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# A Sense of Place

Great Travel Writers  
Talk About Their  
Craft, Lives,  
and Inspiration

with MICHAEL SHAPIRO

Bill Bryson  
Frances Mayes  
Paul Theroux  
Isabel Allende  
Pico Iyer  
Simon Winchester  
Peter Matthiessen  
Redmond O'Hanlon  
Jonathan Raban  
Arthur Frommer  
Tim Cahill  
Jan Morris  
Rick Steves...and many more



# PRAISE FOR MICHAEL SHAPIRO

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# A Sense of Place

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**Great Travel Writers Talk  
About Their Craft, Lives,  
and Inspiration**

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# A Sense of Place

## **Great Travel Writers Talk About Their Craft, Lives, and Inspiration**

with MICHAEL SHAPIRO



Travelers' Tales  
San Francisco

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FOR MY FATHER, LARRY SHAPIRO, WHO EXHORTED ME ONWARD EVEN AS HIS OWN WORLD WAS TURNING IN

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# INTRODUCTION

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IT WAS ON AMERICAN AIRLINES FLIGHT 44 THAT I FIRST PITCHED THE idea for this book to Travelers' Tales Executive Editor Larry Habegger. We were flying from San Francisco to New York, en route to a travel journalists' conference in Bermuda. Somewhere over Nebraska I knelt in the aisle next to his seat and shared my nascent thoughts for a book of interviews with travel writers. I felt like I was kneeling at the altar of publishing, seeking benediction for my project. When a flight attendant approached with a rolling cart and a nasty glare, I thanked Larry for his consideration and went back to my seat.

That was September 4th, 2001. A week later the Twin Towers crumbled and the Pentagon was shattered, sending shock waves through the American psyche and economy. Few industries were hit as hard as travel, and travel publishing was reeling for months.

Yet the idea stuck with me. Each year I spend the week between Christmas and New Year's on a silent retreat at the Sonoma Mountain Zen Center. During my 2001 retreat I kept thinking about the project, and it began to take shape. Initially I considered interviewing each author about travel writing, but soon realized I wanted to discuss much more: their lives, their hopes, their aspirations, and their thoughts about the world. That last part—their thoughts about the world's politics and people—seemed especially relevant after the September 11th disaster. Who better to shed light on global issues than the people who have explored the planet so widely and so sensitively, and who have written about it so eloquently?

Another thought occurred to me during that retreat: In the coming year I would turn forty, and I wanted my life to take a new turn. For the past seven years I had written mostly about travel-tech issues, such as how to use the Internet for travel planning. I didn't want to abandon that completely, but I sought something more engaging to my soul and intellect. I sensed I was embarking on a pilgrimage, as well as a journey of tribute to the writers who have inspired me to explore the world in new ways.

I wanted to learn from the masters. And the best way would be to interview them where they live. After roaming the planet they had settled—or not quite settled in some cases—in places far from their native homes (Pico Iyer) or on their native soil (Jan Morris). I was curious about what influenced their choices of place and whether being rooted somewhere helped them understand the world.

This would require extensive travel and some expense, but rather than hope that the project would pay off in financial terms, I chose to view it as a personal graduate school. I would learn from the interviews and from the travel. By simply being in the presence of so many prominent authors, I could soak up knowledge and wisdom by osmosis.

The following spring I submitted a proposal. Travelers' Tales Publisher James O'Reilly saw potential but wanted "proof of concept." That's when the fun—and the hard work—began. I interviewed Simon Winchester in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, and Jeff Greenwald in Oakland, California, and wrote introductions to each conversation. The editors liked what they saw and sent me a contract.

In the spring of 2003, I began setting up interviews. That April I met Bill Bryson—Bill Bryson!—in Hanover, New Hampshire. He was as kind and congenial as you'd imagine from reading his books. I returned home on a high, enthralled by the prospect of one-on-one conversations with Pico Iyer, Jan Morris, Tim Cahill, and so many more of my literary heroes.

The exultation didn't last. When I returned from that trip my father complained of pain in his abdomen. At the Passover Seder he couldn't sit at the table through dinner and excused himself to lie on the couch. Tests showed nothing wrong, but when my father's pain became unbearable a week later, he checked into a San Francisco hospital. A CT scan showed he had cancer of the pancreas, one of the fastest-growing and most lethal types of cancer.

The weeks he spent in the hospital were a living hell that Dante and Kafka might have concocted. But we rarely left him alone—my mother, brother, wife, and I worked out a schedule that enabled one of us to be with him almost around the clock. Throughout his life, my father had been diligent about work and didn't want his illness to forestall my project, encouraging me to keep my interview appointments. To prepare for them, I spent many nights in a sleeping bag on the floor of his hospital room, reading Frances Mayes and Pico Iyer by the light of my headlamp. After twenty-six days in the hospital, my father was released and vowed never to return.

Soon I was on the road again, driving down to the Santa Barbara hills to meet Pico. I spoke to my father daily as I continued south to Arizona to interview Tom Miller, and each time he sounded stronger. The night I got back from that trip, we went out to his favorite restaurant, Gary Danko, in San Francisco, celebrating his recovery with a triumphant parade of delicacies and wines.

But his pain had already returned. On Friday, June 13th, we learned the cancer had spread. I canceled an upcoming trip to Britain, where I'd planned to interview Jan Morris and others, and spent much of the summer hanging out with my father, talking in the backyard and watching Giants' games on TV. Chemotherapy had contained the cancer for the moment, and my father insisted I get back to work. I told him I would dedicate the book to him and he said, "Then I better stay alive long enough to see it in print."

It was against this backdrop that I interviewed Tim Cahill in October and Isabel Allende in November. With each of them I discussed death and dying, and, probably without realizing it, they helped me cope with my father's loosening hold on life. The day after Thanksgiving I left for Europe to interview Frances Mayes, Redmond O'Hanlon, and Jan Morris. I told my father I could cancel the trip, but he insisted I go. He planned to stick around for a while and said that if I was dedicating the book to him then it should be the best book possible.

I called daily from Europe and each time my father's voice sounded strong, belying his deteriorating condition. Even after a discouraging doctor's appointment my father kept his spirits up—at least during our phone conversations, and encouraged me to continue on. But I sensed his condition was worsening, and I canceled my appointment with Morris. I flew back to San Francisco the day after I interviewed O'Hanlon.

During the flight I reflected on how fortunate I'd been to interview so many of the world's leading authors. (I hesitate to call them travel writers because many don't see themselves that way and because their work typically ranges well beyond travel.) How fortunate to jet around the world, to have plenty to eat, to buy any book I wanted.

I got home just in time. My father was conscious but in terrible pain. He said he knew what was happening to him and that it was O.K. He listened with interest as I told him all about my trip, and later we watched a basketball game on TV. The next day, a hospice nurse arrived with a morphine pump. That evening, while holding his wife's hand and flanked by his two sons and daughter-in-law, my father departed for his final destination. I'm certain he was upgraded to first class.

Spurred on by my father's courage and determination, I continued with the interviews. In the three months before my deadline, which had been generously extended, I met Arthur Frommer in New York, Rick Steves and Jonathan Raban in Seattle, Jan Morris and Eric Newby in the U.K., and Peter

Matthiessen at the far end of Long Island. It was a stirring conclusion to a project that has enriched my life in ways that are just starting to become fully apparent.

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—Michael Shapiro  
Sonoma County, California  
April 200

# Working-Class Hero

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## Tim Cahill

LIVINGSTON, MONTANA

**N**IGHT IS ENVELOPING THE COLOMBIAN JUNGLE CAMP; YOUR traveling companion is insulting one of Colombia's most ruthless guerrilla leaders, and said guerrilla is dropping less-than-subtle hints that you may soon be kidnapped. Leave it to Tim Cahill to defuse the situation with a off-the-cuff remark about his companion's fondness for drink.

After more than a quarter-century of travel to the world's most challenging places, Cahill has developed a knack for doing the right thing at the right time. Cahill doesn't court danger, but when he encounters it, which is often, he responds shrewdly and emerges to recollect his adventures in tranquility. Whether scaling a cliff or descending into a cave, he's the kind of guy you'd want by your side when it all hits the fan.

Cahill grew up in a small Wisconsin town. When he was ten, he joined a swim team so he could travel around the state. He put himself through the University of Wisconsin on a swimming scholarship and soon he found himself in UW's law school. But when it dawned on him that most law students become lawyers and go on to careers in law, he dropped out and headed for San Francisco.

A *San Francisco Examiner* story led to a job at *Rolling Stone*. Later he became a founding editor of *Outside* magazine, where he invented the world's greatest job: traveling to some of the planet's most remote places and writing about them. He's swum with great white sharks, plunged into caves with lethal levels of CO<sub>2</sub>, pursued Caspian tigers, and taken a dip in the ice-encrusted waters of the North Pole. But unlike many adventure writers of yore, Cahill's stories don't come from his gonads. He writes from the heart and hopes his tales make you laugh and make you cry.

Cahill, an imposing presence, stands six-foot-one and has filled out a bit since his collegial swimming days. *The New York Times* has called him "a working-class Paul Theroux," and when he's wearing a tattered t-shirt and sipping a beer, he looks like he just got off the day shift. But looks can be deceiving. Though Cahill can joke about dog farts on one page, on the next you'll find lines b

William Blake. He's a serious student of the craft of writing, and his stories are seamlessly structured.

Among Cahill's collections are *Pass the Butterworms*, *Pecked to Death by Ducks*, and *A Wolverine is Eating My Leg*. He called his first book *Jaguars Ripped My Flesh* to rile colleagues who felt adventure travel writing was traditionally "subliterate." Cahill's 1991 book, *Road Fever*, recounts a caffeine-fueled road trip from Tierra del Fuego to Alaska's Prudhoe Bay that set a speed record recognized by the *Guinness Book of World Records*.

"Let me know when you're getting in and I'll pick you up at the airport," Cahill told me when we set a date for the interview. The Bozeman airport is thirty-five miles from his home, so I declined and rented a car. But when he said I could spend the night on his couch—"I doubt you got a big advance for this book, so you may as well save your motel money"—I accepted. I drove under Montana's blue sky to Livingston, where Cahill lives in a modest, century-old house in town, with his wife Linnea, two dogs, and two cats.

We corralled Grace the springer spaniel and Mac the 105-pound giant schnauzer and asked them that rhetorical question: Wanna go for a walk? It was a sunny, Indian summer afternoon. We circled a broad valley framed by the Crazy Mountains to the north and the snow-streaked Absarokas to the south. The dogs took off ahead of us and when a herd of antelope sprung past us, Gracie leapt after them. But even a speedy dog is no match for America's fastest land animal.

Tim and I talked about the death of his mother five weeks before—he and his siblings had to decide when to pull the plug. I asked Tim how his neighbors felt about wolf reintroduction. "Polarized," he said. He told me how he learned to hunt antelope by shadowing other hunters. Later he pointed to a nearby peak and said one day he wants to walk out his front door, swim across the river, scale the peak and be home in time for dinner.

Back at his house, in the company of a fearsome Dogon figure from Mali and a wild-eyed man from Bali, we conducted the interview. Mac's deafening barks punctuated Tim's remarks and he often derailed his train of thought to shout "*Plotz!*" to Mac, figuring the dog would respond better to commands in its native German.

For dinner we went to The Pizza Garden, a homey restaurant owned by Tim's close friend, Jim Liska. Ten people crowded around a table for eight—many were Tim's friends—and they squeezed under the in. One guy was a documentary filmmaker, another had been a photojournalist for *TIME*. The woman across from me had helped ghostwrite Hillary Clinton's book. Our waitress, Courtney, was the young woman whose heartrending story of life-threatening spinal surgery is recounted in Cahill's tale "Trusty and Grace" (in the 2002 collection, *Hold the Enlightenment*).

Halfway through dinner, an effervescent woman named Margie blew in and pulled up a chair next to mine. She told me she'd recently starred in the touring production of *The Vagina Monologue*. Turned out it was her birthday so we all sang for her. On the way home I asked Tim who she was and he said, "Oh, Margie. That's Margot Kidder." Well, my wine-addled mind thought, I might never emerge from a phone booth with a big red S on my chest, but at least I've sung happy birthday to Lois Lane.

The next day Tim asked if I'd like to see his cabin in the woods and help him pull his plastic water pipes out of the creek. As yellow aspen leaves rustled in the breeze, we drove on dusty roads past the small house where he lived when he first moved to Montana in the late '70s. "See that long driveway—it wasn't plowed in winter so I had to post-hole it up that road with bags of groceries and the dog." Nearby ranches belong to Tom McGuane, Robert Redford, and Tom Brokaw. "See that place up there on the hill—you'll never guess who used to own it: Whoopi Goldberg," he said. "But she sold it after a year."

Cahill's cabin is nestled in heavily forested woods just north of Yellowstone. PVC pipes stretched to the nearby creek, bringing water to the cabin. In anticipation of winter we yanked the pipes out from the creek bed. Tim marveled that this was the first time he'd ever managed to pull the pipes out without getting his feet wet. I was soaked up to my knees. Just as he asked if I'd like to take a hike, the phone in his cabin rang. It was Linnea—they needed to leave for a dinner date in an hour.

The drive to the cabin had taken an hour and fifteen minutes. "It'd be great if we could get back in time for me to take a shower," Tim said. "Would you mind driving?" I hadn't really bargained for this: piloting a bulky Chevy pickup at hair-raising speeds across Montana's back roads with a passenger who'd set an overland speed record. "Don't worry," he said, "I'll let you know when there's a curve or a bump coming up." My sodden foot put the pedal to the metal. We flew over ditches, kicked up clouds of dust, sped past a herd of befuddled buffalo. We made it in about forty-five minutes, as fast, Tim said, as he'd ever driven it himself.



*What are you working on now?*

A very short book called *Lost in My Own Backyard*, which is about walking in Yellowstone. I was asked to write about my favorite place to walk so I said, "Could it be Yellowstone Park?" And the publisher (the publisher) said it certainly could be. Good lord, what a job! They're going to pay me to walk in Yellowstone Park—I love it.

*Not everything you've done is travel. You started by writing for Rolling Stone.*

Let me start a little bit further back, and I'll tell you a story. I wanted to be a writer from the time I was a teenager and I think a lot of my adolescent fantasies of travel were tied up with being a writer. Big-time writers in those days were Ernest Hemingway and guys who went to Africa. However in the little town that I grew up in there was nobody who was a writer, and since I really did love to read, I thought writers were some kind of gods. Now you and I know many writers (laughs) and we know that is not the case. Some of the most poetic and wonderful writers are somewhat less than gods in their personal lives.

But at the time I thought if I said I wanted to be a writer, it would be a kind of vanity. It would be like saying I want to be a god. So I never told anybody until I went to the University of Wisconsin. I went to law school and did pretty well in my first semester. A professor, one of those scary law school professors, a *Paper Chase* kind of guy, called me into his office and said, "This is one of the five best briefs I've ever read from a first-year student."

I recall walking out of that office and feeling very depressed and thinking, Why was I depressed? What I realized was that if this kept up the way it was going, I was going to be a lawyer, and I'd never actually tried to be a writer. So I went to San Francisco—this shows how backwards I was; the capital of the American literary world is New York—and enrolled in San Francisco State in a creative writing program. I wrote a mercifully unpublished novel...

*What year was that?*

1968 or 1969—I'm vague on years. The Summer of Love—I got there in the fall (laughs). I was there certainly in time for Altamont. In those days in San Francisco, prices were cheap enough that young people who had big dreams, artistic dreams, could actually live in the city, and there were a lot of us.

had this friend who was an oil painter and a lithographer, and he did birds. He wanted me to write something about birds so that the popular media would carry one of his lithographs.

The only problem with that is that I have ornithological dyslexia. I can't tell one bird from another. I have gotten better at it. What I did know were the turkey vultures on Mount Tamalpais. I used to just lie down in the meadow, and the vultures would begin to circle trying to figure out if you were dead or not. So I said I'll write about the vultures.

So Jim—the artist's name was Jim Gorman—said "I can do vultures" and he did some. I wrote the article and submitted it with some of Jim's lithos to the magazine of the *San Francisco Examiner* and they accepted it. Now here's the interesting thing: I'd never had a journalism course. I knew nothing whatsoever about journalism—I was going to write the great American novel.

But it was just the beginning of New Journalism. I didn't know I was a new journalist. I was just a guy who had never been taught the proper pyramid lead, the structure of a journalistic piece. I knew the structure of a dynamic scene; I knew the structure of novels. I knew how to carpenter scenes together. At that time it turned out to be a very good idea for me to do things like that. The editor liked my story on vultures and asked what else I'd like to do something on.

I'd been told: Write about what you know. So I did one on beer, and then I did one on this guy who had won the 100-meter breast stroke in the Olympics. As it turned out, I had been a swimmer at the University of Wisconsin and I knew what swimming was like. I knew that in the big race you can remember every second of that fifty-eight seconds—you can remember precisely what you were thinking—and how much more so an Olympian than someone like me who was just a pretty fair B-10 swimmer.

So I went and I asked him, "What were you thinking? You're standing on the block and the gun goes off, what do you think now?" And I followed him all the way through—I did about 2,000 words on what he thought from start to finish. It was all an internal monologue, which is a novelist's technique. And that made my work in the *San Francisco Examiner* stick out, because I just didn't know how to do journalism properly. I would use the techniques of fiction, like internal monologue.

It's always good to be in the Sunday papers because everybody reads them, even the people of *Rolling Stone*. I had friends who had friends and somebody said, "Why don't you come down and ask about a job?" So I did. And they said, "Yeah, we need an editorial drudge." That was my title. *Rolling Stone* was so amazing in those days because you could travel very quickly from editorial drudge to associate editor. I think almost all things are more stratified these days. Two months later I was writing about rock-and-roll stars that nobody else wanted to write about, like Donovan. So that's how I got started, long story.

*Was writing about travel a conscious decision for you, or did you just find yourself propelled by your curiosity and start going places and writing about them?*

I've thought about that a lot. I can remember when I was a kid in Wisconsin in a little town called Waukesha. I told my dad, this guy got to go to Florida and that guy went to New York, I never get to go anywhere. I was ten at the time, and my dad said if you join the YMCA swimming team, they go all over the state. So I said O.K. I made the team and I got to go to really exotic places like Beloit, Fond du Lac, Green Bay. I think I associated this reward of travel with hard, physical work.

What happened at *Rolling Stone* is they wanted to start an outdoor magazine and there were only two of us in the office who liked to go outdoors, Michael Rogers and myself, and we along with Harriet Fier started putting together the plans for *Outside* magazine. I said, "Let's have an adventure



travel article in each issue.” And they said, “Well, see Tim, you don’t seem to get it; *Outside* will be the literate magazine for people who go outdoors.” You have to think back to ’76, there wasn’t such a thing. It was either a magazine that told you how to paddle a canoe twelve times a year, very service oriented, or there were those magazines called *Man’s Adventure* or *Man’s Testicle*, and they were all about our death race with the Jungle Leper Army, stuff that you can hardly credit as being entirely true.

I said, “Hell if I can write about lying out and watching vultures and make an interesting story, how much more interesting would it be if I went diving, for instance, and saw a shark.” In the old men’s magazines I’d have to pull out a pen knife and battle it to death. In what I saw, you could talk about what it felt like to see one, and talk about whether you were scared and the core of wonder that would be wrapped up in all that. If you did that well you would have an adventure article.

They said, “O.K. Tim, do it.” And hence I sort of invented my own job, to travel to different places and often put myself in jeopardy, hard physical work being something that travel had been about for me since I was ten.

*I’m curious about how you see your terrain. You talk about the interior landscape as well as the external landscape. What do you view as your beat?*

If I have a beat, it is the remote places on earth. Remote places have changed a great deal since I began writing. Twenty, twenty-five years ago you could go to places such as Peru, and as a white man from the United States, you looked a good deal different than most people there. They would grab you by the arm and take you to one of their children who might have blond hair and blue eyes. And it was just such a novel thing. Now there are adventure travel tours that go through there all the time. People see gringos all year long.

The places that are now remote are the places that cannot be visited by adventure travel companies because the adventure travel companies can’t get insurance. I’m talking about places that generally have some kind of civil insurrection going on. For me to get remote anymore, I’m being driven more and more to the lines of guns. I used to have to figure out ways to ford a river that was running high in the springtime. Now I have to figure out how to get past the soldiers with the guns.



The air was filled with a light snow that didn’t precisely fall but seemed to drift aimlessly under a pearly, opalescent sky. Everything else under that crystal dome was flat, an endless prairie of sea ice, white with the newly fallen snow, and I could see the curve of the earth in the far distance in any direction I cared to look. That direction was south.

I was, for the moment, facing due south. Behind me, the direction was due south. It was due south to my right, due south to my left, and if I wanted to quarter off on my left side, I’d be facing south by south-south.

—TIM CAHILL,  
*Pass the Butterworms*

*One thing that strikes me about your writing is its youthful sense of wonder and exuberance. How do you keep that alive—does travel help you cultivate that?*

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I talk about my travel as being sort of an adolescent dream that I never let anybody know about. The word adolescent is used often as a pejorative, but when I was fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, I was the most idealistic I ever was in my life; the most doors were open to me. Adolescence has some good qualities and I try to cultivate those qualities. The benefit of travel writing is you can always keep that gate to wonder open—it's a great big huge world. Say you'd been to every single place I'd been to in my life except that you were ten feet to my right. You would have lived a totally different trip.

*Or if I followed the exact same line ten days behind, it would still be entirely different.*

The world is inexhaustible so it leaves that gate to wonder open.

*After researching and writing Buried Dreams (about mass murderer John Wayne Gacy), did you travel to get away from the psychotic mind of the murderer?*

I lived in a sewer for three years when I was in that guy's mind. The subtitle was *Inside the Mind of a Serial Killer*. I tried to get inside there. And when I did I was not very happy; it was not very good psychologically for me. This guy had a certain type that he killed. After I got to know him pretty well I could look at somebody on the street and say, "Victim. Victim." Walking down the street looking at people and thinking: victim; that's not real healthy for you.

What's good about the travel I do, a certain rough travel, stuff that makes stories, is that usually there is something, some obstacle that has to be overcome. It may be that your tent and all your gear has been stolen and it's going to be ten below zero tonight. You better figure out something to do about it right now. When things like that happen, they require your entire attention. Coming off a bad serial-killer hangover, things that required my immediate attention took my mind completely off the problems.

*You say adventure is physical and emotional discomfort recollected in tranquility—that's in Hold onto Enlightenment, right?*

That's right—I can't recall which poet I stole that from. I think I said it was Wordsworth, but I think it's Emerson. But the two met, so they stole it from one another, you know, they thought alike. The poet said, "Poetry is strong emotion recollected in tranquility." And I said, "Adventure is physical and emotional discomfort recollected in tranquility." An adventure is never an adventure when it's happening. An adventure is only an adventure when you've had time to sit back and think about it.

Now, a book that I admire is the one that Tracy Johnston wrote called *Shooting the Boh*. This was supposed to be a simple river-running trip and everything went wrong. Suddenly she's clinging to life at the end of her fingernails, and she's also beginning to get the first hot flashes of menopause. What a wonderful book, and a book, by the way, that no man could have possibly written.

Hardly anything bonds you to someone stronger than an intense physical challenge met together. I don't have any problem with adventure travel tours. I worry a little bit about the Disneyfication. The idea is you can't get hurt because this is a tour—people have lost the idea that indeed they can.

I'll give you one quick story: we were in Namibia in southwest Africa. A guy broke his ankle very, very badly. We had to carry him in a homemade stretcher for quite some distance—it was 120 degrees at the bottom of the canyon. We had to get a satellite phone with a dying battery to get somebody

come down and get this guy out of there. The helicopter said they couldn't make it till the next morning so we spent the night there. It was like *Gilligan's Island*—it was supposed to be a day hike.

*A three-hour tour?*

(Laughs.) Yeah, a three-hour tour. And there we were with this guy with a broken leg and I was with Richard Bangs, the famous river runner and writer, the founder of Sobek. And this guy with a broken ankle asked Richard: "Is this the worst that's ever happened on one of your trips?" He said, "No, people have died." That's the nature of adventure travel. I think people should keep that in mind when they book their next adventure travel trip.

*You've said you don't need to travel halfway around the world to enjoy the discovery of travel. But you find that unless I get away from familiar surroundings, I can't really see the world with fresh eyes. Do you feel that it's possible to write travel about your hometown? Can you feel that sense of discovery that you feel when you're in a new place for the first time?*

I hope, with over twenty-five years of experience going to far away and remote places, that I have learned enough about how to write travel that I will be able to write travel right here at home. I have come to many conclusions during the past years—I'm approaching sixty years old—frankly I've lost a step or two. I used to be able to make this climb or make that climb. Now I will quite often say, "Boy, go ahead. This one's beyond me—I'll meet you on the other side." As I begin moving away from the more remote places, I want to write about the area right here at home.

I'm a writer—I can live any place on earth that I choose to. I choose to live here. It distresses me to know that there are people that come here for two-week vacations at dude ranches and they know more about these mountains than I do because they've ridden all around them. I am hoping that I can see this land, this country, the place that I've lived for twenty-five years...I hope the same gate of wonder opens here, and I think it has.

Hell, the only national magazine award I ever won was for writing about Yellowstone. It wasn't for writing about chasing Caspian tigers along the border of Iraq and Iran or swimming under the ice in the North Pole, or walking around Antarctica. It was for Yellowstone; it was for my back yard. So maybe I do have the capacity to see it with fresh eyes. I think maybe the fact that I have traveled widely and I've seen a lot has helped me see what this is. I live here because—don't tell anybody—it's the best place on earth. There is no place better than this to live.

*Why? Why did you choose it and why do you love it?*

Remember when we took a walk this afternoon and I was rambling on about how the prairie meets the mountains here? Now you go over on the other side of the Continental divide, the western side, and you will have all trees, and you will be stuck in a forest, and in this forest you won't be able to see more than ten feet in any direction. There won't be a whole hell of a lot of wildlife. And if there is you won't see it. You might see signs but you won't see a lot of wildlife. It's claustrophobic over there.

Yeah, the mountains are pretty spectacular and the glaciers look great, and the big lakes are terrific, but for game, just for the natural concentration of animals, you're going to see it where the prairie meets the mountains, where the prairie meets the forest. That's why Yellowstone, which is largely a flatland surrounded by mountains, is America's version of the Serengeti. There are animals in there, herds in the thousands—that's what I like. I like the collision of prairie and forest. I like the

ability to have a long view.

~~When we were standing up there and I was saying, my friend from Hawaii says that what you can see would encompass all of O'ahu. Think about what humans must have wanted back as the ice left this land maybe 10,000 years ago. You're going to want a place where there's lots of game, on the prairie there's lots of bison; there's lots of elk; you're going to want a place that's a little bit high to give you the military advantage. You want to be able to see for miles and miles in any direction—you do not want to be in the middle of a forest surrounded by trees. It might have been good for Robert Hood but it wasn't good for Crazy Horse.~~

*You showed me that place where there was continuous human habitation for 9,000 years.*

The Myers-Hindman site, found by two ladies probably in their sixties at the time. They would walk around and look for arrowheads and the like. Archaeologists started digging up there and found 9,000 years of continuous human habitation, which by the way is not nearly the oldest around here. What is like is continuous human habitation—just over that little hill they would be out of the wind, they have a view forever—you can see why people would live there continuously for 9,000 years.

*I remember when I was working as a whitewater rafting guide on the Kern River, there were grinding holes in the rocks at our campsite. It was so cool to sit up there knowing that a few hundred years ago people were sitting on the same rocks, hanging out, talking, grinding acorns into flour...*

Around here you can do the same thing: find a spot that commands a view so that you can't be snuck up upon but is really quite pleasant and out of the wind, and then start looking for arrowheads and they're all over.

I love it around here. I like the river, floating the river. I'd row the river. I used to hunt and fish a great deal more than I do now. I believed at one time that if I was going to be a meat-eater that there was a necessity to hunt and to fish. I don't do it much anymore—I'm busy. If I have a chance to hunt antelope and I have the time, I love to cook it—it's the best tasting meat.

*Having lived here for twenty-five years, do you feel that this place gives you a foundation that helps you feel better about traveling for long periods?*

Yeah, it certainly does. This is a small town, 7,000 people. You pretty much know who doesn't like you and who does. There are people I know here whose values are ones that I respect: honesty and integrity and loyalty to their friends, and it gives you a very, very solid base.

The weightlifters have an expression about how you should tense your body if you're trying to lift something over your head with one hand, and that is: "You can't shoot a cannon from a canoe." In other words, if you don't have a solid base, you're not going to be able to do that. This is my solid base, this little town.

*When you go to a new place how do you make sense of it or understand it?*

You have to let everything happen around you and try not to make whatever happens happen solely because you're there. Some things will happen solely because you're there because you're a stranger who is out of place. What's always struck me as strange is you read about these tragedies in which soldiers from some country, say England, crashed onto the shores of Hudson Bay and died—they froze to death, one after the other—in the midst of other people who have lived there for centuries. It would

seem to me that those Englishmen might have thought, Wait a minute, this is the way you live here.

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*Or maybe: We should talk to these people and make friends with them.*

Yeah, find out how they do things. In general the way they do things wherever you're going—they've had centuries to think about it—is probably better than the way you were taught. So watch them, listen to them, have them teach you. A side note: Just about everything you need is going to be available there. If you're driving yourself nuts in Denver trying to find a proper machete—listen, they're a lot over Honduras. Just walk into any marketplace and buy one for a tenth of what you would pay in Denver.

*You've said preparation is scintillating when your life may depend upon it. What do you feel is most important when going to a place where there could be risk or challenge? What should one read—how should one approach it mentally?*

I think knowing one's limits is real good. If someone said, "Tim, we have a space on the K2 climb for you," I'd have to say, "Guys, that's out of my league." I know what my limits are. I can do things that push my own envelope, but it's my own envelope, so I will have the exact same feeling when I get to the summit of my 20,000-foot mountain that elite climbers have when they get to the summit of Everest.

Aside from that, if you're going to a place where there are going to be guns, it really does help to know what everybody is mad about. Do a lot of reading. Find out who's who and what's what so that you happen to be in the hands of somebody who may have reason not to like you, you would be able to say some things that person might agree with. Spontaneously perhaps say those things.

I think, to a large degree, preparation—I'm not talking about traveling; I'm talking about writing—*is* having a pretty good idea of what your quest is, what you're going to try to do and what you're going to try to find out. If you go to a country or continent that you don't know much about, you're going to be overwhelmed with things that you could write about and you want to be able to follow a story line. So have an idea of what your quest is.

*What's in your tool kit? Obviously you take a pen and paper. What else? Camera, tape recorder?*

I use reporter's notebooks—I usually use just one side and then when I'm thinking about it later at night I use the other side. I bring a large spiral notebook and if I have time I transfer the notes from the smaller notebook into the larger notebook. I build whole scenes and sometimes things go almost directly from the big notebook into print.

I may have a tape recorder, or two, because if things are going so fast that I don't have time to take notes, I can speak my notes into the tape recorder as I'm moving. I did that on a six-week walk across a forest in the Congo, and the woman who transcribed my work came out with 750 pages. I think taking notes in the notebook is such drudgery that I truly keep my mind on what I am trying to do and what I'm trying to say.

*Clearly your work is journalism, so are you allowed any leeway with facts to put together a good story?*

I am allowed no leeway whatsoever—the facts are the facts—what happened happened. Remarkable things have happened to me maybe because I have sought out remarkable events. Believe me, a

journalists who are just starting out: if you fib, they will catch you. And since I have had the remarkable good luck of seeing some astounding things, I must be totally trustworthy as a narrator. Otherwise I am nothing—there is no leeway for me.

*Even when exaggerating? What about the half-pound centipede in your story “Bug Scream”?*

Yeah, it was no bigger than an ordinary Polish sausage. Frankly I may have exaggerated a little bit, but yeah the thing did fall on my chest and people did come over, and the pygmies did spend a great deal of the evening laughing at me—all that is true. I suppose I couldn’t resist “only about as big as an ordinary Polish sausage.” Was it that big? Hey, it could have been pretty close.

*Structure. I think anyone who has read your work and is interested in writing knows that you take structure very seriously.*

Yeah, I work on structure. I take voluminous notes—what I do when I’m about to begin writing a story is look for something a little different. On a three-week trip I’ll fill two to three of those large notebooks. I read them over and I read them over until I have basically memorized what I have written.

David Quammen, my friend who lives over in Bozeman and is one of the great writers of our time, says it’s like you hold this unformed thing up to the sun and you keep turning it and turning it until suddenly like a prism, a rainbow pours through it. And that’s what you do with the raw material of a story: you keep reading it and thinking about it until it suddenly becomes a story. How and why does it become a story? It becomes a story because we are story-telling creatures—that’s how we keep from going mad. ’Cause there’s too much happening all around us—too many things to describe, too many things to think about.

There’s 8 million stories in the naked city—how many can you encompass in your mind? Only a few. You have your own story. You look at your notes—your mind wants to put that into a story structure, one that has a beginning, a middle, and an end and is somehow satisfying or insightful and leaves you with a punch. That’s the philosophical part, I suppose: we’re storytellers. We are also entertainers. Unlike in school where you’re paying a professor, nobody has an obligation to read what you’ve written. So you must make them want to read you. You do that by telling stories well.

*Let’s talk about time. Your stories jump from the past to the present and back—they rarely unfold chronologically. How do you work with that?*

You’re looking at your notes, raw material, and you’re trying to figure out what makes the best story. If I was telling this as a story, wouldn’t the listener want to know this part first. But I only learned that toward the end of my trip. So how am I going to manipulate the story so that all the information that the reader knows, the reader has to know to make a story convincing, is up front. You do that by fracturing the timeline, but you tell the reader that.

Readers are used to it; they’ve been to movies—they know what a flashback is. You use the techniques of suspense. I think Alfred Hitchcock said something like, if there’s a bunch of guys in a meeting room and suddenly a bomb goes off, that’s shock. But if these guys are in the room and you know there’s a bomb and you know it’s going to go off at twelve o’clock and the clock is ticking towards twelve, that’s suspense. Sometimes you have to tell the reader ahead of time things that you didn’t know to produce that suspense. I don’t think that’s cheating—that’s storytelling.

*You've said that you want to make the reader laugh and you want to make the reader cry. I also feel from reading your stuff that you want to teach the reader something. I always learn something, like why animals' eyes shine at night.*

Why do different animals eyes shine differently in light at night? Why are some red—why are some green? Some say, well predators have the red eyes, and prey populations like deer have the green eyes and I wondered whether that was true or not. But here's the thing: I find the answer is fascinating; it's a scientific principle of reflection that has to do with a coating on the back of the eyeball.

So if I said, Reader, I'm going to tell you about a coating on the back of the eyeball that reflects light back through the pupils and makes animals eyes shine...some people may read it and some may not. But if I put you into a dark forest and I have a light and I start shining it around and I'm looking at all these different colored eyes staring at me, then the reader may be ready for me to tell him what I know about why animals' eyes shine differently. The reason I put that stuff in there is that I just found it fascinating. But I can't put in the purely scientific or historical stuff until I've aroused the reader's curiosity to the point where the reader might say, "I wonder why that is." And if I'm really good that's when I come in and say, that's because...



That's why the words "Let's go!" are intrinsically courageous. It's the decision to go that is, in itself, entirely intrepid. We know from the first step that travel is often a matter of confronting our fear of the unfamiliar and the unsettling—of the rooster's head in the soup, of the raggedy edge of unfocused dread, of that cliff face that draws us willy-nilly to its lip and forces us to peer into the void."

—TIM CAHILL, "Exotic Places Made Me Do It," *Outside*

*In a lot of your work you deal with fear, whether going to places where men have guns or risking your life in physical adventures. I wonder what scares you most?*

What scared me most in my early career was physical disability, if I lost a leg or something like that. I don't think this now, but as a very young man I thought it would be better to be dead than to be an invalid. Now I see the value of life—my mother just passed away. She had written me many times saying if it's a choice between me being an invalid and living with machines keeping me alive, please have the courage to pull the plug.

And we did what she wanted us to do. Dammit, you say, we could have had her around for a little bit more. So, yeah I could live very well without a leg.

What scares me today: the same thing that scares everybody else: heights. Who wants to fall to their death? And I'm scared of talking in front of an audience.

*But in terms of your trips, you've suggested people with guns scare you more than a raging river, for example, because you can sort of gauge a river, but you can't really tell whether or not somebody is*

*going to pull the trigger.*

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You've said it exactly the way I would say it. You cannot tell what a person with a gun is going to do. As the world turns, I'm afraid that gunmen get younger and younger. You're getting a fourteen-year-old with an AK-47 on you. I've had a chance to test my physical limits. I kind of know what my limits are. I can look at a river and say, no, not me—I'll walk around. I didn't do that early on.

One of the first stories I did was I learned to fly a hot-air balloon—one had never been flown over Pike's Peak in Colorado. We got all set to do it—I had two experienced pilots with me and we got ready to go. One of the experienced pilots said, "I don't like it." He didn't like the way the mountain looked. This is one of the guys who taught me how to fly a hot-air balloon, and he didn't like it. The days I would say, the guy who knows more than me doesn't want to do it, but I was too dumb call off. We managed to get over, but...

I greatly admire Bill Bryson's book on the Appalachian Trail because he just said, "Oh hell, this way too hard—I'm not going to do this." He wrote a wonderful book about it. I never never never never would have not done that entire trail. What am I trying to do—I'm only trying to write good books, but somehow that Calvinist thing in my brain would have said: You said you're going to walk the trail and you're going to walk the trail. Bryson made it wonderfully hilarious, and it was a better book for it.

*I agree. You and Bill have such different approaches. When I interviewed him he expressed great admiration for you and your sense of adventure and daring. He said, "I don't like that." His favorite trip is walking through England from inn to inn, with a lovely fire and a nice dinner when you get there. He can write beautifully about that.*

Oh, he can. I didn't used to work out to try to keep in shape. I always figured I'd get in shape on the trip—let the trip get you in shape. Now, with age creeping up on me, I've got to work out. I gotta walk, I gotta lift weights. But you know what, if I do what I do properly, it isn't about the peril or the adventure. It's about the writing, it's about the laughing, the crying, and maybe a little bit of the teaching. As I segue into a maybe less adventuresome writer, I hope those things will become obvious that I've been doing them all along.

I would like to walk from hut to hut. I would like to spend a great deal more time getting to know these mountains around here. They're 10,000-foot mountains, but hey, I was on search and rescue around here: you make a mistake up there.... We took more people who hadn't made it out of there than we ever rescued alive. You'd think that I would know the area having done search and rescue. I'm talking about really knowing the area, and I can see spending a great deal of time up here. How many stories on Yellowstone or the greater Yellowstone ecosystem can I write before somebody says, "Oh, he's the guy who always does this."

*I'm curious about the scariest trip you've ever been on. I know you've traveled with Robert Young Pelton (author of The World's Most Dangerous Places). Was that it or were there other times when you were even more imperiled?*

First off, Robert Pelton is an extremely good reporter. We were traveling in Colombia at the time—we interviewed the FARC, the revolutionary Marxist forces that were opposing the government, and America was their deadly enemy. They'd killed a couple of American indigenous rights workers, by mistake they said, and kidnapped a great deal more. So that was real scary.



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