



The Pillars of Hercules

Paul Theroux

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"DAZZLING."

--Time

"[THEROUX'S] WORK IS DISTINGUISHED BY A SPLENDID EYE FOR DETAIL AND THE TELLING GESTURE; a storyteller's sense of pacing and gift for granting closure to the most subtle progression of events; and the graceful use of language. . . . We are delighted, along with Theroux, by the politeness of the Turks, amazed by the mountainous highlands in Syria, touched by the gesture of an Albanian waitress who will not let him pay for his modest meal. . . . The Pillars of Hercules [is] engrossing and enlightening from start (a damning account of tourists annoying the apes of Gibraltar) to finish (an utterly captivating visit with Paul Bowles in Tangier, worth the price of the book all by itself)."

--Chicago Tribune

"ENTERTAINING READING . . . WHEN YOU READ THEROUX, YOU'RE TRULY ON A TRIP."

--The Boston Sunday Globe

"HIS PICARESQUE NARRATIVE IS STUDDERED WITH SCENES THAT STICK IN THE MIND. He looks at strangers with a novelist's eye, and his portraits are pleasantly tinged with malice."

--The Washington Post Book World

"THEROUX AT HIS BEST . . . An armchair trip with Theroux is sometimes dark, but always a delight."

--Playboy

"AS SATISFYING AS A GLASS OF COOL WINE ON A DUSTY CALABRIAN AFTERNOON . . . With his effortless writing style, observant eye, and take-no-prisoners approach, Theroux is in top form chronicling this 18-month circuit of the Mediterranean."

--Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

The Pillars of Hercules Details

Date : Published October 29th 1996 by Ballantine Books (first published 1995)

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Author : Paul Theroux

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From Reader Review The Pillars of Hercules for online ebook

James Hartley says

I like Theroux. I like his grouchy old man act and I like the books (not a fan of the novels, though). This one is entertaining and informative and well-written. It's also another example of a book written not so long ago at all but which, thanks to the Internet gap, seems to be from another world - the author making phone calls to Honolulu in bars and being amazed at this, for example.

Ricardo Ribeiro says

What I like in this book and this author: the writing and traveling style, the areas chosen for his wanders. What I don't like: everything else. I don't like his arrogant ways - it's not nice from the author to call someone judgmental when he is a great example of a judgmental person. Then we have the sheer ignorance. I have news for Paul Theroux - to mention just a couple examples from the top of my memory: Mostar is in Herzegovina, NOT in Bosnia. It was the Croats NOT the Serbs who bombed the old bridge of Mostar.

Then it's truly puzzling is management of the book's space. As we know, the author decided to travel around the Mediterranean and write a book about it. It's difficult to understand that about 70% of the book is about the European shores of the sea. It's difficult to understand the whole dull chapter about Gibraltar and basically nothing about Greece, a country and a people who suffers the most of the judgmental character of the author.

As in another book I read from the author, it's annoying his attraction to dialogue with people who have nothing interesting to say... or are biased... it's a pity that he wastes so many pages quoting Americans, English, Australians... well, anyone who's an English native speaker. It's arrogant, like only these illuminated have something interesting to say and [almost] all the locals are just there to entertain the traveler with some picturesque sentences.

Buck says

Paul Theroux is not a nice man. It isn't nice to say that Albanians look "retarded". It isn't nice to point out that Greece is a welfare case sponging off the EU and milking a cultural legacy it has dishonored with its parochialism. And it certainly isn't nice—it is, in fact, downright impolitic and a bit sinister—to take such obvious pleasure in despising Israelis.

But nice people, as a rule, don't write great travel books. They write "heartwarming tales" full of spiritual uplift and multicultural group hugs. Niceness—complacent, indiscriminating niceness—is basically sluttish. It smiles at stupidity and winks at injustice and consults its own comfort.

I don't know if *The Pillars of Hercules* is a great travel book, but it's definitely an interesting one, and that's saying something, because the Mediterranean is the most overdone body of water in literature. Theroux may be a hater, but he's what Hazlitt used to call a "good hater": his hatred generously makes room for all kinds of odd passions and sudden sympathies.

If you really must travel—and personally I think more people should stay home and watch *CSI*—Theroux's

example is as good as any.

Jeremy Forstadt says

In *THE PILLARS OF HERCULES*, Paul Theroux travels a well-trodden path, for once, and one which has perhaps been excessively romanticized in the past. In contrast to many of the other regions of the world in which he has traveled and of which he has written, the Mediterranean has a long literary history consisting of native writers and expatriates alike. In much of this book, Theroux manages to skirt the most touristed regions of *Mediterranea* while seeking out the landmarks and icons (some living) of the literary Mediterranean. In some ways, *THE PILLARS OF HERCULES* is substantially different than any other travelogue published by Theroux.

In other ways, however, this book remains true to the Theroux we have always loved or reviled. How could it not be? Theroux's acerbic pen has not lost its bite, and his misanthropic self is as prominent a character in this book as it is in all his others. Now, however, he is treading a sacred path: one which, for once, may have been crossed by a substantial number of his readers.

Beginning in Gibraltar, Theroux's plan is to circumnavigate the Mediterranean while remaining as close to the water's edge as possible. The plan to stay within sight of the water sometimes causes Theroux (or perhaps it provides the excuse he needs) to miss some of the more popular locations of the Grand Tour, yet it keeps him close to those who make their livelihoods at the shores of the great sea. In one of the most traveled regions on earth, Theroux manages to find those out of the way places--not gems perhaps, but surprisingly untouched by the tourist trade--where we can really experience a sense of place and of culture.

THE PILLARS OF HERCULES ends up being a deeply satisfying work for those who love to travel in a vagabond manner, though perhaps not for those whose travels consist of packaged tours and managed activity schedules (and perhaps not as well for those possessed of eternally sunny dispositions). Whatever your travel preference, I would strongly recommend this book to anyone pondering a Mediterranean vacation. There is bound to be something interesting or entertaining here for anyone.

Jenny Brown says

I'm about 1/3 the way through and yes, he is one cranky old man and annoyingly full of himself. This isn't anything new, but in the past he was also a very good travel writer. This, alas, is no longer true.

In this book he's become lazy. He goes from place to place getting on one boat or train after another and interacting only with the people he randomly encounters: the proprietor of the he hotel, others waiting for transport, the lunatics who accost strangers in public places.

It's as if he's gone "work to rule" on filling this book contract. He's signed a contract to write a book where he goes to all these places he's damned if he's going to do anything more than he has to when he gets there.

For example, he goes to Robert Graves' home on Mallorca but tells the reader almost nothing about Graves, who was one of the more interesting authors of the 20th century. What he does say about Graves is so telegraphic you'd have to know a lot about Graves before reading it to understand it. (He throws off a one liner, for example, about how Graves threw out his lover and found another White Goddess.) Theroux doesn't bother to meet with Graves' children who were living in the house when he visited, either. It would

be one thing if this was because they had rejected a request to meet him, but he admits he didn't even bother to contact them. Lazy.

Note: I did finish it and it got worse. Once out of Western Europe Theroux sees what he expects to see, applying racial and national stereotypes to everyone he meets based on a phrase or two he overhears or elicits. His antisemitism is pervasive and unpleasant, and very familiar to anyone who lives in Massachusetts and knows people raised in the class he grew up in.

What is the most wearing--and revealing about the author in this book--is the way he continuously excoriates the other foreigners he meets for being tourists while flattering himself that he is a "traveler." Not once or twice but every few pages. The world, to Theroux, is infested with people who travel the same places he goes and enjoy them. A lot of them turn out to be Germans who he loathes for reasons he considers so self-evident he doesn't share them with the reader. Indeed, as far as I've read (he's just left Croatia) he's never actually brought any Germans to life with his pen, but dozens of times he's used the term "German" in the same kind of tone most travelers save for bedbugs.

In short, the once perceptive Theroux has become lazy, and traveling has become a distasteful pursuit he must follow to earn the very comfortable living that lets him spend the rest of his time in Hawaii basking in his fame.

Rex Fuller says

Reminded myself why I swore off of Theroux's travel books years ago. Although I finished this one, like the others, it was not so much travel as a report on the four inches between his ears while going to the ports of the Mediterranean. Hoped to get a kind of update on many of the same places I had been--especially in Turkey--and was disappointed to get Theroux's egotistical and misanthropic attitude towards everything. My recommendation: avoid his travel books (there are vastly more palatable travel writers) and stick to his fiction, which isn't as larded with him.

Inês França says

At his best, Theroux is a lovable grump, at his worst a poster person for #whitepeoplesproblems.

At a certain point, reading this book became an ordeal. Can someone edit this man, please?

And by the way the "portuguese" saying he quotes near the end? "Quando con Levante chiove, las pedras muove" isn't portuguese and rather a strange combination of spanish and italian (funny he wouldn't notice, since he keeps pointing out how fluent he is in italian), which made me doubt every single turkish sentence written.

For all his talk of wanting see "real places" and "real people" he really comes into his own surrounded by wealthy excentrics in a luxurious cruise. Theroux, don't fight it, dude. You're just a white, waspish, snobbish man. Just embrace it. Let me hear those cruise menus again.

Andrew Rosner says

I think a person approaching Theroux's travel literature for the first time is likely to be surprised at how curmudgeonly he can be at times. If you can get past that, you'll find he's also intelligent, articulate, and a keen observer of humanity. Most importantly, he possesses an almost fatal sense of curiosity. Who else would dare journey to (gulp) Albania???. But if you want to learn about life under the Hoxha regime and its apocalyptic aftermath, this is a good place to start. There's a lot more to this book than that benighted country, as he travels around the Mediterranean from Gibraltar to Morocco. Along the way he makes a few very trenchant observations that are even more remarkable now, some fifteen years later. For starters, I don't know too many writers who were paying attention to European demographics and the declining birth rate in countries such as Spain and Italy, or who noted the rise of "political Islam" in Syria and Egypt. I finished the book with the general impression that this was a part of the world living off its past glories, somewhat exhausted in its efforts to cope with modernity. Despite that somewhat depressing conclusion, this book is still worth the effort - or should I say journey?

Michelle Warwick says

I'll confess from the start that a travel memoir is just not my kind of thing and so I probably started reading this book rather resentfully.

I just so desperately wanted to be proved wrong. Sadly I was not.

This book delved into the dull minutiae of his trip to the extent that I was simply bored by it. The book contained sweeping generalisations about the countries, cultures and people he encountered on his travels and there were no great insights that I could glean.

I suppose now is the time that I admit I only got half way through before getting so annoyed with the man that I threw the book across the room and declared I could not possibly take any more.

This is just not for me.

MBJ says

It has been more years than I can remember since I last read an analog book – an actual physical book that I held in my hands, turning pages and highlighting pithy passages in yellow. My husband recently came across a dog-eared copy of *The Pillars of Hercules: A Grand Tour of the Mediterranean* that his mother had passed down to him. I never met my mother-in-law, but heard much of her love of reading and great writers. So I made an exception to my digital-only rule and decided to take on this travelogue.

Paul Theroux's Mediterranean world is not the one of great cultures and civilizations, but rather one of random encounters and off-beat places. He makes no attempt to embellish what does not need embellishing. Rather, he searches beneath garbage dumps and into the soul of all he encounters. Mr. Theroux speaks to the immediacy and reality of whatever or whomever is in his path.

As a traveler, Mr. Theroux eschews the obvious. He admits he does not like museums, castles or ruins, never mind that he is writing about a vortex of great civilizations. He is disparaging of virtually any cultural experience within striking range of the average tourist. In fact, he admits that he dislikes tourists, referring to himself instead as a "traveler". A man-made structure must almost be inaccessible before he will rave about it. Then again, that is probably because it would no longer, in his view be a tourist attraction, as no tourist, as

opposed to a traveler like himself, could get anywhere near it. But that is who he is, and he makes no apologies for it. He ultimately delivers for the reader, tourist or otherwise, as he gives us a unique and insightful view into a world of the Mediterranean that few outsiders have, or ever will, experience.

Mr. Theroux is anything but an apologist. He admits that his practices for note-gathering border on downright rude. He goads virtually everyone he meets into conversation, and is proud of it: "[T]hat was the nature of my traveling: request for detail, conversation as a form of ambush, the traveler as an agent of provocation." But the reader is well rewarded, as Mr. Theroux's encapsulation of these encounters is masterful.

Mr. Theroux's erratic approach to travel inures to the reader's benefit. As he states, his "... method of travel was all about improvisation." This turns out to be an understatement, as he zigzags through the Mediterranean coast, often unsure of where he will go next or what mode of transportation he will take. He admits that he pays a price for his chaotic approach, as he describes the anxiety he experiences in the process. He tells of a recurring dream in which he has a major role in a play which he has never read, even as he struts confidently about the theater before his audience. Classic performance anxiety: it brings him just a tad closer to his reader.

What is the point of writing a book such as this? For the reader, the rewards are obvious. But Mr. Theroux seems to demand a greater justification for his writing than the satisfaction of the casual reader: He writes: "Some of the best and most enjoyable travel books or studies are snap judgments. In the end, all that matters is that the facts are true, so that the historian... will be able to use your book as a source for say, the condition of Albania in 1994 ("...stolen cars, bad roads, poor diets, lived in bunkers. . E. Hoxha graffiti still legible on some walls ..."). Historians are on firm ground with primary sources, diaries and travelers' tales". These moments of introspection add texture to Mr. Theroux's storytelling.

One particularly enjoyable aspect of Mr. Theroux's writing is that he builds his narrative around travel writers who preceded him: ex-pats like Lawrence Durrell, James Joyce and Evelyn Waugh, as well as native writers like the Egyptian Naguib Mahfouz and Israeli Emile Habiby. Mr. Theroux takes us into the cafes, living rooms and other haunts of writers, past and present.

Mr. Theroux's views are often shockingly blunt. At times he sounds downright imperialist: "The Greeks had not taken very much interest in their past until Europeans became enthusiastic discoverers and diggers of their ruins. And why should they have cared? The Greeks were not Greek, but rather the illiterate descendants of Slavs and Albanian fisherman, who spoke a debased Greek dialect and had little interest in the broken columns and temples except as places to graze their sheep. The true philo-Hellenists were the English – of whom Byron was the epitome – and the French, who were passionate to link themselves with the Greek ideal". Mr. Theroux makes no pretense of being politically correct.

How does Mr. Theroux pull all this off? Quite simply, because he is a great writer who digs deep into the soil he labors. He prefers the war-torn coast of former Yugoslavia as a stomping ground of the Mediterranean to its pristine beaches. He prefers a rusty old tub of a smoke-filled ferry to the fashionable cabin and haute cuisine of a luxury liner. And his predilection for adverse working conditions is unparalleled: "I was happy when it rained or when conditions were miserable, that being the stuff of writers."

Mr. Theroux ends his Mediterranean journey in Tangiers, Morocco where he pays a visit to the ailing American writer Paul Bowles. Mr. Theroux describes Bowles as "... preoccupied, knowledgeable, worldly, remote, detached, veiled, skeptical, eccentric, self-sufficient, indestructible, egomaniacal, and hospitable to praise. [Paul] was like almost every other writer I have known in my life." One may undoubtedly include Mr. Theroux in this club.

Many thanks to my mother-in-law for recommending this outstanding book to her son. I don't know that it

would otherwise have come into my hands. Physically or digitally.

Jon Stout says

Having enjoyed several of Paul Theroux's books, especially *Sir Vidia's Shadow*, I thought a tour of the Mediterranean would be great. I like Theroux's rough and ready (former Peace Corps) style of travel, except occasionally when he goes luxury class.

Starting from Gibraltar, Theroux has to zigzag in order to cover the islands and to avoid political conflict. I was surprised to remember how much violent discord there is in the Mediterranean. He zigzags in the former Yugoslavia, unable to transit Montenegro, and he also has to avoid Lebanon, Libya and Algeria.

I like Theroux's habit of reading and reviewing the literature of whatever place he is visiting, and he seeks out authors whenever he can. In Egypt he searches out Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz, and is awed by his brave, fatalistic attitude toward having been attacked by an extremist.

Even though the Turks are always smoking and the service is wretched, Theroux warms to their courteous and personable ways. He seems at his best travelling by bus from Turkey through Syria and Jordan, appreciating the almost Biblical village life along the way. In Israel he visits an Israeli Christian Arab writer, Emile Habiby, and is again inspired by a positive view of the future.

He finishes in Tangier, Morocco, visiting the aging author Paul Bowles. Theroux has his likes (Turks and Italians) and his dislikes (dictators and security officials and tourist hucksters), but he is always prodding and questioning and interesting.

Oceana2602 says

Theroux amuses me.

I know that not everyone likes his sarcasm and that he is seemingly never content with where he is (but then, which great traveler is ever contempt with where he is? Isn't that why we travel?). I find him intelligent and entertaining, and because I don't always agree with him, he makes me look at the world in a new and interesting ways. That he managed to do that when he wrote about Europe, my home, shows even more what a great writer he is.

The Pillars of Hercules is everything you could want from a Theroux book. Personally, I liked "The happy Isles of Oceania" better, but intellectually this is his best book so far. I hope his new one is released soon.

Sorin Hadârc? says

Great journey. I liked the way Mediterranean coastal towns in Spain, Croatia, Israel and Tunisia were described as being more alike than their inland neighbors. Plus Theroux is a great travel companion: he meets people. Not just celebrities like Mahfouz or Bowles but also taxi-drivers, farmers, street vendors. Puts you on a move...

Kolumbina says

I am a big fan of Paul Theroux. And this is one of his earlier books. What a great book. Enjoyed it thoroughly.

Jeff says

Why do you bother to read travelogues, Jeff?

1. Between working in the adult film industry and a stint for the Royal Canadian Mounties, I traveled extensively as part of my job in international industrial espionage and it's always fun to read about places that I only saw at night while wearing a ski mask. Travel tip: A wool ski mask is especially difficult in tropical weather.
 2. It's always nice to get a unique perspective on a time and place. Theroux traveled around the Mediterranean in the mid-90's when Yugoslavia was tearing itself apart, but before the current crisis in Syria.
 3. Travel humor is the best. Bill Bryson's jabs are usually as subtle as using an anvil to crack a walnut; whereas, Theroux deftly uses his dry wit like a switchblade in an alley flight.
 4. I like to learn about stuff. You're never too old to handle a well-lubed metric ton of info-dump. Theroux traveled from one pillar of Hercules all the way around to the other, mixing history, literary illusions, random observation, and his extensive knowledge of porn to make this one of his better travel books.
 5. Not being ~~much of~~ an asshole, it's nice to vicariously live via someone else's assholery. Theroux was especially astute in his ability to "harass" the locals. In Syria then under dictator, Hafez al-Assad, this was especially wince-inducing. For Bryson, there's never a target too small or big for his juvenile brand of humor.
 6. "It's a nice place to visit but I wouldn't want to live there" can be modified to "It's a piss hole of a place and I will never set foot there in my lifetime." Theroux finds the wonderful and equally dreadful things everywhere, sometimes in the same locale.
 7. Books are designed to take you elsewhere, why not transport you to an actual journey through the eyes of a skilled and gifted writer.
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