

SOUTH AWAY: THE PACIFIC COAST ON TWO WHEELS

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By

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ABSTRACT

South Away: The Pacific Coast on Two Wheels is a travel memoir, a road story, and an homage to the tales of adventure—from *The Hobbit* to my father and grandmother’s true-to-life bedtime stories—that inspired my youth. The travel takes place over a four-month period in the fall of 2009, when, alongside my sister and former rival, I set out to pedal the Pacific Coast, from Terrace, British Columbia, to the tip of the Baja Peninsula. With much enthusiasm but little cycling experience, we face the dangers and hardships of the road, from rough weather to perilous highway, learning from our missteps and seeking out minimalist pleasures along the way. Accompanying the physical travel is an inner journey, composed of flashbacks and reflections, wherein I contemplate past life events, in particular the role of family in shaping my current character, as well as a dilemma I have been puzzled by since childhood: how do you create a satisfying life while balancing risk and adventure? By combining an inward-looking gaze with the act of cycle touring, I come to terms with an oftentimes tumultuous relationship with my sister, analyze how my life trajectory differs from my mother’s more traditional path, and explore different ways of being, formulating a set of guiding principles to carry forward after the journey ends. *South Away: The Pacific Coast on Two Wheels* combines elements of the quest—a goal-driven protagonist-narrator who encounters challenges, surmounts obstacles, and gains new skills in pursuit of a destination-goal—with the road genre, a form in which the road provides both the geographical and narrative structure. I aim to present a female take on the road story, a subgenre that has traditionally been dominated by fast cars and male narrators, while also laying bare both the enticement and the tedium of long-distance bicycle travel.

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ARTIST'S STATEMENT

*South away! And South away!
Seek the sunlight and the day!
Back to pastures, back to mead,
Where the kine and oxen feed. (177)*
– J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (1937)

South Away: The Pacific Coast on Two Wheels is a travel memoir spanning three countries, the title of which derives from J.R.R. Tolkien. The travel took place over a four-month period in the fall of 2009, when I cycled the Pacific Coast, from Terrace, British Columbia, to the Baja Peninsula, Mexico. Although I have made numerous cycling trips since, I chose the autumn 2009 trip because it was my first, and therefore an initiation into the cycle touring lifestyle. At the time, every facet of bicycle travel was new to me, and therefore I recall many of the details more vividly than in recent journeys. In addition, as a freshly-minted university graduate, I was at a crossroads, a circumstance that conveniently presented an inner journey to parallel the external travel. Joined by my sister and former childhood rival, I navigated both the challenges of the road and my own family history in search of an answer to a question I had puzzled over since adolescence: how do you create a satisfying life while balancing risk and adventure? As I began work on my project, a number of additional concerns arose: how would I situate my experience within the scope of women's travel literature? How did other writers document the repetitive, oftentimes tedious nature of long-distance bicycle travel? Would nature writing contribute to my perspective of the Pacific Coast? Through encounters with rough weather, unforgiving terrain, and an eclectic array of individuals, including off-the-grid folks in Washington, California pirate musicians, a San Diego surfboard artist, and a legally blind miner named Umberto, travel facilitated an exploration of different ways of being as well as reflections on my relationship with my family. Ultimately, the 2009 cycling trip laid the scaffolding for my own roadmap to life.

As I reflected more on the journey, I gained a better understanding of the issues I wished to explore in my writing: for instance, nature and the environment, alternate lifestyles, minimalism, and what Kristi Siegel refers to as “women's travel and the rhetoric of peril” (“Women's Travel” 55). As well, I discovered my story had more characters than simply the “I”: my sister, mother, and to a lesser extent grandmother all emerged as women whose stories intertwined with my own. The influence of my father and events during adolescence would need to be depicted as well. I rely on flashback and reflection to relate these episodes within my travel experiences on the road. The bicycle in my thesis functions as a mode of both outward and inner travel, transporting the narrator across landscapes and through time as she re-encounters her past. As well, I begin each chapter with an epigraph, a short quotation intended to direct the reader toward thematic points that arise in the following pages. Some epigraphs invoke other journeys; some set a mood. They come from a diverse range of sources, from movies to video games, poems, and stories.

I classify my thesis as travel memoir, a merging of the travel and memoir writing forms. In their introduction to *Perspectives on Travel Writing* (2004), Glenn Hooper and Tim Youngs assert that “travel writing remains a loosely defined body of literature” (2). While travel

narratives have existed for millennia, “their longevity has made it no easier for critics to agree on how to define or classify them” (Youngs 1). Most critics agree that travel writing “consists of predominantly factual, first-person prose accounts of travels that have been undertaken by the author-narrator” (Youngs 3), although some, such as Jan Borm, support a more open interpretation of travel writing as a collective term for both fictional and non-fictional texts focussing on the theme of travel (13). Youngs and Hooper, among others, highlight the genre’s employment of fictional techniques and note its penchant for borrowing from other nonfiction forms, such as journalism, autobiography, and ethnography (9-10). Jonathan Raban captures the fluid and varied nature of travel writing well when he claims:

As a literary form, travel writing is a notoriously raffish open house where different genres are likely to end up in the same bed. It accommodates the private diary, the essay, the short story, the prose poem, the rough note, and the polished table talk with indiscriminate hospitality. (253-44)

Sue William Silverman describes the genre of creative nonfiction as “a long river with many moods and currents” (184), and maps out the seven basic forms, or ports of call. Memoir is differentiated as a subgenre that “employs many of the same techniques we encounter in fiction: dialogue, setting, character development, plot, and metaphor” (189), and, unlike autobiography or biography, captures only a slice of life. Another feature that distinguishes memoir from other works of nonfiction is the presence of two voices: the innocent voice that “conveys the experience of the relatively unaware persona the author was when the events actually happened,” and the experienced voice that “plunges us deeper into the story by employing metaphor, irony, and reflection to reveal the author’s progression of thought and emotion . . . what the facts *mean*, both intellectually and emotionally” (Silverman 189). Similarly, in *Your Life as Story: Discovering the “New Autobiography and Writing Memoir as Literature* (1998) Tristine Rainer affirms that “the voice in autobiographic narrative is a combination of your younger self as protagonist in the past and your older self as narrator in the present” (129). It should be noted that Rainer categorizes memoir as a subgenre of autobiographic writing. Examples of popular literary memoirs that engage the dual voice include Candace Savage’s *A Geography of Blood: Unearthing Memory from a Prairie Landscape* (2012), Cheryl Strayed’s *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* (2012), and Tobias Wolff’s *This Boy’s Life: A Memoir* (1989).

In addition to the insight provided by utilizing the dual voice, another reason I chose to write memoir was that memoir presented a form of “no-holds-barred writing” that Phyllis Barber, author of “The Fictional ‘I’ in Nonfiction” (2009) asserts could “touch closer to the truth, to the essence of what it means to be an individual human being here on this earth” (176). Tristine Rainer contends that “Stories are powerful . . . the individual stories of our own lives tell us who we are and infuse our personal existence with excitement, meaning, and mystery” (37). I have always been fascinated by stories, from my father and grandmother’s own tales of adventure, to bar rambles from complete strangers. My desire to understand people’s lived experience has led me to pursue undergraduate degrees in archaeology and anthropology, disciplines rooted in the exploration of human lifeways, both past and present. After graduating, I continued to read nonfiction, shifting from ethnography and texts on ancient civilization to memoir and travel writing. At some point, I wanted to add my own story to the written record.

The genres of travel writing and memoir have historic linkages: Paul Fussell situates travel books as a subgenre of memoir “in which autobiographic narrative arises from the speaker’s encounter with distant or unfamiliar data and in which the narrative . . . claims literal validity by constant reference to actuality” (qtd. in Hooper and Youngs 203). Loredana Polezzi,

in her essay *Between Gender and Genre: The Travels of Estella Canziani*, cites further historical and formal ties between travel writing and autobiographic forms, highlighting how both genres are critical locations for the formation of identity: “The way in which identity is constructed, modified, reproduced, inherited . . . is repeatedly re-enacted in the narrative representation of encounters, conflicts and transformation which lies at the core of travel writing and autobiography” (123). Others, such as Kristi Siegel, have noted similarities between the two genres in terms of their sharply defined focus and construction of self; much the same as how a memoirist peels back layers of self to construct and reconstruct identity—a process of self-discovery that Phyllis Barber compares to opening up a *matryoshka*, or Russian nesting doll (174)—travelling brings about a comparable upheaval: “travel necessarily brings about change. Travelers may lose their sense of identity altogether or, conversely, find their sense of self sharpened by the journey” (“Intersections” 7).

South Away: The Pacific Coast on Two Wheels also fits into a subgenre of travel known as the road genre, a body of highway literature and film that Jessica Enevold describes as typifying “the masculine ‘buddy genre,’ gendered as such by Jack Kerouac’s novel *On the Road*, and later reinscribed as such by Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper’s road movie, *Easy Rider*” (76). Enevold demonstrates how *Thelma & Louise* (1991) proved to be a major turning point, liberating the genre from its masculine roots and “laying bare the stereotypical gender-dependence of the road genre” (76). What followed in travel writing was a resurgence of the road genre with a female spin; examples of more recent popular texts include the collection *Wild Ways: New Stories of Women on the Road* (1998), and *Flaming Iguanas: An All-Girl Road Novel Thing* (1997). Like the male buddy stories that have traditionally dominated the road genre, J.R.R. Tolkien’s Middle Earth in *The Hobbit* (1937) is clearly in the domain of the male. In my own work I aim to counter the male-dominated literature historically associated with quest narratives (Macpherson 193), travel writing (Foster and Mills 5), and the subgenre of the road (Enevold 74). By writing female characters into what has traditionally been considered as male roles, I hope to accomplish what Enevold refers to as re-scripting, a process wherein characters cross “culturally scripted, binary boundaries” and female characters take up the reins of adventure (79). Because gender is only one of many variables that include class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, I agree with Foster and Mills when they say “it is difficult to generalise about women’s travel writing” (4). Nonetheless, I hope that in writing from a female perspective, I can contribute to the growing body of literature written by those whom Enevold refers to as the “daughters” of Thelma and Louise, the generation of women who have grown up with Thelma and Louise on their minds and “refuse to drive off the cliff; they want to resolve the road differently” (90).

During the course of this project, a number of key influential texts emerged, some recommended by my mentor Candace Savage, some culled from the biographies of other critical texts. Since my project encompassed three major overlapping categories (nonfiction, travel, and memoir) I sought out texts to better understand these forms.

In order to gain a firm handling on the craft of literary nonfiction, I turned to Philip Lopate, personal essayist and literary critic of *To Show and To Tell: The Craft of Literary Nonfiction* (2013); Tristine Rainer, author of *Your Life as Story: Discovering the “New Autobiography” and Writing Memoir as Literature* (1998); and a selection of essays centered on nonfiction writing in *Words Overflowed by Stars: Creative Writing Instruction and Insight from the Vermont College of Fine Arts M.F.A. Program* (2009), edited by David Jauss. A common concern many of the authors address is the notion of truth, and how authors of creative

nonfiction use techniques often associated with fiction, such as crafting a persona, dialogue, and scene, to shape the material. According to Rainer, “truth in autobiography has always been a complex question . . . there is no such thing as journalistic objectivity in autobiography” (13). She continues on to state that while a writer “may remain completely honest and never alter an event, reaction, or feeling, you are ‘making up,’ crafting, your life into story” (49). Lopate echoes Rainer’s standpoint, stating that he does not believe “we need to apply the strictest journalistic standards of factual accuracy to all literary nonfiction” (13). Like Lopate, I prefer the word *honesty* (a term I associate with sincerity of thought) over *truth* (a term that invites a hard-and-fast, black-and-white distinction between what accords with fact or reality, and what is invented) in reference to creative nonfiction writing, and agree with him when he says, “We may never be in possession of the truth, but at least as nonfiction writers we can try to be as honest as our courage permits” (13). While Lopate argues for a degree of flexibility in crafting a story, in terms of which events to omit or how to arrange a sequence of events, he also emphasises the importance of nonfiction remaining a genre firmly grounded in reality: “there is something magical and uncanny about the world as it is given to us, in the very randomness or order that it is given to us” (14).

Because my thesis deals with actual people, I have consulted nonfiction craft books to advise in the ethics of writing about others, for instance Lopate’s *To Show and To Tell* and Rainer’s *Your Life as Story*. Lopate discusses the challenge of portraying real people, particularly family members, and cautions against allowing those being depicted to interfere with one’s manuscript (85). In addition, he advises would-be non-fiction writers to abide by two rules: “(1) Never write to settle scores . . . (2) Try to write as beautifully as possible because well-wrought prose invites its own forgiveness—from yourself, if not from the offended party” (84).

I have sought permission from family members in writing this manuscript, as I felt it to be crucial that they understand and support the scope of my project. My sister has read the manuscript in its entirety and believes the writing accurately expresses our experience, from my point of view. I have not, however, sought permission from every person depicted. Some names have been changed to protect the identity of individuals. If I had been pursuing research and writing about a vulnerable sector, as Candace Savage did in her book *A Geography of Blood*, obtaining consent to publish the work would have been necessary. In my case, however, the narrative is rooted in my own personal experience, with the aim of telling my story, and I did not feel it necessary to seek permission or show my work to all parties involved. I have, nonetheless, tried to be conscious of the unequal power relations of travel and the colonial history of travel writing, as well as how my work, written from the perspective of a white woman of European descent visiting a previously colonized country, has the potential to construct knowledge about Mexico aimed at an outside, English-speaking readership. To better comprehend the colonial implications of travel writing, I turned to Mary Louise Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992).

To understand the field of travel writing in general and women’s travel writing in particular, I read a number of texts written by scholars and critics, including Tim Youngs’ *The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing* (2013), *Gender, Genre, and Identity in Women’s Travel Writing* (2004, edited by Kristi Siegel), and *Perspectives on Travel Writing* (2004, edited by Glenn Hooper and Tim Youngs).

Certain narrative texts stood out as particularly useful in demonstrating aspects of craft, or providing examples of texts that succeeded in enticing the reader and telling a convincing story. In order to transpose the act of cycle touring to the page I looked at a number of cycle-

based texts, including Andrew X Pham's *Catfish and Mandala: A Two-Wheeled Voyage Through Landscape and Memory*, a text that combines vivid description of travel with an emotionally impactful internal journey. To better understand the experience of female travellers, I read a number of anthologies, including *An Anthology of Women's Travel Writing* (2002) edited by Foster and Mills, *Wild Ways: New Stories About Women on the Road* (1998) edited by Margo Daly and Jill Dawson, and Cheryl Strayed's *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* (2012). One of my favourite narratives, however, was Erika Lopez' *Flaming Iguanas: An Illustrated All-Girl Road Novel Thing* (1997), a fictional road story about a young woman named Tomato Rodriguez, an inexperienced lesbian Latina biker who travels across America on her motorbike. Lopez writes with a brazen wit I envy, jarringly humorous but at the same time pointing towards the vulnerabilities of being a woman on the road.

To write lyrically about nature, I turned to Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* (1968), Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), and Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974).

Because I failed to maintain a written journal during the 2009 trip, I was left with the challenge of how to accurately transcribe my experiences. To overcome this obstacle I turned to visual source material, and put trust in my own powers of recollection. I relied on the original print maps as well as Google Maps, Google Street View, Google Images, and my own digital photo albums. Another valuable source has been the actual people I travelled with and met along the way. I conversed with my sister and primary travelling companion frequently over the course of this project, and sought feedback from her on a late draft of the manuscript. Through social media, I have maintained contact with a number of people I met while travelling, and during the writing process contacted some with queries for information. So in a way I maintained a journal, although it was not a typical note-taking record, but a collection of maps, images, contacts, and powerful memories engrained forever into the back of my retinas.

I also faced difficulty in deciding how to structure my story. Through discussions with my mentor I realized that I was writing a modern day-quest narrative. According to Youngs, "Quests of different sorts have motivated travellers for millennia. They may be spiritual or material . . . solitary or collective, outward into the world or inward into the self" (87). Furthermore, "the quest is not merely a part of the content of travel accounts; it influences their very structure" (Youngs 87). In brief, in a quest narrative the protagonist embarks on a mission, encounters obstacles, surmounts them, (usually) attains his or her goal, and returns home wiser and more self-aware. Youngs points to the enduring longevity of the quest as caused in part by its willingness to adapt: recent narratives, instead of being explorations into unmapped terrain, focus on the search for personal meaning (90). *South Away: The Pacific Coast on Two Wheels* describes a quest, in that the narrative follows both my physical quest toward the end of the pavement at the tip of the Baja Peninsula, as well as my internal journey to comprehend the relationship between risk and adventure, come to terms with past decisions, and gain a better understanding of my mother's life choices.

As well as lending the title to my work, *The Hobbit* features as a prominent text in my thesis: it represents the quest narrative, the kind of fantasy I grew up with and a world that I rediscover, to an extent, in the freedom of cycle touring. By incorporating references to this outside text, I hope to invoke the fantastic, and demonstrate how I see the road through the lens of Middle Earth, relating the physical sights in front of me to the imagined fantasy worlds that exist in my mind. In many ways, *South Away: The Pacific Coast on Two Wheels* can be viewed as a complementary text to *The Hobbit*: both are quests involving risk, adventure, and movement away from the safety of home toward increasingly unknown lands. However, in my thesis I aim

to regender the male-dominated world of *The Hobbit* and other epic quest mythologies, and strip the genre, to some extent, of its romantic trappings. In describing the minutiae of daily drudgery, I hope to lay bare the hardships of long-distance travel, and shift the focus from high adventure to the more intimate aspects of daily life. Instead of skirmishes with goblins, giant spiders, or trolls, my protagonist faces off against her own doubts and uncertainties, concerns of safety, and dangers of the road that are often more perceived than real. In this way, *South Away: The Pacific Coast on Two Wheels* explores complexities of character, providing another voice to the chorus of female travellers enacting their adventures on the road, and to modern literature expanding the quest genre.

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DEDICATION

For my grandmother, Marie Hackinen, who first taught me that adventure roams in foxglove meadows and ferned ravines.

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