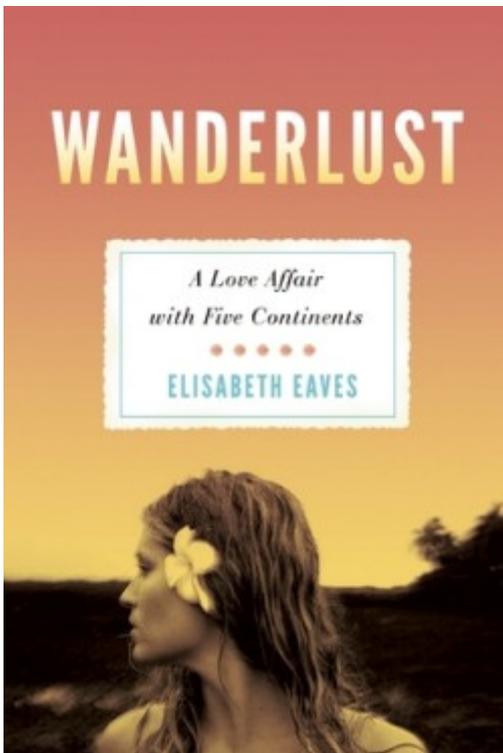


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# Vagabond's candour makes memoir worthwhile



February 27, 2014

Wanderlust: A Love Affair with Five Continents

By Elisabeth Eaves

Seal Press

304 pages, \$17.50

Reviewed by Isabela Vera

Elisabeth Eaves first began her love affair with travel as a college freshman, spending the summer in Spain as an au-pair with a penchant for Pepe, the suave bartender down the road. Now a middle-aged freelance writer living in New York City, she returns through her travel memoir to reflect upon a decade and a half spent pursuing pleasure in places that the meeker among us may only dream of. *Wanderlust: A Love Affair with Five Continents* untethers Eaves from the grey, drizzly backdrop of her “disappointingly unexotic” university

life in early-90s Seattle, pushing her through roles ranging from an exchange student in Cairo, a backpacker in Australasia, a hiker in Papua New Guinea, and a Master's student in New York.

"I had woken up at the age of thirty-four to realize that I wanted to go home, only to discover that I had no idea where that was," writes Eaves in her opening prologue. It is our first hint that *Wanderlust* may not be your run-of-the-mill tale of self-discovery. Eaves's memoir is darker and more thought-provoking than its cheesy tropical cover suggests. Although this final revelation looms over readers from the start, we initially indulge in 20-year-old Eaves' adventurous spirit. Her opportunities seem endless, and we barely bat an eyelid when, after a failed attempt at diplomacy in Karachi, she writes that "the ebbing of this professional direction didn't yet worry me much . . . what I most wanted was to travel more, without an end date or obligation in sight. I wanted to wander and feel free." The memoir moves constantly between different men and countries as her wanderlust intensifies. Each new part of the world is revealed through a lens of love, separation, and sex.

Her journey has a theme: "travel equals longing equals love." For Eaves, the conventional aspects of travel—the food, the culture shock, the self-discovery—have always been entangled with desire. If we can first accept the memoir's romantic focus, then we can appreciate her personal revelations. *Wanderlust* flirts with the men and the places, but at its core lies Eaves and her inability to stay with them. "I know that I'm the problem," she writes. "I'm perverse . . . Nothing with me can last."

This problem makes Eaves a frustrating protagonist. We begin to mistrust her judgement by the book's second section, when she tells us that "the jungle, with its never-wavering pattern of life and death . . . was a rational place compared to my own heart." In moments of emotional climax, her attention to other characters is minimal, and we feel that she cares little about them. It is the frank exposure of both her strength and her vulnerability that keeps us with her. "Even if I don't love the reality . . . want to have the enviable life, just because it's enviable," she admits. The prose is simple, humourless, even narcissistic. The honesty is refreshing and forces us to admit that we, too, were once seduced by her limitlessness.

At first, each new sexual and geographical conquest is exciting to us. By the memoir's last section, it all feels repetitive. Eaves does a clever job of closing down the opportunities we once saw as never-ending, making us want to scream "enough!" and book our own return flight home. She drags us through the claustrophobia to reward us by picking up the pieces, acknowledging "when traveling stops changing you, it's time to go home."

*Wanderlust* is not so much a bubbly beach read but a companion for a long, winding journey, preferably with a lot of time to spend staring out the window of a train. The author's candour ultimately makes the entire tumultuous ride worthwhile.

*Isabela Vera is a tea-loving world traveller and a UVic student.*

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