

❖ **Carl Hoffman - *The Lunatic Express: Discovering the World ... via Its Most Dangerous Buses, Boats, Trains, and Planes*, Broadway Books, New York, 2010, pp 304, ISBN-10: 9780767929806**

Reviewed by Robin Ewing

The concept for Carl Hoffman's book *The Lunatic Express* is ostensibly simple: to write a travel narrative about riding the world's most dangerous conveyances. The idea was to experience mass transit as the majority of the world does, under the radar of tourism statistics, in places where the necessity of motion entails long, arduous and uncomfortable trips on poorly maintained vehicles ... vehicles that don't always make it.

And so Hoffman circumnavigates the globe, starting and finishing at his home in Washington D.C., weaving his way across South America, Africa and Asia. He seeks out the same routes on which buses plunge, ferries sink, trains derail and planes crash. Each chapter opens with a news clip of a transportation tragedy, and Hoffman spends more than a few pages recounting grisly tales of things gone wrong.

Subtract the danger and the settings (which can be difficult considering they include the wilds of the Amazon river basin, the chaos of Nairobi, the desert of northern Afghanistan and the seas of Indonesia's islands), and the subject is commonplace - commuting to work, moving goods, visiting relatives - all of our mundane daily journeys filled with inconvenience and discomfort and time spent waiting.

But even with the most seemingly pedestrian of subjects, the best stories grapple with universal truths. Hoffman takes these journeys, ordinary for his fellow passengers, and holds them up for readers to consider in the frame of life and death, touching on the larger issues of human connections, intimacy and trust as well as delving into sociopolitical commentary on the worlds of the haves and the have-nots.

Similar to Paul Theroux's travel writing, only without Theroux's witty cynicism and arrogance, the main focus of this book is the journey and the people met along the way, not the destination. Hoffman comes to his interactions with fellow passengers with genuine curiosity and an openness resulting from his surrender to fate, dirt and crowds. Because it's the people who make the book: Pierre Colly, the 24-year-old survivor of the Joola, who for the first time tells his heartbreaking story of escaping the Sengalese ferry that sank, killing 1,800 people, 300 more than the Titanic; Mrs. Nova, a bubbly 17-year-old who takes Hoffman under her wing on a five-day, roach-infested Indonesian ferry; Nasirbhai, the Mumbai thug featured in Gregory David Roberts's *Shantaram*, who expertly guides Hoffman through the perils of riding India's commuter trains. These are people who watch out for him, people who take him into their homes and make him tea and feed him and introduce him to their families.

And, like most good travel stories, there is an element of the personal. The sub-narrative here is that Hoffman turns these interactions back on himself, using them as a gauge to examine his own failed marriage, fear of intimacy and inability to feel comfortable in his own life.

Hoffman is clearly addicted to the intensity of facing his own death. On the blog he kept during his travels (<http://thelunaticexpress.com/blog/>), he explains his curiosity of the unknown by describing how he sometimes closes his eyes while driving and seeing how high he can count (he makes it to three). After years of traveling and reporting, he reaches the point where he looks forward more to leaving home than returning, seeking out the most horrific of travel conditions. "It made me feel alive; that edge was a powerful aphrodisiac, and weeks without it at home made home seem quiet and boring,"¹ he writes.

Ernest Becker, in his book *The Denial of Death*, says: "The idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else."² Basically, Becker's philosophy is that all human activity is designed to overcome the terror of death by denying awareness of it. But Hoffman propels himself directly into that awareness, and uses it to identify his own limitations and then feeds on it as energy. Traveling is just a way to get to the edge.

This addiction to the edge is one familiar to soldiers and conflict reporters. In *War Is a Force that Gives Us Meaning*, foreign

correspondent Chris Hedges describes how the adrenaline rush of combat can hook people, causing them to “feed recklessly off the drug.”³ Journalist Sebastian Junger refers to risk as a beautiful woman he is in love with, a woman who makes him feel special and alive.⁴ Hoffman is no war reporter, but he craves that same intensity, seeking it out despite the obvious costs.

And this is where some frustrations come in. At times it’s hard to sympathise with Hoffman, a self-proclaimed curmudgeon, and his travel-induced self-psychotherapy that concludes with him being startled to realise, more than once, that his love of risk and wandering is really also a fear of intimacy. He bemoans his disconnection from his family and stresses his wish to set things right, and then on the next page calls them from a computer with a broken web camera on Christmas Day. And there is a brief, ambiguous love affair with a younger American woman in India that Hoffman uses to highlight his detachment from his own life but ends up being out-of-place and slightly pathetic.

But for the most part, Hoffman sticks to the theme and does an excellent job of creating vivid scenes and depicting people with dignity and compassion. He immerses himself in his surroundings, drinking tap water, buying street corner food and sleeping shoulder-to-shoulder in cramped conditions. “Doing so prompted an outpouring of generosity and curiosity that never ceased to amaze me. That I shared their food, their discomfort, their danger, fascinated them and validated them in a powerful way.”⁵

There are moments when he breaks, when he yearns for escape and hides in the security of being able to slip in and out of his experiences with money, in which the comforts of life are boiled down to space, hot water, a clean bed and silence. But he acknowledges this without attempting to apologise or cover it up, and it adds needed contrast and reflection to his experiences. However, there are also moments where you want to tell him: Yes, we get it; the world is poor and life is tough, but people adapt and overcome. He spends a lot of words driving this point home, returning again and again to the sense of community he feels, which teeters on the edge of being preachy. The most telling cultural moment is when Hoffman returns to his native US and sees his own country as inhospitable, isolated and sad. It’s the only place on his entire journey he says, that the vehicle broke and couldn’t be fixed.

Travel writing has a bad reputation. It has been known to involve bland clichés, overused words such as ‘intoxicating’ and ‘sun-dappled’ and peddle banal endorsements of ‘magical’ spots in a ‘land of contrasts’. Travel writer Chuck Thompson wrote, “The most memorable experiences – getting laid, getting sick, lost, home – always seem ‘too negative,’ ‘too graphic,’ or ‘too over the heads of our readers’ to find their ways into print. Inside information on the vagaries of the travel industry itself borders on the sedition.”⁶

Hoffman is a contributing editor at *National Geographic Traveler*, *Wired* and *Popular Mechanics* and has published in *Outside*, *National Geographic Adventure* and *Men’s Journal*. He said in an interview with Rolf Potts that he considers himself more a journalist than a travel writer.⁷ But *The Lunatic Express* is an example of just the kind of book the travel-writing industry needs. Books with adventures, yes. But also with thoughtful narratives that are not just based on observation and reporting but ones that also make connections and reflect on larger issues with candor, sincerity and humility.

Hoffman’s fearlessness is a reminder that fear is a state of mind, because, after all the hype, all the horror stories, all the morbid soliloquies, nothing bad actually happens. Hoffman dramatises bus breakdowns and goes through possible death scenarios a few times in order to add tension to his otherwise non-fatal trips. Not to say that traveling can’t be hazardous – and it is, particularly so in the parts of the world Hoffman writes about – but that death can sneak up on us anywhere, even while sitting quietly at home. And after all, the odds are pretty much on our side.

A Sri Lankan seaman Hoffman met while waiting for a flight in the Addis Ababa airport, summed it up: “But remember, you never know when you will die, so you must be happy all the time.”⁸

Footnotes

1 Hoffman, C. (2007). *The Lunatic Express* (p. 234). New York: Broadway Books.

2 Becker, E. (1973). Introduction. *The Denial of Death* (p. ix). New York: The Free Press.

3 Hedges, C. (2003). *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* (p. 143) . New York: Anchor Books.

4 Junger, S (2011). Sebastian Junger Remembers Tim Hetherington. *Vanity Fair*. Retrieved from <http://m.vanityfair.com/magazine/2011/04/sebastian-junger-remembers-tim-hetherington-201104>

5 Hoffman, C (2010). *The Lunatic Express* (p. 127). New York: Broadway Books.

6 Thompson, C. (2007). Introduction. *Smile When You’re Lying* (p. 9). New York: Holt Paperbacks.

7 Potts, R. (Interviewer) & Hoffman, C. (Interviewee). Carl Hoffman [Interview Transcript]. Retrieved from <http://www.rolfpotts.com/writers/index.php?writer=Carl+Hoffman>

8 Hoffman, C. (2007). *The Lunatic Express* (p. 100). New York: Broadway Books.

About the Reviewer

Robin Ewing is a journalist currently teaching in the Department of Journalism, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong.

