



Coasting: A Private Voyage

Jonathan Raban

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Put Jonathan Raban on a boat and the results will be fascinating, and never more so than when he's sailing around the serpentine, 2,000-mile coast of his native England. In this acutely perceived and beautifully written book, the bestselling author of **Bad Land** turns that voyage—which coincided with the Falklands war of 1982—into an occasion for meditations on his country, his childhood, and the elusive notion of home.

Whether he's chatting with bored tax exiles on the Isle of Man, wrestling down a mainsail during a titanic gale, or crashing a Scottish house party where the kilted guests turn out to be Americans, Raban is alert to the slightest nuance of meaning. One can read **Coasting** for his precise naturalistic descriptions or his mordant comments on the new England, where the principal industry seems to be the marketing of Englishness. But one always reads it with pleasure.

Coasting: A Private Voyage Details

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Author : Jonathan Raban

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Maddy says

Best find yet from the free little library box in my neighbourhood. My edition is from the 1980s and doesn't have a subtitle. I was really drawn in to Raban's prose but part way through the book was a little disappointed that (a) he doesn't talk about that many British coast towns (I can only remember the Isle of Man, Fowey, Brighton, Rye, London, Hull, Essex) - that's what the book is supposed to be about! and (b) he seems to have a passive-aggressive vendetta against Paul Theroux, which he insists on mentioning in a round-about way. That said, his understanding of the changing English lifestyle of the 1980s (moving into a conservative, warmongering, service-economy, recession, strike-busting, tourist-courting kitschy kind of place) is really beautiful, as is his grappling with his own inertia. He's probably the only one who could ever sell you on Essex life, swamp, smugness and all.

Annemieke says

You need to read this book, while on a sailing boat, at least I did. And I could relate and I loved it. Moreover, his observations about people, and himself, and places are not to be missed!

Eric says

Read this with 'The kingdom by the sea' by Paul Theroux. Theroux walks around the UK, Raban sails. They meet each other and both report the meeting in their book. Let's say they have a different perspective. I like Raban's best - and he's a better writer than Theroux.

Jason says

Jonahthian Raban writes at a whole new level, he can blend his current travels with his past in a way nobody else can. His wonderful poetic prose draws you in right from the off.

I love hiking, one of the reasons is how remote things are and that there is nobody else around, bliss for me. I recently walked in the Brecon Beacons, finding 50 people eating lunch at the highest point, others having loud conversations that echoed around the hills and others playing loud music on their phones. Back in 1982 Raban found England to be very cluttered too so he looks towards the sea for a bit of secluded peace and quiet. His description of the sea is near perfect:

"The sea marks the end of things. It is where life stops and the unknown begins."

Whilst at sea, real life goes on, Britain goes to war with Argentina, Lady Di drops her first sprog and Thatcher goes to war with the miners. Each trip back to shore gives him little updates on what is happening, he tends to be disgusted with what he reads in the papers, especially The Sun and its blood hungry racist slurs, these all make him desperate to get back out to sea.

It's almost inevitable but when you spend so much time alone your mind is going to travel back in time to past events, each time his thoughts end up with his difficult relationship with his dad, it was fun to read him meeting up with his dad and realising they seem to have swapped places.

My first Raban book and it was a joy to read, I'm now hooked on this writer.

Blog post is here> <https://felcherman.wordpress.com/2018...>

Stacy Bearse says

This is a wonderful book, less about sailing, and more about life in England in the early 1980s. Raban hugged the British coast during his 3000-mile journey, frequently stopping in ports to interact with the locals and learn about their history. His perspectives on the state of England's fishing and coal industries were depressing when written in 1982, and would be even more disappointing if written today. Raban is particularly nettled by the faux history re-created by towns and villages desperate to replace doomed commercial industries with international tourism. The over-arching message of the author's observations focuses on the resiliency of Britain's middle-class in the face of great change. *Adapt and survive* would be an appropriate motto for these determined Englishmen.

Andrew says

Normally, Jonathan Raban is one of the sunnier travel writers out there, but in Britain in the early 1980s, sunlight was strictly forbidden. Please see the attached documents: the complete oeuvre of Hanif Kureishi and Derek Raymond, Paul Theroux's *Kingdom by the Sea*, the complete musical output of Joy Division and the Smiths, *This Is England...* the list goes on.

He starts in the hyper-conservative tax dodge of the Isle of Man, and then works his way around the coast, expressing horror in various degrees at the general warm-beer-and-gravy stench of the whole island, the toxic Thatcherism that plagued the place, his lousy childhood, etc. etc. Oh, and he meets up with noted glass-half-full types Theroux (who was trudging around working on *Kingdom by the Sea* at the same time) and Philip Larkin, both of whom are positive about positive things all the time forever.

Of course I loved it.

Gail Pool says

To some degree the traveler is always an outsider. For the travel writer this poses a risk: there are journeys where he never gains entry; his account is that of a stranger in a land he doesn't understand. Yet it can also work to his advantage: the very detachment of being an outsider can serve to sharpen his perceptions and observations.

In "Coasting", Jonathan Raban plays the outsider's role wonderfully as a traveler in his own land. In 1982, at 40, the British travel writer set out to sail around the British Isles, stopping at various ports. His goal was not to escape but to come to terms with Britain's identity and his own. Stocking his boat, the "Gosfield Maid,"

with books on British history, geology, flora—"an explorer's, not an exile's library"; hanging on his wall a photo of Margaret Thatcher with clenched fist—"a reminder that this voyage wasn't going to be a holiday from life"; he set off to visit familiar places and record how they had changed.

"Coasting" is partly about Britain, partly about the author, and the two themes are nicely balanced, pivoting smoothly on the figure of Raban's father. The Britain Raban finds is in decline. At Hull, where he attended University and taught school, the once bustling Fish Dock is abandoned, The Fishing dead; Blyth is beset by the miners' strike, Rye by tourism, the whole country by the improbable Falkland Islands War.

Yet for all that Hull is "doleful", Blyth tense, and Rye "packaged", "Coasting" is not pessimistic. A counterpoint is provided by Raban's sense of humor; by the sea and its dangers which he survives; by the people he meets—the "insular" Manx, the marvelous Philip Larkin, and Raban's father, who in retirement has found a new life. To Raban, his father—a vicar in the Church of England, a war hero, conservative, austere—was England itself. He now finds him a labor-voting, "cheerful...bearded, radical debunker," and reflects at some length on how the vicar, like the Church itself, has adapted to the times. One comes away from this affectionate, upbeat portrait, and from the book, with a sense not of stagnation but of motion, of tides, of a country and people in flux.

Matthew Cartledge says

Not a conventional travel book in any sense, the narrative doesn't follow the course of the journey chronologically, and instead strings together a series of musings on life and the state of the nation in the early 80s against the backdrop of Raban's round Britain sailing voyage. The dry, slightly gloomy tone suited my January mood, and the whole book works wonderfully well. Such a shame it seems to be out of print.

Greta says

A morose, melancholy journey in search of what he remembers his home country to be, Jonathan Raban is a skillful writer who manages to describe every possible nuance of the bleak despair he seeks, and frequently encounters.

I found the book fascinating for a couple of reasons. The setting in 1982, the year my first child was born, brought back many memories of the Lady Di and royal wedding infatuations that were so popular in America at that time. His vision, from the other side of the ocean, was quite instructive. The actual setting, the boat herself, was what I had hoped to learn the most about, since we are considering a coasting voyage of our own later this year.

Although he goes on (and ON) about the terrifying dangers of being afloat, he somehow manages singlehandedly to get where he means to go without being sunk or blown to smithereens or dismasted. Rather, he coasts, in every sense of the word.

I found it rather amusing, like the folks who move somewhere perfect for them and then discourage any and all potential neighbors from ever setting foot in the wretched swamp.

I could only read it in small doses, as I found it quite depressing, albeit beautifully written.

Greg says

Reading this book at the moment and finding it very satisfying and up there with Passage to Juneau - by the same author and in a similar vein. I do worry about his relationships with women though. At the start he describes being galvanised by earlier sailing books written by authors with "philistine certainties and chauvinistic attitudes towards women". Not referring to himself of course, but most of the characters he connects with in the book are men, and he talks about his relationship with his boat as if it were a person. I suppose his sailing experiences are deeply and essentially solitary and it is within this reference frame that he is at his most creative. In the Passage to Juneau he does his best writing after his partner has left him and he goes on alone..... go figure

Robert Ditterich says

Raban is not your average escapist writing about the bliss of being footloose in a boat. Where you might expect this simply to be a salty tale, it turns out being a wonderful insight into the state of Britain in the early 1980's, as glimpsed from the cockpit of his boat and his venturing into port as he makes his way around an island in a state of turbid change. He is an outsider in many ways but this is a very useful filter for his musings on the nature of a population surrounded by water, at a time when Thatcher was taking shots at the Argentinians over the Falkland Islands, and while the fishing and coal industries were taking seismic hits from which the labour force would never quite recover.

I really warmed to his prose and his insights, although he doesn't escape the inevitable difficulty of finding a suitable ending for a voyage which is pretty much circular.

Judith Rich says

Raban travelled around the coast of Britain in 1982 and his voyage coincided with the Falklands War (or Falklands Crisis, then Falklands Conflict as we called it back in the day).

I found this horribly depressing reading, realising how little has changed. The "them and us" island mentality he discovers, the racism and the nastiness of the tabloid press.

Bob Roller says

"Knocking about from port to port, you keep on going past the port you originally started out from. In that regard at least, coasting is a lot more lifelike than those epic journeys which reduce the world to a magnificent straight line of conquest; and the coaster's chronic itch, to be moving on only in order to get nearer home, his never-quite-knowing whether he's returning or running away, are more real, in a daily way, than the exotic compulsions of the serious travelers who voyage intrepidly from A to Z" (p.301).

Cedric Rose says

If you're an anglophile and a boat-o-phile and a limnophile, you're going to love this book. Raban delivers his usual heavy dose of esotera and history... some of it in the making here: The Falklands conflict gets under way, coal miners are going on strike, and England is decaying as Raban sets sailing in the *Gosfield Maid*.

Sandy says

very well written. thoughtful and thought-provoking. I am enjoying it.

Raban writes about the ocean with the kind of body and beauty of Van Gogh's paintings, the visible details and swirls of color and light and texture. I've read a lot of books about the sea and sailing but I have never come across a writer who is so in touch with his environment that he can write about it with such a close eye and such a texturally rich voice. That he chooses to write with this depth of expression is in itself a remarkable thing... So many writers glaze across the top: at the distant vistas; at the unfathomable depths; or the quality of the light and storm... or they write with... an eye to telling a story? I am not quite sure how to express it, but they seem most often to be writing with an editor's eye to the book-buyers marketplace, maybe? Raban does not. He seems to be writing for himself, from amidst an extra-ordinary environment, meditating into words his quiet wonder of the world he's chosen to enter. It feels rare in its beauty.

I cannot find a page that jumps at me, but they are there, amidst his contemplative narration of the world he is in. If you are a creative writer who appreciates fine paintings - oils, tempura, acrylics... and want to give voice to those colors and details and texture, read Raban's "Coasting: A Private Voyage". It is a rare voice, which I, for one, don't want to forget.
