# Jonathan Raban: Home and Away

Jonathan Raban's work crosses, or rather ignores, the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, history and memoir, reportage and criticism. Though he has frequently written about voyages, he is in no traditional sense a travel writer. His journeys are historical, personal, and metaphorical, guided by no map save Raban's lifelong sense of dislocation and the abiding home he finds in books.

Raban's first major work, *Soft City*, explored the metropolis as a foreign place, a wide-open landscape of self-invention. Later books—*Arabia*, *Old Glory*, and *Hunting Mr. Heartbreak* among them—took him abroad. *Coasting* and the novel *Foreign Land* brought him back home to an equally foreign England. Resident in Seattle since 1990, Raban has more recently turned his attention to his own new, far corner of America: *Bad Land* documented the travails of failed settlers in turn-of-the-last-century eastern Montana; *Passage to Juneau* traced parallel voyages to Alaska, his own and George Vancouver's; and the novel *Waxwings* captured the twilight of the Internet boom just before the darkness of post-9/11 America. His most recent work, *My Holy War*, is a personal meditation on this darkness. A second novel set in Seattle, *Surveillance*, is due in September. I corresponded with him via email from my own West Coast perch during the month of April, 2006.

-Owen Wozniak

**Loggernaut Reading Series:** I first learned of you in, of all places, the opening pages of David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Harvey launches his dizzying analysis of late twentieth-century capitalism's destabilizing effects on our experience of time and space with a discussion of your book *Soft City*. Harvey isn't too kind to your book. He sees your ruminations on the perils and possibilities of self-invention in the modern metropolis as a symptom of the foreshortening and downright denial of time and space implicit in postmodern discourse. When I finally read *Soft City*, I came away with the distinct impression that Harvey had missed the point. The London of *Soft City* is not a theoretical abstraction but an intensely observed place, experienced by someone struggling to survive in it—a place in which the ghosts of Dickens's novels exist uneasily

alongside the bohemians, professionals, and other modern pilgrims with whom you ambivalently identify. Looking back on *Soft City*, do you find any credence in Harvey's implication that your depiction of the city is too intensely personal or too subjective to meaningfully capture its "reality"? Or put another way, how does the theorist in you communicate with the memoirist?

**Jonathan Raban:** Yes, years ago someone sent me a photocopy of those pages from the Harvey book. I found them a bit opaque, and am glad to hear that the overall impression made by *The Condition of P-M* is—as you say—"dizzying."

What I hoped Harvey was going to say (alas, he didn't) was that *Soft City* was itself a postmodern object, with its mix of fiction (one chapter was first published in *Encounter* magazine as a short story), memoir, literary criticism, and sociology. In its time, it was thought an odd book: I remember reviewers calling it "annoying" and "maddening" because they wanted it to be something else (a social study, an autobiographical novel, a history of modern London) but it refused to fit into whatever genre they thought it ought to belong to. My own take on it was pretty simple: I was trying to get at the city from a lot of angles at once, and using what experience I had as a former lecturer in English Literature, an avid reader (then) of sociology, especially that of the Chicago school, an occasional writer of fiction, and a recent arrival in London.

In 1968–1969, my last year at the University of East Anglia, I taught an interesting—at least to me—course on The City (1870–1910), alongside a social historian, Geoffrey Searle. We had readings in literature, history, politics, with the occasional dash of sociology, and students could count the course as a credit in either history or literature, whichever best suited them. The two teachers had a lot of fun back-and-forthing—my literary take on Geoff's historical documents, his historical take on my novels and poems. "Interdisciplinary" was a good word in those days, and I had that course at the back of my head when I sat down to write *Soft City* a couple of years later. I wasn't self-consciously trying to construct a hybrid form for the book, I was just reflecting the way I thought, in a sloppy interdisciplinary way—being an

academic one day, a book critic the next, drawing from my own experience the next, and so on. I was surprised, and rather hurt, when some reviewers found the book eccentric and show-offy.

So I like your question about "how does the theorist communicate with the memoirist." Amiably, I'd say—though I'm hardly a theorist, more a sometime academic who can't kick the habit. It's surely natural to use other people's ideas to shed light on one's own personal experience, and one's reading life is just as much a part of "life" as sex or traveling. At one level, *Soft City* is a book about someone wandering down the Earls Court Road in 1970, wondering what Dickens, or Georg Simmel, or Claude Levi-Strauss might have to say about the terrain—and of course it's the reflection of an instinctively bookish sensibility. There are writers who like to keep their own reading hidden from their readers as if it were a secret vice, but I'm not one of them.

**LRS:** Having let loose the word "postmodernism," I'm eager to know where you stand on it. It hadn't occurred to me to consider *Soft City* a postmodern text, since to my mind books that are postmodern distance themselves in some way from that which they seek, aiming for ambiguity, parody, or formal confusion, but never directness. Yet what *Soft City* has in common with much of your later work is its quality of directness, its searching engagement with the places and lives around you. Do you see it, or any of your later work, as postmodern in any sense? Does that word have any certain meaning to you?

**Raban:** Insofar as I think about postmodernism at all, and it doesn't exactly keep me awake at nights, I think of it as something that happens to one, not a style one affects. We're postmoderns because we're not modernists. The modernist writers—Pound, Eliot, Joyce, Stevens, Yeats, Woolf, Williams—spoke with a kind of vatic authority: they were really the last of the Romantics, for whom authorship itself was like being a solitary prophet in the wasteland. Perhaps the last of the great modernists was my friend (though he was born one year before my father) Robert Lowell, whose work is rather scandalously out of fashion now. (You may have noticed that *Soft City* is dedicated to him and to his third wife, Caroline Blackwood, another close friend.)

Lowell wrote in a way that seems impossible to my generation—as if poets from Horace and Juvenal through Andrew Marvell and Baudelaire were his contemporaries and first cousins... as if he'd known them all in some New England schoolyard. Wonderful—and so modernist. To my mind, postmodernism isn't some David Letterman-like routine of ironizing everything so much as it is what architects mean by the word: expose the artifice, open the building up to show the pipes and beams. Which is, I think, or hope, roughly what my own books do: they interrogate the reading that has gone into them, try to show a mind shaped by other books, emphasize the relative and the personal, avoid the vatic. They're all—fiction and nonfiction—provisional takes on the world. For a good long while I liked the "travel book" as a form because it was so formless and modest and seemingly ingenuous. *Oh, I just went on this trip, and this is how I recollect it now.* Unfortunately, I got taken literally by reviewers. A bit like one saying "Oh, I don't do anything much" to someone at a party and being taken at one's word.... I should have said *I'm a sly postmodernist.* There's an irony in the books, not Lettermanish at all, but unconfessed. So I guess the pipes and beams do remain concealed, despite my attempts to expose them.

**LRS:** Far from keeping your reading hidden from your readers, you often make your reading a character of sorts in your work. I think one of the distinctive qualities of your writing comes from the sense that we are thinking along with you as you write, and that the library in your head is always present as a set of maps by which you navigate your encounters with people and ideas. Perhaps this is true of all writers, but it seems that for you, books are especially insistent presences. Has it ever been the case that the library in your mind threatened to overshadow, rather than illuminate, what you were writing about?

**Raban:** As for books "overshadowing" rather than "illuminating" what I write—maybe they do, but what I was aiming for was a deliberate foregrounding of their presence, to say, "This is where I'm coming from, this is what shapes these remarks, this passage." Beams and pipes again. Perhaps it's worth saying that in *Surveillance*—a novel that comes out this September in the U.K., next January in the U.S.—the only book of any importance

is a memoir that may or may not be faked. That's central to the plot, but otherwise the characters live relatively book-free lives. Indeed, books are seen as a potential earthquake hazard, likely to brain someone when they fly off the shelves in a big temblor, and are dismissed by the Chinese owner of the apartment block as "storybooks." Come to think of it, *Pride and Prejudice* does get to figure, somewhat importantly, in *Surveillance*, but otherwise I'm a reformed character. Temporarily so. I'm afraid that in a novel I've recently started, Twain, Hawthorne, Whitman, and Jack London, along with the landscape paintings of Albert Bierstadt, do get a lot of play, but it's also about Englishmen, video games, and murder.

**LRS:** As someone who identifies with the introspective, somewhat misanthropic narrator of *Passage to Juneau*, I can hardly imagine myself successfully connecting with the loggers, fishermen, resort-keepers, shipyard workers, and roustabouts who people the book. Yet it's clear that Jonathan Raban the writer, if not Jonathan Raban the narrator, has connected. Many of the small revelations in your work stem from encounters with people who may not share your cultural assumptions, who have not read the books you read, and who react warily to your accent or your manner. The drama inheres in your recognition, and occasional bridging, of the gulf separating you and them. Do you carry this drama in mind when you meet such people? Is it part of the artifice created when the journey ends and the writing begins? (I think here of your discussion in *For Love and Money* of travel books that appear decades after the fact.) Is there some tension between the character you present in the story and the writer who gets the story? If so, how do you negotiate this?

**Raban:** I think you've largely answered your question. The writer, looking back at the journey from a distance of a year or two (or three), is a different character from the hapless character who undertook the trip: wise after the event, with the leisure to tease out meanings from the experience that the distracted traveler never had, and often impatient with his alter ego's blinkered and unsatisfactory version of things. *I* am not *him*....

Writing from memory, not from a notebook, has always seemed important, even though it's necessarily impressionist and inexact

in regard to the literal facts of the experience. When traveling, I usually keep a notebook: when home at my desk, the notebook serves mainly to remind me how little I saw at the time, or rather how I was noticing the wrong things. But the notes do spur memories, and it's the memories I trust. The wine stain on the page may tell me more than the words there, which usually strike me as hopelessly inadequate or off at some irrelevant tangent (irrelevant, I mean, to the story I'm trying to unfold on the typed or printed page).

Memory and imagination are inseparable powers. Memory shapes, distills, exaggerates, orders—and ruthlessly loses what it doesn't need for its own storytelling purposes. I wouldn't trust memory in a courtroom but I trust it absolutely in a book. I can't write until memory has done its job, which it does slowly, over months and sometimes years. (It took me three years to get around to writing *Coasting* after I finished piloting a boat around the British Isles—much of the time was spent writing a novel—*Foreign Land*—while I let the voyage settle in the back of my mind.)

You talk of my "introspection" and "misanthropy." I can't speak for the second, but there's precious little room for introspection when one's managing a boat in a small gale, or trying to immerse oneself in the lives of long-gone homesteaders in a ruined Montana shack. Introspection comes much later, to the writer at his keyboard rather than to the person he once was, in oilskins or snake boots, too busy with the here and now to give much of a thought to himself.

As for "connecting" with "loggers, fishermen, etc," I do find this hard to square with my supposed misanthropy. I like being away from home, living among strangers, and I am always fascinated by other people's lives in a landscape that's alien terrain for me. A sense of my own displacement in the world fuels my appreciation of people who are, or seem, more securely placed in their own geography.

I might add that the term "travel writing" sets my teeth on edge: when I hear the term, all I see is the Travel section of the Sunday paper, and journalists sampling free vacations. My books

have *never* been like that—or so I hope and pray. The "travel" bit has never been more than a basic narrative spine on which to build the flesh of other kinds of writing. And if you go back to the history of the novel—that other low form, as it used to be thought of—that's true of novels too. *Vide Moll Flanders* or *Tom Jones*—tours of English society, high and low, threaded on to the string of one character's life.

Solitary travel makes one hungry for company and conversation. You find your society where you can—seated on the next barstool, or walking on the dock. Strangers on a train often talk more easily to one another than they can to their immediate colleagues and friends—it's like being in a confessional, talking to the priest behind the screen (not that I have much experience of confessionals, but still.) I relish such talk, and give at least as much as I take. I'm not being an "observer," I'm a wholly engaged participant. But then, back home writing, I betray those confidences....

I've very rarely felt that I was "gathering material" or "doing research" on my various trips: I was just trying to get along as best I could in the company in which I found myself, while hoping that later, much later, the experience would turn out to be something I'd be able to write about. The writer is never *entirely* off duty, but in my experience he takes a back seat to the person who is talking of the woes of marriage or whatever. Later, when he's in the driver's seat, assuming control of the story, he'll undergo a change of personality, become a tyrant as he subordinates one detail to another or turns his erstwhile friend into a figure of speech.

But I guess I ought to confess that I'm tired of travel memoirs: I feel I took the form as far as I could in *Passage to Juneau*, and don't feel much temptation to return to it. That's partly political. Since September 2001, the world on the front doorstep has become so urgently absorbing that it seems like defection to travel away from it. Maybe under another presidential administration I might feel differently, but for now I'm chained to this place, stranger and scarier at this moment than anywhere I've ever visited. *Here* is what I want to write about, not *there*, at present.

**LRS:** Misanthropy was a poor choice of words. So was introspection, for that matter. What I meant to suggest was an awareness of distance, and a respect for the possibilities inherent in that distance. I would also like to ask about this turn in your orientation away from travel writing. You've written *Waxwings*, a novel that captures a suddenly distant age, and *My Holy War*, a unique take on the post-9/11 cultural and political climate in a corner of America uncertain of its relationship to the world at large. Can you say a little more about how (or if) the advent of this ostensibly new era and your vantage on it has affected your interest in and approach to fiction?

**Raban:** I feel bereft of any theory on this. I get miserable when I'm not writing, so I write whatever I can.

On 9/10/01 I was about one third of the way through *Waxwings*. From 9/11/01 to sometime in February '02, I put the manuscript aside, thinking that I might never look at it again. The only thing I was able to write during that time was the title essay of *My Holy War*, a sort of autobiographical approach to the jihadis. Then I picked up *Waxwings*, and saw a way of continuing it as a post-9/11 novel, with the attacks implicitly foreshadowed but never directly mentioned. Then I dickered around for a long while with essays and commentary pieces—driven to write them by simple incredulity at what the Bush administration was doing, or threatening to do, in Iraq and here at home in the "war on terror."

Your question suggests a change of hats, but I'm not conscious of changing hats when I write—of being a "fiction writer," or a "travel writer," or an "essayist," "book reviewer," "radio playwright," or whatever. Each piece of writing has its own technical requirements of course: settling down to a 2000-word piece is different from the long-haul rhythm of a 100,000-word book. But the formal difference between, say, *Bad Land* and *Waxwings* is far slighter to my eye than it probably is to yours, and I'm more struck by their similarities—their multiple points of view, their anchoring of characters in a landscape, their back-and-forthing between past and present, their use of 1500–2500-word differently-angled building blocks to make a patchwork

mosaic within each chapter. That one is a novel and one is "nonfiction" seems to me a rather tiresome librarians' distinction, and I wish they could be shelved side by side, where they belong. Just as there's a lot of documentary fact in *Waxwings*, which is set very specifically in Seattle between November 1999 and March 2000, so there's much fiction in *Bad Land*—every time I plant myself in the shoes of a homesteader and look out through his or her eyes, I'm writing fiction not strict reportage. Or there's a short essay at the end of *My Holy War* which grew out of my forthcoming novel, *Surveillance*, where the thoughts belong to a distinctly not-me fictional character. So I slop about between genres whose existence I barely recognize.

It just happens that in the last six or seven years, which roughly correspond with the advent of the Bush administration, the ideas that have presented themselves as candidates for books all required to be written as novels. Maybe this simply reflects a desire to stay home. The book I'm working on now is rooted in a first-person, seemingly true-life narrative, like *Passage to Juneau*, but the story it tells is imagined, so perforce it's a "novel." But I hardly notice that when I'm writing, and a casual reader, opening a page at random, might well mistake it for "nonfiction."

All of which is a tiresomely long-winded way of saying, no, I don't think there's any special connection between my present political preoccupations and my recent run of writing novels. It just turned out that way by accident, like most things in my life... I've never been good at sensible planning—or at sticking to my cobbler's last. Like I said, I just write what I can, which isn't nearly as much as I'd like.

**LRS:** Your observation of the similarities between *Waxwings* and *Bad Land* actually comes as a bit of a surprise. I see in retrospect that indeed the books have similar forms. But in reading *Bad Land* I had the sense of moving through a distant historical terrain made fully recognizable, while the time and place of *Waxwings*, by contrast, seemed somehow foreign, despite its familiarity. I spent the year during which *Waxwings* is set living in the Pacific Northwest, working at a dot com depressingly similar to the one in the novel, and generally breathing the same

air the novel's characters breathe. *Waxwings* touched on memories and sensations that have not yet coalesced into history, personal or otherwise.

Historians often say of the past that it's a foreign country, one whose foreignness can be hard to recognize beneath the patina of legend, myth, and popular memory. I feel that in many of your books, *Bad Land* in particular, you capture something essentially true about this foreign country that more academic approaches to history often fail to do. I don't imagine that you see yourself as an historian, but clearly you spend a lot of time "doing" history. Do you "relate" to the historical characters in your work any differently from the present-day ones? Does the process by which you generate historical interpretation—imagining Vancouver's survey, for example—differ from the process by which you interpret contemporary landscapes, the people you encounter, or your own memories?

**Raban:** Your letter reminds me of a remark made by Richard White, the historian of the West, when he reviewed *Bad Land*, saying that I "channeled" my historical characters. He didn't intend this as a compliment, but rather implied that I was doing something vaguely illicit and pseudo-mystical, like that woman in Yealm, Washington who channels Ramtha, the millennia-old Native American god figure (I think... I can't be bothered to Google that nonsense...). White meant, I assume, that whatever I thought I was doing, I wasn't doing History—and of course he's right. "Channeling," I thought, was rather a nice term for it.

Most of this morning I was trying to "channel" an imaginary Americanophile Englishman who comes to Seattle to work for Microsoft and ends up committing a very American, far-western crime, and I see no great difference between that kind of explicit fiction writing and what I did in *Bad Land*. As an English immigrant to the U.S., I was stunned by the bare dry oceanic landscape of eastern Montana, so I found it easy to connect with a previous generation of English immigrants who'd passed that way, like the Wollastons and (my favorite character in the book) Worsell, the born-lazy slob, whose homestead was an infamous local disgrace. I had a fair amount of documentary evidence (photographs, memoirs, etc.) to go on, but not so much that I

didn't have to imagine most of what I wrote. I have enough firsthand experience of trying to make a new life in a strange land to identify with (or "channel") those homesteaders, most of whom found themselves way out of their depth after being duped by the promotional literature distributed by the railroad companies and by a misleading textbook on farming without rainfall. Books brought them to the West—something else that chimed deeply with me. I tried to write about the homesteaders as my intimates and contemporaries, using as much as I could of what I had in common with them and they with me.

And there's something else here. Their history seemed to me very recent—everything happened when my own grandparents (born in the early 1890s) were youngish adults. My own family history is vivid and particular to me through the nineteenth century and into the late eighteenth, after which (or before which) it gets increasingly vague. But I could tell you exactly what my great-great grandfather did in the 1860s, or what his father was doing in the late 1830s.

The last house I owned in England was built in 1630, and it wasn't an old house by the standards of the Essex village where it stood. And I remember once stopping at a bar in rural Ireland, just as a funeral at the church across the road was coming to an end. When the mourners came in to have an impromptu wake with gallons of Guinness and whiskey, they began talking about the dead man's grave, whose grave it was next to, whose next, whose next, and so on. No more than ten minutes into the talk, they were going on about some guy, familiar to everyone, who was "killed by Cromwell's men." That would have been in 1648–50. In the next half hour, we must have meandered back, with many reminiscent side-trips, into the fifteenth century, if not before, yet the dead were still being spoken of as if they'd gone last week. So very un-American. So very, very Irish.

I do think of the 1790s as the beginning of "modern" history—partly, perhaps, because of my own ancestry, more importantly because that's when the Romantic revolution in English really took hold. So the date of Vancouver's arrival in the Pacific Northwest—1792—interested me a lot, especially when I saw the wild discrepancy between his writing about this landscape and

that of his only slightly younger midshipmen. He was a mid-eighteenth century fogey, they were nineteenth century Romantic moderns.

So Vancouver's sensibility did strike me as historic—or at least pre-modern. But as Clinton would say, I felt his pain—born, not unlike me, into that no-man's-land in the English class system, somewhere between the upper-lower-middle class and the lower-upper-middle class. Life on that ship took me straight back to the horrors of my snobbish English boarding school. That way, I could "channel" Captain Van.

I don't know.... What I'm trying to say here, I think, is that I feel a sort of instinctive contemporaneity with people trying to find their footing in a novel and forbidding landscape—the homesteading immigrants in Montana in 1910, or George Vancouver in the Pacific Northwest in 1792–1794. The dates—the "history," if you must—seem much less important than the predicament of finding oneself in a place where one doesn't belong, which is what really interests me. A cruel critic might say of me that I'm merely breathing my own neuroses into the lives of innocent characters from the past, making them suffer my own sense of awkward displacement in the world. I'd try to argue back that the landscapes themselves—the Inside Passage, the Montana prairie, Seattle here and now—are so particular, so redolent of the period in which the books are set, that they give the characters a degree of historical authenticity, if you see what I mean. What I feel I have to do is to catch the friction between the people and the peculiar geography in which they're situated—and if I can do that the rest will follow. ❖