

# Long Paddock

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Patrick O'Neil, *Sideways: Travels With Kafka, Hunter S. & Kerouac* (Penguin-Viking, Victoria, 2009 337pp, ISBN 9780670072705, RRP \$32.95 pbk)

Patrick O'Neil's *Sideways: Travels with Kafka, Hunter S. & Kerouac* is a messy, drug-fuelled travelogue that follows three separate occasions – over the course of almost a decade – when the Melbourne author packs up his regular inner-city life to follow a dream of big adventure and the open road.

The central conceit of the book is that each set of O'Neil's travels is framed by the mood and works of the aforementioned authors – thus his first sojourn is marked by numerous tortured, nightmare bureaucracies – his second trip filled with gonzo paranoia and copious tabs of acid – and the third jaunt, a study in beat poetry and the romance of the road. This is, in theory, the structure of the book, though the parallels O'Neil makes are, at times, something between a strain and a stretch.

Elsewhere, the technique pays off in surprisingly effective ways, as when O'Neil describes his passion for trance party culture. Massive, hedonistic festivals spring up in the hidden corners of Brazil and the middle of the Sahara, and O'Neil chases after these events like a surfer traveling the world for that perfect, transcendental wave.

“Most people at trance parties stomp to the beat on the same space for hours, but I think the best people – the ones worth seeking out in the maelstrom – are those who weave through, surfing the party for other freaks with whom they can cause the right kind of trouble.”

This is great stuff, a perfect evocation of Kerouac's famous lines about the mad ones who “burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow Roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars” but re-imagined for the trance crowd. O'Neil's words here are a perfect fit, with the right kind of reverence, the right amount of originality, and the author is at his best when he's overtaken by these kinds of passions. There's an undeniable joy that bursts through in the prose when O'Neil crosses paths with Guilherme, the Dean Moriarty to O'Neil's Sal Paradise:

“Little did I know that years later I would count him as one of my best friends on the planet, that one day we would witness a solar eclipse while floating on a wooden fishing boat in the Atlantic,

that he would talk our way out of a lengthy Brazilian prison sentence, or that we would find ourselves storming through a rebel-infested jungle in Colombia during a monsoon.”

O’Neil’s travels take him all over the earth – Egypt, Amsterdam, London, Mexico, New York, among other places – and he describes these locales with the infectious enthusiasm of a man whose backpack has seen every clichéd corner of the world. The writer passes judgment on each country he sets foot in, and what’s surprising here is how closely his experiences hew toward stereotype. It may, perhaps, be fair to call Tangier a “shithole” – this book is, after all, a subjective opinion based on O’Neil’s own experience – but when he writes that “all Japanese travelers are a little weird”, when the Brits are “crazy”, the Spaniards “wild”, the Bolivians “a nation of midgets”, and all travelers (besides O’Neil and a select few others) are “tourists” in the most pejorative sense, the line between brutal honesty and caricature becomes a little hazy.

On the other hand, O’Neil never fails to come across as a genuinely likeable, honest bloke. He’s a born storyteller, and one can imagine him holding forth in a pub, captivating a crowd with his riotous anecdotes. Indeed, the author comes up with his fair share of gems, many of them evidencing his attraction to the unfamiliar, and to his pre-occupation with the perils of language:

“How much colour one misses because of language barriers. I remembered my sister’s confusion when encountering the common experience in Bolivia of having a man climb on her bus and make a fifteen-minute sales pitch for the cleaning brushes he was selling, a Latin American face-to-face version of our late-night infomercials. My sister, speaking no Spanish, spent the first ten minutes thinking her bus had been hijacked and the bandit was outlining his demands.”

It’s almost a constant concern: O’Neil’s stories are filled with the babbling tongues of fellow travelers, and all the unknowable languages competing for space. And it becomes clear, over the course of the book’s chapters, that for all his attention to words, the author holds equal fascination with the *wordless* – those small miracles that occur when an idea is communicated despite the jabbering confusion, through smiles and gestures and the universal language of music.

In another episode, O’Neil finds himself guessing at a terse exchange between his mate Guilherme and a Brazilian pub owner – their differences in opinion on the price of the bar tab culminate in a fifteen minute shouting match – O’Neil observes, not understanding a word, and there’s a certain poetry in the way he retreats into himself and captures the sweet frustration of being caught outside of language: “when people operate in a different language their whole personality seems to change,” he says, “Language necessitates more than words, it is a way of relating...”

O’Neil comes across some other, hard-won truths, halfway across the world, with the morose realization that a man cannot will adventure into existence no matter how ready he is for it to happen:

“It came as a great shock that here, on the other side of the planet, there was an unnerving familiarity about everything. I had expected the wonders of the world to come rushing at me but instead everything was exactly the same, except here I didn’t know anyone. I kept willing adventure to spring from a laneway, but it became increasingly apparent that life just rolled along as it always had.”

And yet, adventure *does* happen, time and again. O’Neil is almost constantly in some sort of trouble, and he slips into and out of these situations almost effortlessly, for it seems the author has a preternatural knack for coincidence. Whenever things grind to a narrative halt, or it appears O’Neil has gotten himself into an inescapable bind in some foreign, luckless continent, along comes a guardian angel – the brother of a mate from back home, a benevolent taxi driver, a barely known acquaintance from five pages back – these real-life *deus ex machinas* who descend to earth to save O’Neil’s day.

Life is full of these twists of fate but one has to admire the author’s good fortune, for he manages to find it time after improbable time. It’s interesting to read the book and to see who, in a long line of strangers, will be saving him next, and it’s easy to sense – in O’Neil’s perpetual optimism in the strangeness of people and places, and in his own manic wanderlust – that none of these future and eventual saviours will be himself. And that’s part of the problem: while Gregor Samsa and Josef K awoke to the horrors of the world, blameless and confused, Patrick O’Neil, packed his own bags, booked his own ticket and fell into a story completely of his own making. There is not a lot here to hang your sympathy on a man who, in his stoned wisdom, almost drives over a cliff, a man who smokes joints out in the open and is (more than once) accordingly confronted by the law, a man who is chased ‘Texas Chainsaw Massacre’ style on the peyote trip from hell. Perhaps there *is* a measure of respect, even envy, for someone with the sheer courage to drop it all in search of something new, in a place where language is but a luxury.

There’s no doubting that O’Neil shares the adventurous streak of a Hunter S. and a Kerouac, and the literary ambition of a Franz K. Through it all there is a certain likemindedness on display: a self destructive tendency that would be much easier to forgive, to enjoy, if only O’Neil was as well-written as he was well-read.