

Book Review

Measures of Connectivity: Ted Conover and The Routes of Man

Mark O. Gatlin

Assistant Professor

Department of English, School of Undergraduate Studies

Regent University, 1000 Regent Drive

Virginia Beach, VA 23464

E-mail: mgatlin@regent.edu, Phone: (757) 352-4464

Non-fiction author, Ted Conover brings to life with refreshing insight and empathy the most unusual and meaningful of people, places, and things. Mr. Conover, a writer-in-residence at New York University's Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute, takes the who, what, when, why, where, and how of traditional journalism to new levels of perception. The Carter Institute, well known for its blend of creative non-fiction courses within the context of journalistic studies, produces immersion journalists capable of flavoring writing with their keen observations and reflections—an endeavor particularly suited to Conover's tastes in literary reportage.

In an interview with Ted Conover following his reading at the Old Dominion University Literary Festival last fall, he shared that he does not write for himself, to serve his own interests. Societal concerns regarding volatile current events, rather, drive his thematic selections. Conover carefully considers each of his foci, choosing to, "...live with topics for long periods of time in order to determine which ones wear the best."

It is one thing to research from a distance the events that shape our world but it is quite another to immerse oneself in cultures, to live among the characters and through the experiences that grow from first-hand contact. In the author's own words, "...to find meaning that can bring the physical journey to life...."

Conover's approach to cultural immersion has produced a number of powerful narrative works. Among them, *Newjack: Guarding Sing Sing*, a winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award and finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, is the result of a year working as gallery officer where Conover supervised some of the most violent felons in the American penal system. From this experience, the author shares unique and fascinating insight into a world of concentrated crime. But beyond that, he considers the social and psychological pressures that shape the lives of prisoners and guards alike, effectively challenging traditional notions regarding authority, power, and control.

Running like a powerful undercurrent through much of Conover's work, guiding it, as it were, is the concept of travel, of being on the move and how mere motion impacts lives. The travel narrative is a literary tradition canonized by authors such as Jack Kerouac and John Steinbeck. But where Kerouac's *On the Road* sought (among other things) a national communal identity and Steinbeck, in *Travels with Charley*, endeavored to reestablish contact with America and American voice, Conover sifts global phenomena to explore concepts essential to a world of diminishing boundaries and expanding ecumenical needs. Like any successful writer, Conover knows his audience and he aims to please.

The travel sentiment began to burn within the author from a young age, beginning with the cross country bicycling of his youth and a period during his undergraduate studies he spent in the company of contemporary hoboes, traveling in boxcars and jungling up in the makeshift camps that line our nation's railways. Conover's experience eventually culminated in his narrative, *Rolling Nowhere: Riding the Rails with America's Hoboes*, a compelling read that depicts his nomadic companions with the power of an insight gained from both walking the walk and talking the talk.

The author's next foray into life on the fringes resulted in *Coyotes: A Journey Across Borders with America's Illegal Migrants*, a project that saw the author traversing deserts, wading rivers, and hiding in orange groves as he lived among Mexican nationals desperate for better lives in America.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that Conover writes only to bring to life experiences beyond the reaches of the average citizen for mere dramatic effect or to romanticize dangerous elements. He recently turned down an offer by a magazine editor to smuggle himself inside a cargo container—danger for danger's sake does not interest him from a literary point of view. Elements of risk do figure in his work, however, as the author is driven to uncover and to share vital concepts and experiences as they are developing and when the outcomes are often far from certain.

In his latest book, *The Routes of Man*, Conover does just this as he immerses himself in six powerfully charged cultural settings. Along with his physical journey—with truckers in East Africa, among Israeli soldiers at roadside checkpoints, and in the cab of a Hyundai from which he considers the proliferation of new highways across China—Conover shares an internal journey during which he explores, among other things, the “price of convenience” as our world is inundated, ironically, with highways and byways of connectivity that bring with them threats as well as promise. Just as the Roman roads provided tremendous expansion for the post-Republican society, the same roads were later used against a weakening Roman empire by Visagoths and other invading tribes.

Even medieval architects realized the secret castle passageways they constructed for escape means might well prove to be the conduits of their demise if discovered by attackers. This paradoxical concept Conover examines closely through six venues of increasing complexity: among mahogany harvesters traveling dicey mountain switchbacks and swollen rivers in Peru; over the Zaskaris—a frozen river that is the only egress for inhabitants of remote Himalayan villages seeking education and a different way of life; with African truckers who carry supplies and medical goods from central Africa to the continental coast but who also may be contributing to the spread of AIDS along their routes; on the West Bank, where Israelis and Palestinians share roads fraught with tension and sudden violence; among a rapidly expanding automobile club culture in China where road travel is growing at fantastic rates; and with an ambulance crew traversing the packed byways of Lagos, Nigeria, one of the fastest growing cities in the world in terms of population...and crime.

Conover’s themes—the benefits of development weighed against the detriments to environment, progress vs. isolation, social transformation, and visions of possible futures—are as fresh as they are vital. In the mid-20th century Robert Moses forever changed the landscape of New York City, building highways, tunnels, and bridges that decimated some neighborhoods and isolated others. His visions of connectivity changed the way people viewed community planning and forever expanded the boundaries of cities and concepts of city life. The South Bronx, however, traditionally a home to stable, working-class families, was partly destroyed and effectively isolated by construction of Moses’ Cross Bronx Expressway. Fifty years later, this portion of the Bronx borough of New York City has yet to recover from the impact of progress and expansion. Leading a sentinel-like existence, this modern wasteland stands testimony to the costs of progress.

Ted Conover’s plunges into both marginal and mainstream planes of existence kicks open doors of perception and keeps them open. He asks many questions of himself but perhaps Conover is ultimately asking us to more carefully consider the choices being made for us today to avoid sifting through the aftermath of our tomorrows. *The Routes of Man* will leave you reflectively resolute; it will render you incapable of closing those doors, whether you wish to or not.