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Travelers' Tales: America True Stories of Life on the Road

Fred Setterberg, editor
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E pluribus unum. It could be the motto of this book, as well as the United States.

Travelers' Tales: America, a collection of stories and excerpts about the United States, is the latest offering in the *Travelers' Tales* series from the small eponymous publisher in San Francisco. Each book centers around a different place: Paris, San Francisco, Brazil; or a type of traveler: women, mothers, lovers; and puts together varied selections about the chosen topic to create multifaceted volumes with a single focus.

There could be no better subject on which to use this collage technique than the gorgeous mosaic of the United States, with its all-encompassing variety of terrain and people. This collection comes as close to capturing the United States in one volume as a book can. It's akin to Charles Kuralt's America (Kuralt even has an entry, "Good People," in the book) but, with nearly fifty contributors, provides far more points of view, creating the particular richness of this travelogue.

Travelers' Tales: America captures the American obsessions with both moving and itself but goes well beyond oft-sung hymns to byways such as Route 66. In fact, the book stays away from well-trod paths, or at least from familiar perspectives of them. The collection sings of the pure joy of wandering down a path just for the sake of wandering, capturing the atmosphere of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, but in a far more accessible style. The delight of taking the road less-traveled is exemplified in Jim Harrison's "Going Places," in which the author writes about the pull of the open road and the pleasure inherent in driving little-known byways.

But the road less traveled isn't always a joyous one. In "Borderland Blues," Luis Alberto Urrea explores the path illegal Mexican immigrants take in California, following the edges of the concrete river of Interstate 5, one of the busiest highways in the country, but with a hidden side flow of human traffic seeking new opportunities.

Editor Fred Setterberg, who also has his own story, "Underneath Willa Cather's Nebraska," in the volume, has chosen selections from a nice variety of famous authors, including Dave Barry's "The Walt 'You Will Have Fun' Disney World" and E. Annie Proulx's dark "The Train to Hell," (talk about different perspectives) but as with traveling, it's often more fun to discover the less well-known. Setterberg has done an excellent job of choosing stories about a diversity of places from a very wide range of authors, and it's this medley that makes the book. Every story is another world.

Travelers' Tales: America opens with a story about the land's first inhabitants: in Jerry Ellis's "Walking the Trail of Tears," as the author reverses the trek of his Native American forebears from their native home in the eastern states to the dry deserts of the southwest. One of every four died on what became the trail of tears, but Ellis finds acceptance in a stranger's home in return for his acceptance of his host. In the last story and in another world, the teeming urban melting pot of the New York metropolis, in "Always Arriving," author Jonathan Raban meets a new immigrant who dreams of opening a travel agency in Newark, New Jersey, but then expanding to Manhattan, and maybe even establishing a chain. In between are stories of fifty of the other realms—economic, religious, geographic, and racial—that make up America.

In the most powerful stories, one world meets another. In Janine Jones's "Surviving the City of Angels," a potentially violent encounter on a Los Angeles bus with a young gang member turns tender when she "looked that boy in the eyes. I looked beyond his eyes. Recognized him." When this sophisticated expatriate Parisian reaches out to him, for a few fleeting moments, she sees the soul locked into his turbulent life.

The stories are enhanced by small quotes and sidebars. Also promised, though not seen by the reviewer, is a

bit of practical information on traveling in the United States: holidays, customs, weather in various regions, fun things to do in national parks

The bulk of the book can get to be overwhelming; this volume should be read slowly and savored. Just as in traveling one can't see everything at once and expect to retain much from the experience, *Travelers' Tales: America* should be explored at leisure, not all in one chunk. Otherwise, the reader comes away with that "Today-is-Tuesday-so-this-must-be-the-Grand-Canyon" feeling rather than being captured by each selection and awestruck by the high quality of the prose.

No guidebook could direct anyone to the unique experiences described in these stories; they're times and moments a traveler has to stay open to. *Travelers' Tales: America* both inspires those on the road to remain open to new experiences and shares a glimpse of some challenges even the most adventurous might not have the desire or opportunity to face. This is armchair travel at its very best. (January)

Celeste Sollod is a book editor in New York and studied English Literature at Cambridge University in Cambridge, England. She grew up in San Francisco and has traveled to almost all fifty states.
RICK MILLER (December 16, 1998)

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