

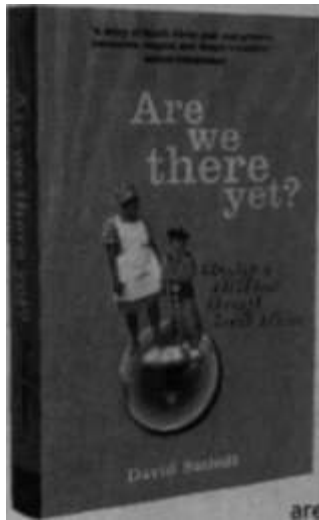


Books Keith Austi

On a guilt trip to South Africa

Many of us choose books in the same way that we choose our wines - by appearance. We go into bottle shops with only two things certain in our mind - price and colour. After that it's in the lap of the gods and the skill of the label designers.

If *Are We There Yet?* were a wine, it would languish on the shelf until finally being consigned to the



***Are We There Yet?* by David Smiedt, University of Queensland Press (\$22.95).**

\$5 bargain bin, for the author, David Smiedt, has been lumbered with a cover that has been repeatedly whacked with the ugly stick.

If you were to pull this bottle out of the bin, though, you'd get it home and discover that you have purchased a wine of unusual clarity, with a nose for the bizarre, the fascinating, the historical and the philosophical. Buy it, pour it, and I promise you will consume it in great gulps.

Smiedt, a South African who came to live in Australia when he was 18 having never seen a photograph of Nelson Mandela or heard *Nkosi Sikelele Africa*, the hymn that would become South Africa's national anthem, because both were banned, has produced that rare thing: a travel memoir that is funny, engaging and informative. Sometimes all at the same time.

The subtitle, *Chasing a Childhood Through South Africa*, explains the "what" but it is the "how" that makes this such a cracking read.

Smiedt goes back to South Africa laden with guilt, loss (his father had just died), memories and expectations and somehow manages to throw all this into the complex melting pot of modern South Africa without the writing becoming confused, simplistic or boring.

And he tells such stories to make you weep: "I had known Joseph ... all my life. However, my eight-year-old brain was having trouble grasping the fact that he was now working in our garden instead of the family business. 'Wow, Joseph,' I said, genuinely impressed by his range of skills. 'I didn't know you were a garden boy.'

"He stopped where he stood ... and sat on his haunches so we were eye to eye. Without a trace of anger in his voice, he put a hand on my shoulder and said, 'Dave ...' Joseph then paused, formulating a gentle way to express a rough truth. 'I'm a man. I'm not a boy.' I never used the term again."

BEYOND the Shore - sailing, seafood, wine ... east coast Australia is a glossy coffee-table book. I think they are called coffee-table books because only coffee tables can handle the weight. Certainly you wouldn't want to drop this thing on the cat. The other thing about coffee-table books is that they aren't meant to be read; you

trick through them in a

Being a little anal about these things I began flicking at the front flyleaf, where this phrase caught the eye: "It is a coastline rich in beauty, rich in history and rich in the fulsome enjoyment of life..."

According to the Macquarie Dictionary "the shift in meaning of this word [fulsome] from 'offensive to good taste' to 'lavish, unstinted' offends some writers but seems to have gained acceptance with the majority".

Which means I can declare my fulsome

praise for this book which, if I didn't know better, I'd say was some sort of vanity publishing project. The clues? Well, the gushingly pedestrian writing and the lack of grammar, for one: "We were cheered by the usual good humour of the fishermen

readying themselves for the days [sic] work ... "

Apart from the somewhat peripatetic nature of the book's apostrophes, there's also the dreary flatness of many of the hundreds of photographs, the lack of detail in the recipes ("make a sauce of rice vinegar, sugar and salt") and a design that deems it perfectly fine to run white, handwritten script over a near-white background.

It smells nice, though. And you could save a packet on the vet's bill by dropping it on the cat.



IN 1999 Orion books published an anthology of gardening quotations featuring pretty and witty illustrations by Laura Stoddart (who was commissioned to design Britain's Christmas stamps in 1996). It was a bit of a success and was commended in the National Art Library Illustration Awards in Britain in 2000. The follow-

up is *Off the Beaten Track*, an anthology of travelling quotations featuring pretty and witty illustrations by Stoddart.

There is also a companion, *A Traveller's Day Book*, which features quotations about travel and illustrations by Stoddart, all taken from *Off the Beaten Track*. It has

space on every page that you can fill with your own quotations or illustrations.

(Personally, I would find it quite intimidating to muse upon my own peregrinations when the words of Herman Melville, Shakespeare, Rene Descartes, Francis Bacon and Richard Burton are staring back at me.)

Stoddart's little pastel-coloured people, with their detailed clothing and tiny heads, are indeed witty and pretty, and you can see why they have become so popular. The quotations, too, are chosen well to reveal the intelligence, insights, fear, arrogance and casual racism of long-gone and not-so-long-gone travellers.

But would I pay \$21.95 for it? There's the rub.

WITH more than 280 pages of stunning photography, detailed maps and heaps of information on places to see and things to do, *Explore Australia's Coast* is an essential item for anyone who wants to, well, explore Australia's coast. It's easy to use, full of information such as when to go, with a diary of events in each region, climate charts and safety tips. And if it doesn't have what you want, there are phone numbers and websites for visitor information offices, parks and reserves.

The large paperback format makes it ideal for stuffing in a suitcase or car door, but lighter travellers might want to photocopy the relevant sections before heading off.

The photography is nothing short of astonishing, so much so that some pictures raised suspicions here in the office that a little digital fiddling had gone on. Check out the fisherman in the rowboat on page 167, who seems to be floating a metre above the crystal-clear waters off the east coast of Tasmania; only his oar seems to be making any contact with the water. And are the waters around the Tasmanian Peninsula really purple? Weird and yet wonderful.

Such piddling distractions aside, it's a great addition to any home traveller's library.

Explore Australia's Coast, Explore Australia Publishing in association with Australian Geographic (\$45).



Off the Beaten Track by Laura Stoddart, Orion (\$21.95). ***A Traveller's Day Book*** (\$26.95).



Beyond the Shore - sailing, seafood, wine ... east coast Australia by Rob and Rosemary Peterswald, Maro (\$59.95).