

Theroux insists that truly great travel writing focuses less on the author and more on the people they encounter

# OTHER PEOPLES' STORIES

Paul Theroux's travel writing has made him a household name across the globe. After decades of escaping from America, he has at last turned his unflinching gaze on his own country. And, as **Chris Fitch** discovers, his writing remains focused on what has always fascinated him - other people

PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVE MCCURRY

**I**'m not an interesting person.' So says probably the world's most famous travel writer. It feels instinctively as though it can't be true, and yet Paul Theroux declares it with such confidence, it's hard not to linger and reflect on his words. Perhaps it's this attitude which is the key to achieving 40 years of success in a genre in which many have dared to tread, but where few have experienced anything like his consistent achievements.

Theroux's vivid descriptions and astute observations of the places and characters he has encountered on his many journeys have led to a signature style which, while serving him well throughout his whole career, has also designated him as the permanent observer, a passively central character in the midst of a steady stream of stories.

'I've made a career of writing about how I got from one place to another,' he tells me, as he unpicks his success. 'But I haven't exactly changed my mind: travel should be less about the ordeal, the narcissistic account of suffering going from

one place to another. It should really be about other people. My getting from place to place isn't the story.'

And yet, on the surface, that is exactly what the story has always been. With memorable and romantic titles like *The Great Railway Bazaar*, *The Old Patagonian Express* and *Riding the Iron Rooster* - getting from place to place has always been at the heart of his narratives. The places may change, but that insightful gaze, full of poignant wisdom, stays the same.

#### FINDING ANOTHER PLACE

As you may expect, in the early days, getting away from home was all that the young Theroux had in mind. 'The younger me wanted to leave the United States,' he recalls. 'It was a very difficult time. The Vietnam War was going on, politics was very discouraging. I felt completely alienated from the States. I thought, "I just want to go, I want to find another place. I want to find something to care about, and something to discover".'





Theroux talks in front of Rowan Oak, the former Mississippi home of author William Faulkner



Yet few, surely, could have predicted the journey that these restless feelings would lead him on. In the early 1960s, after training with the Peace Corps, Theroux moved to Malawi - initially still known as the British-ruled Nyasaland Protectorate. 'I didn't want anyone to know anything about me, I wanted to be a new person,' he reflects. 'That's one of the great things about travelling; you go to a place, no one knows you, no one makes assumptions about you. No one has any preconceptions about you.'

In search of both work and excitement, he began moving around the world, including stints in such diverse locations as Uganda, Singapore and the UK. 'I was teaching in central Africa, then I was a teacher in east Africa, then I was a teacher in Singapore,' he says. 'Ten years went by and I fell into writing in that period.'

#### PUTTING PEN TO PAPER

What followed next has been thoroughly well documented, not least in the staggering array of successful books that Theroux produced over the subsequent 40 years, both fiction and non-fiction. His travel writing took him on numerous cross-continent train journeys, meeting unique characters in carriage compartments, all passing into folklore, preserved for posterity in literary stone.

So successful has his career been, earlier this year he was awarded the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) Patron's Medal, adding his name to a list including Livingstone,

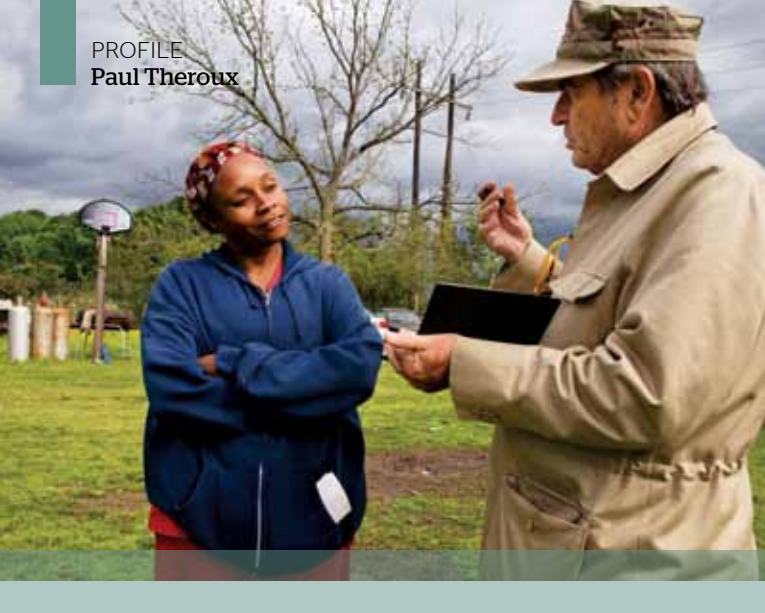
'Travel should be less about the narcissistic account of going from one place to another. It should be about other people'

Stanley, Hillary, Scott and many similarly iconic figures. 'I'm very humbled and unworthy,' says Theroux. 'All my heroes have received that medal. They suffered and died for their travel - and I'm just sitting here having a cup of tea. I didn't win it for finding the source of the Nile or anything like that, but for writing travel books.'

However, the man who in his youth so desperately wanted to escape the US, returned home, to Cape Cod, Massachusetts, and, perhaps even more unpredictably, recently used his travel writing skills, honed on expeditions across remote and far-flung corners of the world, to write about a region of his native country, the southern states, in his latest publication *Deep South*.

'A younger me would not have gone "down South";' says Theroux. 'I wanted to get away, but the South was still just the United States. I had friends that went down South, in the civil rights movement. They were very brave and I admired them.'





‘The South is very poor; there’s a peasant society there. They’re people on the abyss, they’re lost. That was the story’

But I was in Africa when Africa was having its own civil rights struggle and countries were becoming independent - it was the post-colonial era of the 1960s. That was very thrilling to be part of. I heard a lot about the South from other people, and it was in the back of my mind, ‘Someday I’m going to go’. I was just waiting for the right moment.’

And so, 50 years later, he did go. Over and over in fact. First in autumn, then in winter, followed naturally by spring and summer. He had questions he wanted answering, and based on his life experiences, he knew no other way of obtaining those answers. ‘The more I travelled in other places, the more I wondered what America was like, the rural parts of America,’ he explains. ‘Where is the South now? What’s happening there? What are people doing?’

His conclusion: that most of those southern states have been overlooked, ignored and neglected, making them, in his words, ‘not very different from a lot of third-world countries’.

‘It’s very poor; there’s a peasant society there,’ he recalls, grasping for the right words to describe the scenes he encountered. ‘They’re people on the abyss, they’re lost. And it’s a wealthy country. So, I felt that was the story.’

#### MAKING DISCOVERIES

It strikes me that a more patient, Theroux-esque approach to travelling might help the rest of us gain more meaningful experiences when exploring the world - especially those aspiring writers who seek to follow his lead. ‘A lot of people don’t have a lot of time for travel,’ he says. ‘They need to do it in a couple of months and they have the trip planned. “I’m going to go to this town and I’m going to go from here to there, and the book is going to be about my struggling from here to there”. Well, *Deep South* is not about going from here to there. It’s not even about me, it’s about other people, and there’s no ordeal of travel from one place to another.’

‘The great thing that happens to you in travel is making discoveries,’ he continues. ‘Then there’s something to write

about. Then you feel “I’m not wasting my time, this was worth doing”. So it keeps you going with those discoveries. And, because it’s expensive and time-consuming, you want to make sure that what you’re doing is worth it. It’s not like a holiday where it doesn’t matter. “Am I having a good time?” is what you say on a holiday.’

Theroux feels that the value of travel writing is that the book ought to destroy stereotypes. Books that purport to be journeys of self-discovery hold no interest for him.

‘You have to show the human face of a place,’ he says, ‘that these are people, and they’re different, and they want different things, and their experiences have been quite different and complex. So, if you have the time for it, that’s what the traveller ought to do: make a friend, get people to trust you, they tell you their story, and then that’s the book. It can’t be about the ordeal of the traveller - except in rare instances where the traveller is doing something extraordinary - that’s different. But getting to know people, you find out their hopes, their successes, and fears too. All of that becomes a valuable part of the narrative.’

#### MISINFORMATION

Much of his personal criticism of modern travel lies at the feet of technology - specifically the internet - for the adverse effects that it has had in terms of how people approach the world when choosing and planning their journeys.

‘It’s made people presumptuous,’ he argues. ‘When a prospective traveller says, “I’d like to go to this place”, they immediately go to the internet. But it’s misleading, because it’s a library created by a lot of self-interested people. There’s a lot of misinformation on the net. The only way to find out about a place, is to go to the place.’

So strongly does Theroux feel about the negative impacts technology can have on travel - and people’s understanding of the world - that it was a key component of his acceptance speech when collecting his RGS-IBG Patron’s Medal.

‘It’s distorted the world, made people arrogant, made them impatient to find out things, and none of those are good,’ he continues. ‘There are simpler, more reliable ways, but they’re just more trouble. And for all those reasons, I don’t trust it. I only trust my own judgement, and I think the only way to find out, as I said, is to go to a place.’

#### YOU’RE A STRANGER

The ability to discover new stories where others would think there are none - as in *Deep South* - highlights Theroux’s view that, far from being something the world has collectively done and dusted, there are still a wealth of original and unique adventures available to offer the aspiring explorer.

‘There’s plenty left to discover,’ he enthuses. ‘Because the world is changing very fast. It’s not getting more beautiful. But there’s plenty to discover, if you’ve got the stomach for it.’

And what exactly does that entail? ‘A lot of travel is a mental problem, not a geographical problem,’ he says, after a pause for thought. ‘You need to be in the right frame of mind, you need to be in the right mood. A mood of acceptance. A mood of patience, understanding and compassion. And you need a strong sense of yourself. Because you’re a stranger, and it’s hard to be a stranger. So you need your ego and your self-esteem, your life has to be in good order. Then you go.’

*Deep South: Four Seasons on Back Roads* (£20, hardback) is available now, published by Hamish Hamilton. 