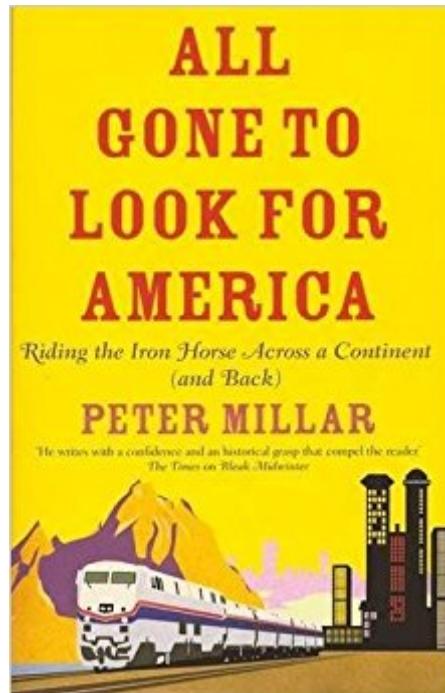




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All Gone To Look For America



Synopsis

At the age of 52, with a shoestring budget, a backpack and an open mind, Peter Millar set about rediscovering the US, by following the last traces of the technological wonder that created the country in the first place: the railroad. On a rail network ravaged and reduced he managed to cross the continent two and half times, talking to people, taking in their stories and their concerns, shaking stereotypes and challenging preconceptions, while watching the vast American landscape that most visitors fly over unfold in slow motion. In the tradition of Bill Bryson and Paul Theroux, wry, witty, intelligent and always observant, this "inland empire" should appeal to modern Britons keen to get beneath the skin of the country that more than any other influences their lives, and to intelligent Americans open to an oblique look at their own country. And, of course, railway lovers everywhere.

Book Information

Paperback: 319 pages

Publisher: Arcadia Books Ltd (March 30, 2010)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1906413630

ISBN-13: 978-1906413637

Product Dimensions: 5.1 x 1.1 x 7.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 10.6 ounces

Average Customer Review: 3.7 out of 5 stars 4 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #733,194 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #167 in Books > Travel > Food, Lodging & Transportation > Railroad Travel #1942 in Books > Reference > Writing, Research & Publishing Guides > Writing > Travel #2850 in Books > Travel > Travel Writing

Customer Reviews

'He writes with a confidence and an historical grasp that compel the reader to take his scary theories seriously' Marcel Berlins in The Times on Bleak Midwinter

Peter Millar is a British journalist, critic and author, primarily known for his reporting of the latter days of the Cold War and fall of the Berlin Wall for The Sunday Times. He has published non-fiction, Tomorrow Belongs to Me, and fiction, Stealing Thunder and Bleak Midwinter. He is the translator of several German language titles into English, including the best-selling The White Masai (Arcadia) by Corinne Hofmann and A Deal With the Devil by Martin Suter (Arcadia), recently shortlisted for the CWA Duncan Lawrie International Dagger.

For an American, at least a hypothetical one without access to the global internet, this book is not easy to find -- as near as I can tell, it was never published in the US, only the UK -- but it's worth the effort. (I should say that it IS on Kindle.) It's a well-written, detail-packed story of a British journalist's journey around the USA on Amtrak. Yes, Amtrak: that most maligned and, for long-distance journeys, unappreciated and underused transportation mode. US train service, at least away from a handful of metro areas, is bound to be disappointing to a European, even the oft-complaining-about-their-own-trains British, but Millar doesn't spend too much time mouth agape at our woefully inadequate passenger rail system. I should say here that this is not necessarily a book for train buffs; anyone wanting details of rolling stock will be disappointed. Amtrak is mainly just the gimmick if you will -- the method of travel, not the story itself. In part because of Amtrak's seemingly haphazard routings, Millar ends up and spends time in places other US travel essays don't cover: Buffalo, Spokane, a flyspeck town in eastern Montana, but that's not a bad thing, as it makes this book unique. He describes the modern deficiencies of midsized American cities, with their never-ending parking lots and car-oriented urban planning, with deserving candor, but he also gives praise where it's due. I believe his trip took place in the fall of 2008, so already some of the descriptions feel a bit dated, but that's unavoidable in a story as subjective and of-the-moment as this one is. Millar is not as consistently laugh-out-loud funny as Bill Bryson (though there are some very funny passages in the book), but he's a traveler in the same vein as Bryson: on what might seem sometimes like a make-it-up-as-you-go-along journey, during which he's willing to take last-minute detours and strike up conversations with random strangers, who then become the real-life characters of this book. One quibble: I do wish in his recounting of conversations with Americans, he would avoid flagrant examples of British English, terms Americans never say. A rancher in Montana talks of "rubbish" and getting something "sorted," for example. Maybe an editor decided to make those changes, but I really doubt that a UK audience wouldn't understand "garbage" or "figured out." At any rate, to this American it made the book lose a few authenticity points. A minor complaint, however.

Peter Millar's newest book, *All Gone to Look for America*, is a primer for anyone who has ever thought of taking Amtrak around the US, or for anyone who would prefer to read about it, without all the legwork. To paraphrase Anthony Burgess's review of Paul Theroux's, *The Kingdom by the Sea*, 'Thanks to Peter Millar for riding the iron horse across America, so I don't have to.' And of course even if we did, we might not uncover the local personalities and peculiar neighborhood lore that

Millar unearths as he goes. This is a well researched book with many of its associations coming straight out of the author's own experience as a multi-lingual correspondent for Reuters and his penchant for arcane knowledge of brewing and language and customs. If the book had footnotes it would need often two or three to a sentence, so wide-ranging is the author's command of historical detail. It is what you read travel books for: Either to visit places you have never been, or to see your own town from the perspective of someone who is 'not from these parts'. I not only learned, for example, the correct recipe for Elvis's Peanut Butter and Banana Toast, but I learned that the street I once lived on in Seattle was the original 'Skid Row'. Seems more charming, now that I know that. Mostly, however, Millar's vision of America's city centers is that they don't exist. Many of us have had that disquieting realization before, that we live in a civilization built around automobiles, where there is no concept of foot traffic. In my old neighborhood in Colorado Springs, for instance, there are not even any continuous sidewalks. Oops! It seems like an oversight of historic significance, and part of Millar's description is an account of how this came to be a fixture of urban design in the US. Whether or not this situation is easily correctible is one thing, but for those in the urban planning business, or those in the Department of Transportation who are (or should be) looking for an alternative to the automobile, Peter Millar's book, *All Gone to Look for America* should be required reading.

Picked up this book second hand as I have been considering taking a similar journey on the Amtrak network myself. The book starts out good but less than halfway through it focuses less on the train rides and more on the cities visited until by the last third hardly anything is mentioned about the ride at all. The author also skipped over quite a few possible destinations while spending an inordinate amount of time on things that have nothing to do with the train, for example almost an entire chapter is spent on trying to get to a soccer game in Los Angeles but then the next chapter skips Houston entirely when the itinerary shows that it is along the way to New Orleans. It also feels like some cities were hardly given a chance, such as Reno where the author sounds like he walked hardly a block from the casino-hotel he stayed the night at before giving up. It appears that quite a bit more research could have been performed before and during the trip (and afterwards, if you're going to make pop culture references at least name the correct movie in a series.)

I've not yet even finished reading this book, but it's the sort of writing that lends itself to reading in sections. Each chapter is a self contained story that illuminates sometimes unusual aspects of a very diverse country. The fact that the places visited are only linked by the fact they are accessible

by train fills the writing with pleasing surprises and poignant insights. Its not a book to buy to plan your holiday, and its not a clone of Bryson, or indeed anyone. It is unique in style and almost impossible to classify. I must admit that America was not high on my list of future journeys, but this book has opened my eyes to a world that I really didn't know was there, however much we think we know the United States this book proves our assumptions will always be wrong - somewhere.

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