



Driving Home: An American Journey

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"For over thirty years Jonathan Raban has written about people and places in transition or on the margins, of journeys undertaken and destinations never quite reached; of isolation and alienation, but also of what it means to belong, to feel rooted.

Driving Home, a collection of pieces spanning two decades, charts its course through American history and recent world events. Raban writes with an outsider's eye for the public and the personal, about political, social, and cultural affairs, and about literature, his tone intimate but never nostalgic, and always fresh. Variously frank, witty, and provocative, *Driving Home* is part essay collection, part diary – and wholly engrossing.

'A passionate history buff and a skilled raconteur . . . it's a fine ride' Sunday Times

'A fabulous collection' *Observer*"

Driving Home: An American Journey Details

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Florence says

Jonathan Raban has included essays on a wide range of topics in this volume; the Pacific Northwest, literary criticism, fly fishing, politics, sailing, homesteading, the character of life in small towns in the United States and in England, where he was born. All of them are thoughtful and original, and reflective of human foibles. I read all of them closely, mining the words for each subtle and entertaining morsel. I especially liked the theme of the wildness of mountains, forest, and sea in contrast to neighboring Seattle, a city populated by well educated young people perpetually dressed in camping gear. I have never been to the region but after reading Raban I feel like I know the place.

Tim says

Although I enjoyed this book, I was glad I got it from the library rather than buying it, because more of the book than I thought reasonable consisted of a mishmash of unrelated book reviews and essays. But when on topic, I enjoyed Jonathan Raban's ruminations on his adopted home of Seattle, and on the wider Pacific Northwest.

Eliot Boden says

This was overall an excellent collection of essays that could have been much improved with more selective editing. Raban is at his best in essays that explore his relationship to his adopted home of Seattle through the lens of the ever-present conflicts between city and country, conservation and development, working-class and software-rich that define the geographical and social history of the Pacific Northwest. I felt several essays would have been more appropriate in a different volume, none more so than the second "Phillip Larkin," a retrospective of an eccentric and often vulgar twentieth-century British poet with no connection to the United States; this in a book called "Driving Home: An American Journey." The political essays about Obama, Palin, and the Tea Party, while excellent, also do not quite fit with the theme of the preceding 400 pages, and the book would have been more focused without them.

Edward says

This collection of forty-four pieces originally appeared in various periodicals most of them comments on his experiences of living in and traveling about the states for 20 years, after emigrating from Britain. . His introduction, "Readings" gives you a sense of his mindset, a literary background, heavy on the classics.

One book he says particularly influenced him was William Empson's **SEVEN TYPES OF AMBIGUITY** which taught him to slow down his reading, "to read at the level of the word, the phrase, the line; to listen, savor, question, ponder, think." It's this kind of reflection, particularly questioning, that Raban brings to American culture, an outsider's view that notices the subtleties and contradictions that a native might well

miss.

A few of the pieces ,while interesting, have little to do with any American "journey" and serve as filler. In top form, though, Raban is a perceptive observer, and some of his best pieces are about Seattle and the Pacific Northwest., "I'm in Heaven" talks about Seattle being in spirit in that "far west of the American imagination where all utopias belong." He mentions J. Z. Knight (the channeler of a 35,000 year old sage from Atlantis) who set up shop near Seattle, as well as Betty Eadie, a Seattle woman who described her journey to Heaven. Raban wryly notes that Seattle and the Pacific Northwest has always been a tale of the "hereafter;" it's where people go to get a new start, and with Boeing, Microsoft, Starbucks, and Amazon, there have been some "heavenly" success stories. He adds that "in the enlightened Northwest, the recycling and saving of things (water, owls, paper bags, whales, urban neighborhoods) elides imperceptibly into the salvation of the self."

But Seattle has its downside. Despite Henry James' 1906 praise of Seattle as one of the six most beautiful cities in the world, Raban notes that its natural beauty (mountain ranges on both sides, deep bay, hills, internal lakes and offshore suburban islands) also serves to break it apart so that citizens are put at arm's length from one another. 161 bridges in the city needed to connect its different parts inevitably means a sense of isolation.. Raban doesn't say it, but it could be a microcosm of the United States.

Seattle has changed as well. It grew as a seaport city where fishing, lumbering, and the Boeing aircraft industry dominated the city's economy, but with the development of high tech and service corporations, Seattle has become more like any other cosmopolitan city. Raban has the feeling that now in Seattle, "I might be anywhere." Seattle, a spotted owl indicator species for the rest of the country?

Raban ranges well beyond Seattle, and has essays on literature, fishing, small town life, both in England and America, and politics. A couple of political ones are especially perceptive. He reports on a Tea Party convention in Nashville and finds much more diversity among its members than the often too-stereotyped views that most liberals have of it. He praises Obama as being the first intellectual to occupy the White House in a long while, and that a good part of his difficulties stem from trying to act on the premise that America is estranged from its essential character. It has been engaged in dumb and unjust wars, has a skewed tax system, broken politics, but in too often Obama has been identified, not as the bearer of bad news, but the creator of the bad news.

In 2006 Raban wrote in a British Independent column on the aftermath of 9-11. "The paranoid endorsement of a unchecked carte blanche to defeat terrorists succeeded only in defeating guarantees of civil liberty, totally aside from the death and carnage of Iraq and Afghanistan. By one calculation the war cost the average American household \$35,000. Guantanamo, for instance, served to alienate many of America's traditional allies. Considering that Raban wrote this piece eight years ago, he was prescient in voicing concern about "warrantless wiretapping, detention without trial, the most secretive presidency on record, rupture between the branches of government. . ." None of these issues have gone away.

It's impossible to do justice to a collection of individual essays like this one, but it's well worth reading for a book that roughly falls into the genre of what others think of us. Outsiders often see what we are blind to. Raban is a writer with a consistently sharp eye that sees much.

Janice says

This collection of essays is thought-provoking, engrossing, and sometimes laugh out loud funny, covering many subjects, including travel, politics, small town life in the U.S., literary criticism, sailing, and the Pacific Northwest. Several times Raban returns to themes around the city of Seattle, to which he emigrated in 1990 from England. These pieces, and his nature depictions, were my favorites.

In one essay, written about heading back toward Washington from a trip to Montana, Raban began pondering the trip taken by Lewis and Clark, following this very same route toward the Pacific. As he tried to contemplate their journey, he made the following contrast: "It was hard, though, to keep securely in touch with the ghosts, our time scales were so far out of kilter...Four long days in the lives of Lewis and Clark had slipped past in the last twenty-five minutes. In this undignified fast-forward mode, the explorers shot up hill and down dale, jabbering in chipmunk voices, while the Dodge trundled comfortably through soft snow at a steady 15 mph."

The author's perspectives, as well as his skill with language, made this thoroughly enjoyable.

Veronica says

I have always thought that Jonathan Raban was incapable of writing a dull sentence. His beautifully crafted prose kept me spellbound right through from Old Glory in 1981 to Passage to Juneau in 1999. It took him years to write each one, but they were precious treasure chests of words, well worth waiting for.

Then something happened, perhaps not unconnected with a marriage break-up. Silence fell. Then he published two competent but uninspiring novels about his new home, Seattle, 3 years apart (Waxwings in 2003 and Surveillance in 2006). Other than that he appeared to be potboiling away, surviving on book reviews and journalism. I missed him. So, spotting that this book had been published unnoticed by me in 2010, I snapped up a second-hand copy. It turns out to be a collection of occasional pieces similar in concept to his earlier collection, For Love & Money: A Writing Life 1969-1989. These pieces were written between 1991 and 2010 and are in chronological order. You can see precisely when the muse left him: 1999. The pieces written before this are as beautiful and compelling as ever. Afterwards, the writing declines into book reviews, introductions to other people's work, and odd bits of journalism most of which should have been thrown away with the day's paper -- they are not worth keeping for posterity. He seems detached from the world, no longer offering his piercing insights into other lives.

It's still well worth buying this book for the first 200 or so pages though. From one of the reviews on the back cover:

Raban writes about water in the way that Barry Lopez writes about snow or Wilfred Thesiger wrote about sand ... you can sense his natural element in his whole way of seeing.

Get him on or in water and he is unbeatable: if you need someone to report on a flood, you can't do better than send Raban, as Granta did when the Mississippi flooded in 1993. This piece is magnificent. As is the entire article about waves, which begins: ""I love to watch waves. Away from a suitable ocean, I'll happily stand by a puddle in the street on a windy day, gazing at air transferring its energy to water". Those pieces in isolation are 5-star reads.

But even if his muse has fled forever, it doesn't detract from the magnificence of books like Bad Land: An American Romance and Hunting Mister Heartbreak, or his first and greatest water book, Old Glory. So if

you haven't read any of his books, start there.

M says

I think Jonathan Raban is one of "our best authors," and I think I've read all of his books. I definitely like the nonfiction better than the novels. This collection of essays, intros, and reviews took me a while to finish, in part, I think, because they are not all thematically connected. I never got "into" it as a book -- as a whole -- and so didn't get sucked in and want to keep reading.

I would have rather seen two slimmer editions, one with musings on the land around Seattle, one with everything else (U.S. politics, Anglo-American relations, book introductions, etc.).

Obviously some of his essays are better than others. But they were all worth reading. Some of his talents:

- * pinpoint the charm or squalor of a place
- * attack a book or author with conviction and competence
- * deconstruct a painting or a photograph
- * offer his political opinion and make it sound like the only sane choice, yet still
- * put himself in the shoes of those with different political opinions

Jonathan, I am still a fan.

Jim says

Excellent collection from a favorite author. Jonathan Raban migrated to the Northwest at about the same time (and time of life) that I did. Originally a British travel writer increasingly obsessed with the US, he brings a literate and perceptive view to every subject in this collection. Descriptions of Seattle people and culture of the '90s and 2000's are right on, with background from the art and history of the greater Northwest. And essays on American politics from 9/11, wiretapping, and Sarah Palin, to Obama's first Inauguration are spot on. His infiltration of a Tea Party convention is both scary and funny. All around good read.

Larry says

English-born, Raban moved to the US in the 70s, and has lived here and written about it ever since. His essays deal with the ambiguous nature of his understanding of our culture. They are uneven, ranging from OK to wonderful, but they echo his really great books ("Badlands" and "Hunting for Mister Heartbreak," say). His writing is worth attention. (His essay on Shackleton and Robert Scott, tucked away toward the end, could merit a whole book.)

Nancy says

I was expecting the whole book to be about an Englishman traveling in the Pacific Northwest, but it's not. In

fact, most of the essays are not. The rest dealt with topics in which I had not interest. The author is an excellent essayist; the problem with the book was in me, not him.

Carolyn Haley says

I loved-loved-loved this collection of essays. See my review at NY Journal of Books:
[http://www.nyjournalofbooks.com/review...](http://www.nyjournalofbooks.com/review-of-old-glory-an-american-voyage-by-jonathan-raban)

Mark Noble says

I discovered Jonathan Raban when I read "Old Glory: An American Voyage" shortly after I moved away from Seattle. Raban is a British writer and began as a travel specialist. "Old Glory" recounts his trip down the Mississippi, recreating the route of Huck Finn, one of his childhood heroes. In addition to the ability to capture the essence of a place, Raban also easily connects with people, draws them out and then paints lasting pictures of their personality. I also loved his ability to look at America from the unique perspective of a Brit; bound by a similar language but separated by nuance.

The next time I came across one of his books, he had moved to Seattle and had begun to write about the Northwest experience. I was a bit homesick for that wet and green part of the US that is rarely visited and little understood by most Americans. I appreciated sharing Raban's experience as he discovered that remarkable corner of the country and wrote about places and neighborhoods I had come to love. Raban wrote with an interesting perspective, the stranger in a foreign land. I would realize only recently that it was the perspective of the expatriate that made his writing unique.

For the past sixteen years, I have lived the expatriate life, dragging my family to China, then Hong Kong and finally to our current home in Switzerland. When you live in a foreign country, you are quickly able to penetrate below the surface of the culture and see and learn amazing things that tourists will never experience. Anyone can take a tour of the Great Wall and marvel at the vistas from the top. But when you share a tea with a local colleague that you have known for four years, have met his family and can even speak some sentences to him in his own language—when such a person tells you of his early life in shadow of this wall, watching while his father is sent to a work camp to be re-educated, and of his struggle to get into a university and study his passion, engineering, the fabric of your understanding takes on subtle hues. The total of these impressions over the years develop into a rich tapestry that a mere tourist cannot imagine. But even so, no matter how long you live in a country, no matter how good your language skill becomes, no matter how many close, local friends you develop, the expat sooner or later realizes that he is and always will be a stranger in a foreign land.

Raban understands this better than any writer I know. As an expat himself, he knows the motivations for leaving your home country and the many joys it can bring. He has also experienced that gap which you may never cross as a stranger. In his latest book, "Driving Home: An American Journey", Raban often touches on this topic. This book is a compilation of his essays written over the twenty plus years he lived in the United States. Many of the articles were originally written to explain the USA to his home countrymen. About the expat experience, he says, "However you may fancy your capabilities as a chameleon, the inside of your head remains obstinately wedded to assumptions and prejudices acquired in its country of origin. Relatively small differences in vocabulary, pronunciation, etiquette and especially humor serve to daily remind the

Briton in America and the American in Britain of their alien status." He goes on to say, "The longer one stays, the more jarring are the reminders of one's uprootedness: just when you are feeling most at home, an encounter at the supermarket checkout or an exchange at the dinner table confronts you with the bleak fact that you are a stranger here." Having had exactly such an encounter at the supermarket checkout, I know of what he speaks!.

I found the book uneven with too many essays based in London and focused on the local British topics and on the Britons. I found myself skimming through many pieces looking for those nuggets which made the search worthwhile. I have several favorites: "Mississippi Water" is a revisit to the river he first drifted down in "Old Glory", now swollen with flood waters and escaping its banks. "The Unsettling of Seattle" is a look at how Seattle has changed from the quirky green wilderness to the hotbed of technology, populated by twenty-something millionaires moving and morphing at alarming rates, and changing the city with it. The title piece, "Driving Home", is long and rambling but worth the trouble, especially the section recounting the Lewis and Clark exploration. When Raban is on his game, he is as good as John McPhee writing about geology. Don't give up on this book too soon; keep it on the table and go back to it when you are in the mood for a look at the US from the point of view of a foreigner who often seems to know more about us than we do of ourselves.

Josephine Ensign says

Highly uneven as a collection of somewhat linked essays. I like his earlier writing better than more recent pieces. Way too many references to 'hinterland' and 'VWs' in the Seattle area in the early 1990's.

Christina Green says

Raban's writing style is funny and insightful. He pulls in side stories and interesting details that exhibit his intelligence and deep knowledge on so many subjects. Many of these details have inspired me to look deeper into topics of interest.

However, I thought this was a collection of stories of a Brit in Seattle. My love for the NW drew me to this collection. I expected a bit of a travelogue and comparison of experiences between his adopted country and his home country. It turns out it's a collection of his writing after moving to Seattle. His essays include political and environmental topics and a lot less sense of place pieces than I was expecting.

If you go into it knowing this, you will probably enjoy it more. The title is misleading.

Alex says

Another series of essays confusingly presented as a memoir. There were many excellent pieces in here, and many themes that got tedious to read about over 500 some pages. Raban is talented and does excellent deep dives on subjects like the Pacific Northwest, boating, and American culture, but mashed together in this opus there is not a lot of breathing room.

