



Photo courtesy Houghton Mifflin Co.

In his novel, *The Great Railway Bazaar: By Train Through Asia*, Paul Theroux traces his journey across Europe and Asia and back.

## Travels create Asiatic odyssey

By Bill Roberts

*The Great Railway Bazaar: By Train Through Asia*, by Paul Theroux/ Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, \$10

All sorts of people walk this earth, so there must be somebody, somewhere, who wouldn't like to read Paul Theroux's *The Great Railway Bazaar: By Train Through Asia*. There must be somebody who wouldn't want to read the experiences and impressions of a likable, first-rate writer who leaves London and goes to Japan, by way of Turkey, India and Singapore, then across Siberia and back to London almost entirely by train.

But it's hard to imagine anyone so mean and dull. This book is full of treasures.

Consider a reader with no desire to learn about a ride on the once fabulous, now decrepit, Orient Express. That reader can thumb through the table of contents until he finds a chapter like "The Local to Maymyo."

### Semi-legal excursion

Then he can check the map on the book's inside cover to decide if he wants to read about a short, semi-legal excursion into the jungles of Burma. If he does, he will join the author in the last car of a picturesque train, with an armed guard on one side and a local man smoking opium on the other.

But the reader who skips the Orient Express will miss Paris, Venice and Istanbul, with its fresco of the Virgin Mary that looks like Virginia Woolf.

He also will not meet Molesworth, Theroux's impromptu traveling companion for the European part of the trip. Molesworth, an actor's agent from Britain, likes to cuddle into a window seat with a bottle of Chablis and comment on the passing world.

*The Great Railway Bazaar* should be read from beginning to end, and not simply to avoid missing an episode. Theroux is a novelist, and he shapes his book so that, by the end, the reader is almost homesick.

"Travel writing," Theroux reflects while in a speedy Japanese train, "which cannot but be droll at the outset, moves from journalism to fiction, arriving as promptly as the Kodama Echo at autobiography."

### Dinner on the diner

After a dreary trek across Iranian deserts, and after being forced to fly over most of Afghanistan (Theroux hates planes as much as he loves trains), green and luscious Pakistan offers relief to his dusty disposition. He even starts singing, "Dinner on the diner, nothing could be finer."

But soon the incredible poverty of India and Sri Lanka depresses him again. Then the trip through Burma exhilarates him and a stopover in Singapore awakens memories of the three years he spent teaching there.

After this emotional roller coaster ride, the author visits Vietnam. Here he describes a view seen from the train traveling from Saigon to Hue in December 1973:

"Over there, the sun lighted a bomb scar in the forest; and next to it smoke filled the bowl of a valley; a column of rain from one fugitive cloud slanted on another slope, and the blue gave way to black green, to rice green on the flat fields of shoots, which became, after a strip of sand, an immensity of blue ocean. The distances were enormous and the landscape was so large it had to be studied in parts, like a mural seen by a child."

### We hadn't planned to stay

Theroux's comments on wreckage left by Americans in Vietnam are sad and beautiful. "The tragedy," he says, "was that we had come, and, from the beginning, had not planned to stay."

Then Theroux gives a picture of Japan that resembles a *Brave New World*, but funny. "Everything works: the place spins with polite invention," he says. He meets a Japanese author, Edogawa Rampo, who models his tales of terror, and his name, after Edgar Allan Poe.

The 6,000-mile trip on the Trans-Siberian Express passes with a whoosh, for Theroux has completed his travel-novel, if not his trip.

Anyone who likes top-notch writing and wonders what an Asiatic odyssey would be like, will love *The Great Railway Bazaar*.

## Gallery screening silent film 'strike'

*Strike*, Sergei Eisenstein's 1924 silent film classic is showing today at 1:20 p.m. at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery Film Theatre.

*Strike*, a visual metaphor of struggling labor and heavy industry, is replete with surrealist and constructivist theatrical effects.

The New York Times said, "There are all the dramatic sight ironies that one normally thinks of as 'visual,' although they are really not visual at all. When scenes of Cossacks on horseback surrounding seated strikers, for example, are cross-cut with shots of a capitalist squeezing juice from a lemon and brushing the fallen rind off his shoe, the irony, though the film is silent, is entirely verbal..."

"When Eisenstein's strike gathers momentum, it has to be broken: at the end of the uprising would go on into infinity..."

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