

Stalin's Nose by Rory MacLean –May/ June 2009

Feedback from our discussions and the meet Rory MacLean event on 8th June at the Ingeborg Drewitz Bibliothek, Steglitz.

So much that is precious is right in front of you

This month we discussed a very original travel book .We then had the pleasure of meeting its author- Rory MacLean. Rory is currently living in Berlin and working on a book about Berlin in the style of William Dalrymple's City of Djinns- which is a brilliant portrait of the city of Delhi. As Rory loves Berlin – it's his favourite city – it's bound to be an insightful and amusing depiction of our city. It will be fascinating to see his take on Berliners as his books are full of wonderfully eccentric characters.

Rory gave an excellent talk on travel writing – tracing the early history from Homer's Odyssey, through Byron, Shelley, Keats and Goethe. Not many people travelled the world until the later part of the twentieth century, so earlier travel writing was very much about bringing back illuminating facts about unknown places. The world now seems to have shrunk. There are hardly any undiscovered peoples or lands. Many people travel far and wide and to previously unreachable destinations. Unexpected places are often to be found nearer to home. Domestic odysseys have become popular, like Bill Bryson's Notes from a Small Island- about the UK. Gimmicks are often used eg Round Ireland with a Fridge- by Tony Hawks.

Rory asked : So how does the modern travel writer return home with anything really original ? 'Old travellers grumpily complain that travel is now dead,' writes Jonathan Raban, 'that the world is a suburb.' They are quite wrong. Lulled by familiar resemblances between all the unimportant things, they miss the brute differences in everything of importance.' Today it is no longer enough to travel across a country, rather one must travel into it. Into its society. The travel writer becomes less a geographer of place, more of the human heart. The 'original knowledge' that he or she brings home is a collection of subjective impressions. 'Travel writing,' says Colin Thubron, 'is one culture reporting on another. Its history, more than most, betrays that objectivity is a chimera.' He adds that uniquely in literature, outside autobiography, the travel writer acknowledges his subjectivity.

Rory feels it is up to travel writers to seek out wonders. "That's our job. Always has been. Always will be. For me that wonder is in ordinary men and women who are separated by borders, politics, emigration, even time and death. Through my books I try to draw together their - and our - divided worlds. My objective is to enable a reader to understand a society and to empathise with its people through stories. To make a country and its history accessible."

With the introduction of the camera, painting as a realistic form of expression fell from favour. In the same manner mass travel and television documentaries are now freeing the travel writer from the need to detail external realities. The duty of today's travel writer is to provide a new way of seeing and understanding the world. Rory has found his own way. He mixes fact with fiction. When he has been travelling he likes to take time to distil his impressions. He begins a book with a feeling, a memory or an intuition rather than with an intellectual response. And always his writing is from the heart.

As a young teenage Canadian he told us he came to „do“ Europe. He was disturbed by experiencing a divided Berlin and had tried to understand how the wall in Berlin had been allowed to happen. Some of his European relatives had been involved in the second world war – one uncle had been a member of the SS- How could ordinary people have allowed themselves to be forced into roles as murderers? These unanswered questions haunted him. Post war North America and Europe had an air of superiority which he mistrusted. He asked: how would he have behaved if he had been born in Germany rather than in Canada?

Rory initially trained as a film-maker and scriptwriter, working with David Hemmings and Ken Russell in London, Marlene Dietrich in Paris and David Bowie in Berlin. But he later chose not to write screenplays. He told us he realised that he would have been writing for commercial reasons and not from the heart.

Then in 1989 he submitted a story on Prague to the first 'Independent' newspaper travel writing competition and won. That led to a commission to write a book on eastern Europe. Then Gorbachev was kind enough to knock down the Berlin Wall, making his subject highly topical.

Fifteen years after his first visit to Berlin he returned to Germany. His wonderful Austrian aunt Zita (based on his real Aunt Ruth) was his main inspiration for his own odyssey across central and Eastern Europe. His characters are closely modelled on real characters and are often composites of two or three

people. Zita is not a composite, she is one hundred percent herself. But she was such a larger than life character that Rory feels she could even have been slightly underplayed.

Winston the pig fell into Zita's life when he dropped onto my uncle's head and killed him dead.

From the very first line we could tell that this was to be no ordinary journey. We would be in for a rollercoaster ride of eccentric and bizarre characters and happenings. Some of us would delight in the dark surreal humour, others would be put off by it. Written twenty years ago, just after the Berlin Wall came down, MacLean takes off with his Aunt Zita and Winston the pig in a battered Trabant to travel across the face of Europe. Starting in Berlin, they head for Moscow and pass through Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland and Romania on the way.

Eastern Europe was in a state of euphoria. Fifty years of totalitarianism - under first the fascists and then the communists - had ended almost overnight. Rory met people who hadn't spoken to a foreigner for 50 years - in some countries it had been illegal - and who opened their hearts and told him their stories. These stories are woven into the journey.

We meet remarkable East European relations and strangers--eg the angel of Prague, a Hungarian grave digger, a dying Romanian propagandist. They help Aunt Zita to tie together the loose ends of her life. She is reunited with her estranged sister after many years. Their reconciliation involves carrying her brother in law's coffin on the roof of the Trabant. They picnic at Auschwitz, they meet Lenin's embalmer and they visit an impoverished Czech town. We learn snippets of Eastern European history. *Stalin's Nose* gives us a portrayal of subjugated peoples at a time of great change, of their fears of the past and hopes for the future, and illustrates the icy comedy of human existence.

We all warmed to Zita. We travelled with her back to her youth - understanding her admiration for her handsome brother Otto marching past in his smart Nazi uniform. How proud of him she'd felt. As youngsters they had dreamed together of building a better world. Otto had been convinced that he was rebuilding a better, stronger nation by following orders of the Fuhrer. Rory said he was sympathetic to Otto. Rory was sure he also wouldn't have had the moral courage at the time to go against his country and his peers. Especially if his family would have been in danger as a result. We are all vulnerable when our families are too.

Zita later cuts up her photograph of Otto, „ *scissoring away his Nazi uniform until just a face without history remained.*“ A face of defiance- an absence of doubt was lacking. He had been obeying orders - he had been freed from the burden of self - of individual responsibility.“

We asked Rory if many of his characters had been in touch with him since the first publication of the book. None, he said. And we also pointed out that he hadn't had to travel far to find his most colourful character- Zita. He replied „, so much that is precious is right in front of you.“

MacLean's comic and dark surreal humour delighted most of us. But it did not appeal to everyone. Some found it too ridiculous to take a pig on the journey. (eg Those who prefer a more conventional travel book - one which is full of facts and geographical information.) The German tradition of travel writing tends to be more traditional and laden with facts. Others were reminded of Orwell's *Animal Farm* and of Winston Smith, the protagonist of 1984. And of Winston Churchill. Rory likes challenging the reader and making us think. It is up to us to decide if the pig represents anyone. As to his own role, Rory deliberately reveals little about himself, so that he can represent „, everyman.“

Comments from group discussions:

„, A very powerful piece of writing- the best descriptions I have ever read of Auschwitz.“

„,very funny but chilling. A look at history, memory and responsibility from a very different perspective from usual.“

„, I was ambivalent about the book- there were some very funny vignettes- but a lot of unresolved moral issues.“

„,I enjoyed it but I would have preferred a more straightforward travel book.“

„, the humour did not touch me. I skipped a line every now and then. Eventually I stopped reading the book.“

„It was difficult to digest all of the information- I wasn't engaged enough with the characters.“

„I couldn't quite understand what he was doing- I was disconcerted- it was all a bit too much- there were so many crazy characters.“

„I liked it very much. I relaxed into it and didn't worry about remembering all the names. It addressed the history of countries I hadn't visited and got me thinking about all sorts of issues.“

„The only way to cope is to leave the past behind and move on. As a young German, I am very aware of the necessity to do this. I am also interested in how people react to dictatorships- how they learn to lie in order to survive.“

„How much is true and how much is fiction? I was confused and wanted to know.“

„I'm an old leftist from 68. I even thought at the time that East Germany was better than West Germany. At least the east was against the Fascists! „

„For me it was sad, I wanted to believe in Communism and still want to and I believe there were good Communists. It didn't put any positive aspects forward of life under Communism.“

„I got a lot out of reading it. I was shocked by the horror of what had happened in the „forgotten“ countries.“

„The idea was super but the execution was a little flawed. Lots of minor details were wrong. eg the hotel Adlon was spelt as Aldon - some of the text in German was incorrect - but nevertheless I enjoyed it.“

„Very imaginative- but not a travel book at all- more like a novel.“

„I agree. It would have been better as a novel.“

„MacLean asked some very interesting questions:
Where does Europe end?
What part does each individual play in history?
How can ordinary people turn into murderers?“

„I loved all of Zita's incorrect colloquial sayings -- eg kicked the buckets - I put him on a pedal stool.“

„I had relatives living in east Berlin and I used to visit them. They couldn't understand why I couldn't afford to bring them everything they wanted. They couldn't understand the concept of us not having enough money. They thought we were all rich and living in luxury- like in the TV programme Dallas. They believed we all had fast cars, large homes etc“

„I loved this quirky style of travel writing- it's a very funny merging of fact and fiction.“

„Ordinary people's stories are the best way of learning about another country. But I would have liked more about MacLean's own feelings.“

„I liked the way Zita gradually has to come to terms with the negative aspects of communism.“

„I'm Austrian and I also have a crazy family like Rory's. I loved it because it felt so real to me.“

„I know Russia, the Czech Republic and Hungary well but it made me like the other countries that I don't know so well. I especially found I had more sympathy for Poland- I admit I have a little prejudice against Poland – it's made me re-think .“

„Best of all was the humour- I often laughed out loud. The image of the pig running off with Zita's dentures will stay with me a long time“

„Black humour is not normally my favourite type of humour- but it was absolutely right in this context.“

„Sensitive, funny, witty, farcical- lots of fun.“

„One of the best books I have read in the groups.“

Mixed reactions – and some members of the groups stayed away- put off by the title Stalin's Nose. Rory wrote the book for English readers and maybe some of the topics were too close to home for readers in Berlin. But those who chose to make the journey with Zita, Winston the pig and Rory found it worthwhile and thought-provoking. And very funny at times.

Highly recommended for the adventurous reader.

A special thank you to Rory for giving us such an enjoyable evening and we look forward very much to reading his next book on Berlin.

Jan Bild