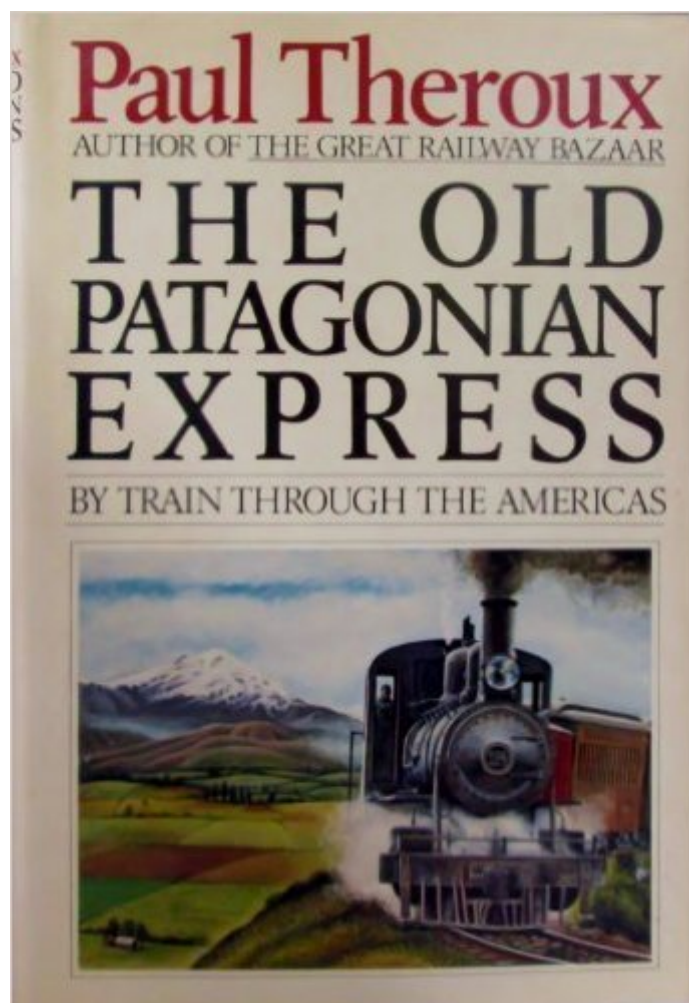


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The Old Patagonian Express: By Train Through The Americas



Synopsis

Starting with a rush-hour subway ride to South Station in Boston to catch the Lake Shore Limited to Chicago, Theroux winds up on the poky, wandering Old Patagonian Express steam engine, which comes to a halt in a desolate land of cracked hills and thorn bushes. But with Theroux the view along the way is what matters: the monologuing Mr. Thornberry in Costa Rica, the bogus priest of Cali, and the blind Jorge Luis Borges, who delights in having Theroux read Robert Louis Stevenson to him. --This text refers to an alternate Hardcover edition.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

A remark that one reads often about Paul Theroux is that he is grouchy, critical of the people he meets, and generally unpleasant. Some readers seem to suggest that this makes him a worse traveler, not being pure-of-heart or sufficiently open-minded. On the other hand, some others suggest he is worth reading as a travel writer precisely because he's not afraid to tell-it-like-it-is. I think it is likely that both of these ideas are wrong. When Paul Theroux writes a travel book, he is not a journalist writing simply to produce a faithful depiction of the places he visits. He is not a social crusader writing in order educate the reader about the lives of the poor or to stimulate the reader to see the richness of life outside of North American. He certainly is not an egotist like Thomas Friedman who writes in order to put himself in a positive light. He is simply an intelligent man who has enough humility to try to write down what he has experienced without drawing too many clumsy conclusions or false symmetries. When he writes that he didn't like a certain person sleeping in his train compartment, he doesn't expect the reader to sympathize with either him or the unpleasant

companion. I don't think he means to argue that his dislike has any special significance beyond the fact that it was part of the travel story that he is telling. I like the fact that when Theroux narrates an encounter with someone in his travels he doesn't smooth out the details to make the encounter unambiguously positive or negative. For example, when he describes meeting Jorge Borges, the Argentine writer, he clearly admires Borges' memory and sensitivity and yet he doesn't avoid commenting on Borges' stuttering and his clowning smile. And yet again I don't think Theroux's remarks are meant to be cynical or knowing. When he tells-it-like-it-is he is not trying to steer an intellectual or moral high road and he is not valiantly trying to see past illusions. I believe that when he writes down a conversation or encounter he intends only to include his side as one of the characters in his story. Theroux has the patience to travel by train across a hemisphere and, thankfully for this reader, he has the patience to delay the moment when the mind can no longer calmly observe and rashly commits itself to streamlined answers and silly pet theories about what one sees and what it 'really' means. His books are, to me, humble because in them he shows us moments when he feels superior and they are wise because he doesn't try to step outside of his story to engage in falsely-wise pronouncements. It doesn't matter whether Paul Theroux is a 'good' traveler or not. Few travelers have the writing ability to produce any sort of record of their travels anyway, whatever their nature. The reason one ought to read Paul Theroux is to be reminded of what the world and oneself can look like through the eyes of an ardent traveler who just happens to love books a bit more than he loves people.

In 1979, Paul Theroux departed from his childhood home in Medford, Massachusetts, and began his train journey from the East Coast of the United States to Patagonia, on the southern tip of Argentina. A seasoned traveler, fluent in Spanish, Theroux brings to life his trip through the northern and southern hemispheres, traveling without a schedule and observing his fellow passengers on the train and people at stops along the way. In Texas he is astonished at the contrasts between Laredo on the Texas side of the Rio Grande and Nuevo Laredo across the border in Mexico, commenting on society and governments. Traveling through Mexico and Guatemala, he observes the poverty of the Indians and their lack of opportunities. In El Salvador he attends a soccer game and gets caught up in the melee and riots which follow it. In Costa Rica, the cleanest country he has visited, he finds himself stuck on the train with Mr. Thornberry, a New Hampshire tourist so boring that Theroux cannot wait to escape him--only to have Mr. Thornberry "save his life" by offering him a place to stay upon his arrival in Limon. In Panama he meets the "Zonians," from the Canal Zone, and in Cali, Colombia, he meets a married "priest" who cannot tell his devout mother in Belfast that he has "left"

the church to marry and have children. Throughout his trip, Theroux reads classics, particularly enjoying Boswell's Life of Dr. Johnson and Edgar Allan Poe's The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, both of which provide ironic reference points for his own journey. For literature lovers, the most fascinating section occurs in Buenos Aires, where Theroux spends many days visiting blind writer Jorge Luis Borges, who persuades Theroux to read to him. Ironically, one of Borges's favorite novels is The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym. As Theroux takes notes on his meetings with Borges, he becomes Borges's Boswell. More an observer than a participant, Theroux has an unfortunate air of superiority about what he sees and hears. Sparring little sympathy for American and German tourists, he rarely gets excited about his surroundings, expressing genuine emotion only when he talks with three boys, ages ten to twelve, who live in a doorway and scavenge for food because their rural families have abandoned them. Theroux's self-congratulatory attitude gets a bit wearisome, but the picture of Central and South America, thirty years ago, and the section with Borges are unparalleled. With beautiful, carefully observed prose and a great ear for dialogue, Theroux's Patagonia Express is a landmark travel memoir. n Mary Whipple

As a venezuelan I thank god that there is no train to my country and that Paul Theroux didn't stop in Venezuela because almost everywhere that he went , including part of the U.S.A, he had the ability, the gift to find only the negative things. So you should ask me, then why did I give this book 4 stars, because its fun to read. Paul Theroux, a young writer in the seventies, one day decides to leave his wife and kids in their home in London, go back to his parents house in Massachussets and from there take a train to the Patagonia: the farthest south that he could go. Sounds fun for an adventurous man, but all the time, all the places he keeps bitching about everything: The people on the trains, the people in the cities, how he misses his family, what is he doing there, about the food, about the hotels. Well you name it, but in the middle of all this bitching you can almost find yourself in the forest, in the middle of a civil war, in the top of the mountain, meeting Borges, every day completely different from the other. Paul Theroux can be real obnoxious, but he sure can write.

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