

Walking to Guantanamo

Richard Fleming

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While reading a travel memoir, you of course want an intriguing location for your virtual visit. You also want a knowledgeable writer for your guide—and an engaging voice, because it's the personality-behind-the-words that actually becomes your traveling companion. In Richard Fleming's *Walking to Guantánamo*, readers are treated to all three of these elements in spades. But even more importantly, and this is something this reviewer never fully appreciated, readers instinctively want a surrogate who'll do the things that we'd like to *think* we'd do.

This doesn't mean bungee-jumping from waterfalls, but rather lingering in doorways from which the sounds of enticing music or fascinating religious rituals emanate. It means inviting oneself into situations and being affable enough to gain the trust of truly interesting people. This is not a flashy skill, but it's one that comes so naturally to Fleming that he himself overlooks it; *Walking to Guantánamo*'s pages are full of self-doubt as to both the compelling nature of his adventures and his own ability to add value by writing about them.

Yet it's precisely Fleming's "being himself" and not seeking out the gimmicky as he trekked by foot across Cuba that make his account anything but, forgive the expression, pedestrian. While the toll on his body eventually necessitated using a variety of conveyances (everything from donkey carts to dangerously overloaded open-backed trucks), Fleming's goal in walking, to meet as many everyday people as possible, ends up being achieved anyway. The other thing the self-deprecating author seems oblivious to is how his prior experiences and expertise provide the perfect lens through which to view Cuba. Indeed, the themes of Afro-Cuban musicology, Caribbean spiritual practices, and, of all things, bird-watching, coalesce into a thrilling portrait of the island's natural and cultural worlds.

With a gift for Chanderlesque simile, Fleming's prose is, at worst, a joy to read, and at best a laugh-out-loud experience. On the political side, Fleming treads lightly, saving most of his analysis for the epilogue. He is unconvincing only when seeming to justify the decapitation of a goat during a Vodou ceremony. Readers hardly need a rationale invoking the popularity of Chicken McNuggets in the U.S. Again, and this time to a fault, the author has misjudged the extent to which we've become his *compadres* during his epic journey and thus have little reason to judge him.

PETER GUTIÉRREZ (January / February 2009)

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