



You Can't Get There from Here: A Year on the Fringes of a Shrinking World

Gayle Forman

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In these eight interconnected travel stories, journalist Gayle Forman traces the trajectory from her relatively comfortable life in New York's Hell's Kitchen to her sometimes extreme--and extremely personal--experiences in some of the most exotic spots on earth

In this extraordinary memoir--now issued in paperback--Gayle Forman takes us with her to the mountain hideaways of Kazakhstan's Tolkien fanatics and inside the townships of South Africa's lost tribe of Israel. She introduces us to a wild assortment of characters: lovelorn Tongan transvestites, charismatic Tanzanian rap stars, precocious Cambodian street kids, out-of-work Dutch prostitutes. In the artful interplay of these eight lively, thoughtful stories, she reveals how all of these diverse lives--as well as our own--are being inextricably altered by the ever-shrinking world that we share. Because, she writes, "To forget the humanity in others is to risk forgetting one's own."

You Can't Get There from Here: A Year on the Fringes of a Shrinking World Details

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From Reader Review You Can't Get There from Here: A Year on the Fringes of a Shrinking World for online ebook

Melissa Stucky says

I love travel books and especially liked how this one focused on people in less-known areas.

Ruth says

Not as good as I had hoped.

Nicole Gas says

So readable and thought provoking, especially since I've never visited any of the places she mentions!

Bridget Bailey says

I enjoy this author a lot so I was looking forward to a different style of her writing. I liked this book a lot because it was more of a memoir and less a story. It chronicled her year traveling with her husband and all the different places they visited which were not common places to visit. I really enjoyed hearing about some obscure tribes in Tonga or Cambodia or what not and the interesting dynamics of different cultures. It was really eye opening how open her and her husband are with meeting new people and going off with them on their own on random adventures. I would be too scared to do this myself and trust people I just met in non-first world countries. Maybe I'm a baby and need more courage but I admire that ability in them and thus why I enjoyed reading this so much.

Sara says

In the introduction to this book, Gayle Forman admits that she's a Weird Girl. She says, "...I am a member of the tribe of the odd. Have been since, as a little girl, I came to realize that I was not like an Amy or a Jenny...As such, I spent a lot of time by myself, daydreaming, bug-hunting, thrift-shopping for Snoopy skirts, dyeing my hair unnatural colors, and doing interpretive dances to the Velvet Underground at my elementary school's talent shows... Naturally, I became the picked-on person, which was just as well because the alternative was to be a picker-onner and I didn't have the stomach for that." Pay attention when she says that, because her approach to travel is nothing like anyone else's. She focuses on and opens her mind to the odd people - the ones who don't fit in, like Tonga's "third sex," the fakaleiti, and the South African "lost tribe" of Jews. She hangs out with Kazakhstanis who gather together in a national forest for a chance to re-enact The Lord of the Rings and camp out for the night. She becomes part of the ever-changing rotation of Bollywood extras. Her travel style is to stay in one place long enough to integrate with the oddest locals, making friends. She says in the book that she thinks that gives her more valid things to say about the culture, and she's right.

The framework for the book is the idea of globalization. From the little girl selling trinkets in several languages outside Angkor Wat to the impending death of the traditional Red Light district in Amsterdam, every stop Forman makes in her world tour reveals something about the impact - both good and bad - of a world that is leaking culture at its seams.

The arrangement of the book is complex: the author and her husband traveled both together and apart. They frequently set off on side journeys, reuniting briefly before parting again. The changing nature of their relationship forms nine mini-chapters in between the main chapters, which are based on locations and cultures. She also uses these sections to gloss over inconsequential travel details (because, let's face it, you really don't want more detail than, "... the 41-hour train ride..."). This allows for more dedication to detail in the sections on, let's say, the rap scene in Zanzibar.

I love travel almost as much as Forman does, but I find her revelations about the spread of the miasma that is American culture deeply disturbing. There is a well-voiced agreement among flag-wavers that democracy is good, capitalism is better, and if you're a Christian, you won't just be happy here, you're ensured eternal perfection, as well. What about the Kazakhs, who are caught between democracy and communism? The fall of Russia has created a nation steeped in confusion, with Western-style democracy available, but with the leftover KGB on the streets to punish those who celebrate the offered freedoms. What about the Cambodians who can't make a living on their farms, so move to the city to beg? That's a direct result of capitalism. And what about the Lemba, who have been genetically shown to have direct connection to the Jews of Israel? Most of them practice a mix of Judaism, Christianity, and traditional African religions. All of this goes to say that traditional American black-and-white ideas about practically everything are not only faulty, but sometimes formed of willful ignorance. So it's not the spread of cultures as reflected in this book that I object to, it's the spread of American culture.

You Can't Get There From Here is a funny book, a thoughtful book, and well worth reading.

Jaime Howey says

Great read. Learned a little something and now I look forward to reading some of Gayle Forman's other works.

Anne says

Gayle Forman is one of my favorite authors. I read all her fiction books and when I learnt that she had written a non-fiction book - many years ago - as well, it was a instinct buy for me.

I really enjoyed this book and Formans travel report. It was written more than 10 years ago - so that fact alone, realizing how much the world has changed in such a short period of time, was very entertaining. But I also learned a lot, especially about places and countries where we hear - until today! - not much about in books, news or movies.

I highly recommend this book. 4,5/5 stars!

Magdelanye says

Foolishly, I read some reviews when I first entered this book. I was disconcerted because the ratings of the first reviews to catch my eye were so low. I know better than to bias myself like that, but I really was not prepared to like GF and braced myself for a whiny, self-absorbed prat. Thankfully, GF herself cleared my head of such mean spirited assessments. Forthright, honest, mindfull and alert to the rare angle, her message may not appeal to everybody, but hers is a thoughtful book, not airbrushed for posterity nor plumped with pc sentiments.

This is my opinion that I will supplement with some choice quotes asap

Catherine says

I haven't read any of Gayle Forman's YA novels and I can't say they really appeal to me, but I did enjoy this non-fiction account of her year-long trip around the world with her husband, prior to having a child and beginning her career in fiction.

In the various places they visit, Forman seeks out the unusual elements of each society: transvestites in Tonga, hip-hop in Zanzibar, a "lost tribe of Israel" in South Africa, role-playing Tolkien fans in Kazakhstan. The journalistic parts of this book I found very interesting. The relationship parts -- with Forman and her husband struggling to keep their marriage together under the strain of two very different personalities and approaches to traveling -- were harder to read.

Jan says

For the most part, this is a very entertaining travelogue. Forman and her husband went to some very exotic places that you won't read about in a lot of other travelogues. It held my interested and I learned a lot.

My biggest problem is that Forman doesn't come across very likable. She spent a lot of the trip whining and complaining (particularly odd since she'd already done a lot of travel in her life) and in the end I felt really bad for her poor husband, who was on his first international trip (I actually checked to see if they're still married; they are).

On the other hand, when I thought about it, I thought it was brave of her to keep all of that in the book when she didn't have to. I mean, there's a reason I'll never go on The Amazing Race (a show I love) or write my own travelogue: I know I would have my travel meltdowns as well, and I'd want as few people to know about it as possible.

In the end, I admired her for her honesty and decided that, overall, it's a pretty good book.

Marissa says

Not my normal cup of tea, but I've enjoyed everything else written by this author so why not. It was a great

book to read in small quick segments. I enjoyed her take on seeing the world.

Karith Amel says

Here's a reflection I wrote on this book when I actually read it, during a freshman class on autobiographical writing:

I really enjoyed Gayle Forman's book, *You Can't Get There from Here*. A travel book, its theme is similar to *Without Reservations*, and yet Forman succeeds in ways that Steinbach does not. Why is this?

I think there are several elements that grant Forman her success, and help to captivate us as readers. For instance, she is not as introspective as Steinbach. While this is not necessarily a positive or a negative, I think it works well in Forman's case. Steinbach left us feeling preached at, and a bit bored. Internal conflict, experienced while traveling the world, is not necessarily enough to keep an audience captivated for several hundred pages. To escape this problem, Forman is outwardly focused, addressing her personal problems briefly and with irregularity.

The exception to this is Forman's focus on her marriage, and the trip's affect on her and her husband's relationship. This is one portion of the book that I find incomplete, and redundant. She explains the stress, she shares her whining, she demonstrates her marriage undergoing strain . . . and then nothing. We're never really given a conclusion. We never see her move through the fighting into a new appreciation of her husband, or a new understanding of herself. Not really. There are small reconciliations, but nothing final. We are given conflict, but no resolution.

But for the most part, this does not happen. Forman organizes her book brilliantly, giving a theme to each chapter, dealing with that theme in full, and then moving on. Each chapter is both complete and unique, offering us something new (no redundancy here) and keeping us interested. She includes only the details that address the specific theme, letting nothing irrelevant slip in and distract. Her stories are fascinating and unusual, and yet very human—very human, because they deal with people. There is conflict and resolution, epiphanies and flashbacks, but all of it is very structured, and very concrete. She deals with abstract concepts, but through physical interaction, not vague theorizing. Her themes hold her to the point, and give her stories consistency and relevance. As a transition tool, taking us from one story, and theme, to the next, she uses short chapters to skim the in-between portions of the trip, freeing us from the mundane experience of day-to-day life.

Even with these transition chapters, however, her book would still be disjointed if not for the overarching theme of globalization. This is what holds her book together, and, ultimately, gives her wacky stories significance and structure. Globalization may seem like a heavy topic, and a bit of a stretch, for an autobiography, and yet Forman's journalistic experience make this a logical choice. Of course, this might alienate readers with no particular interest in the topic of globalization, but her stories are engaging nonetheless, and, in a globalizing world, the topic is extremely relevant. I personally loved this aspect of her book, and found her insights to be meaningful and thought provoking.

One critique might be that, while globalization receives an adequate conclusion, her life does not. Perhaps this is an instance of her being too outwardly focused; we want more insight into the trip's effect on her personally, but we are not given it. She returns home, but what did she learn, how did she change? These events are now a part of who she is, but who is she? Who is the new Gayle Forman, and how is she different

than the woman who left home a year before? We are never really told.

Colleen says

Quite frankly, I'm getting tired of people taking a year off (of work, bad relationships, life, whatever), traveling the world, and then writing a book about it. Are you truly traveling the world to experience other cultures, or are you traveling the world with an agenda--namely finding some adventures so you can write a book about them? And why is it that they always take a year off? How about 2 weeks...or 3 years? Anyway, now that I've gotten that off my chest, I will state that I really liked this book. This was everything Paris, I Love You, But You're Bringing Me Down, was not--both funny and cohesive (yes, you really can have both!). Forman throws herself into her travels, seeking out the weird wherever she goes and somehow, charming (or bulldozing) her way into their confidence. There were times when I thought, This can't be real; she's making it up. But, there are pictures to prove it! Alas, they are not in the book, which I think was a big mistake, they're on her web site. Instead of giving us a broad, boring overview of each country she visits, Forman chooses one story from each place and tells the hell out of it. In Tonga, she schmoozes her way into a colony of fakaleiti, transvestites who are accepted in society because people pretend not to know that they're men dressing as women (and having beauty contests, to boot!). In Kazakhstan, she befriends a group of Tolkien fanatics who hide in the mountains, acting out Lord of the Rings. In Tanzania, she's a roadie for Profesa J and other hip-hop artists as they travel around performing--one of the few times where it seemed she was truly in danger (I would have taken the first plane home, but not Forman). In India, she is cast in a Bollywood movie and spends a few weeks prancing around the set in an electric blue gown. (Hey all you aspiring actresses--Bollywood producers LOVE white westerns!) There are many more of these stories--and not all are goofy; some are quite sad. But all are fascinating. Forman travels the way I'd love to travel but don't have the courage to. I would love for her to give me lessons in how to get people, worldwide, to let me hang out with them.

Stacy says

You Can't Get There from Here: A Year on the Fringes of a Shrinking World by Gayle Forman is a tough book for me to review: I really enjoyed it and found most of it fascinating; however, it took me a long time to get through, longer than most fiction novels take, anyway.

This was most likely because the writing in *You Can't Get There from Here* was a bit too conversational and article-ready. When I read Forman's Just One Day and Just One Year, the writing was divine and the plot was meticulously-planned. But that is the biggest benefit of writing fiction: the author has the ability to manipulate the story, setting, characters however she pleases to make the story more appealing.

On the other hand, though, in non-fiction, the author is expected to "tell it like it is," and sometimes, as is the case in this book, the experience is not very well designed and perfectly worded because it was reported honestly. Kudos to Forman for staying true to her journalist roots; however, some times I wanted to skim through certain sections, but I couldn't do it for fear of missing out on something important. Some of Forman's sections were more like he said/she said lists with some statistical data and relationship drama thrown in for good measure.

And so much of this book was about individual people, and even more than that, as the title implies,

individual people who exist on the fringes of society. I, personally, tend to obsess over traditional cultural experiences abroad: the food, the historical sites, the festivals and holidays. Unfortunately, I am more of an ethnographer than a journalist: I'm not looking to discover a unique story, but rather to observe the stories that have existed in the same way for centuries. For this reason, I found myself wishing some of Forman's stories had been about the more traditional societal cultures of these far-off places, in addition to those stories from the fringes. For example, she goes to India, but her whole experience is reported from a Bollywood movie set. And while Bollywood is uniquely Indian, it didn't seem like the India I was hoping to explore. It was too niche-specific.

I still really enjoyed the stories that she included - they were fascinating and different than anything I had read about before (except the Bollywood part - I read about that in *Just One Year*, & I can definitely see what inspired that scene). But I only wished that she had broadened her frame a bit more - included the unique and niche-specific anecdotes alongside the traditional and culturally historical stories.

It is definitely worth the read, though, and I particularly enjoyed escaping my mundane routine for a little atypical adventure. It was a fun escape, and I learned about a lot of unique groups whom I wouldn't have otherwise known existed without this book. I recommend that you get yourself a copy and escape to these far-off places because most of us will never get to experience events like the ones in this book.

Noelle says

This is a memoir of Gayle Forman's trip around the world with her husband. She's a journalist, so has a few stories in mind when she embarks on the tour. She learns about the Fakaleiti in Tonga, a group of men who dress like women and sleep with men but do not consider themselves gay. It's a challenge to wrap your head around their completely different world view. She also meets up with a Chinese doctor enamored with the English language, works on a Bollywood movie set, plays games with a group of "Tolkienists" who have taken cosplay to another level in Kazakhstan, learns about the Lemba (one of the lost Jewish tribes) traditions in South Africa, and interviews sex workers in the Netherlands. I found the book to be somewhat disjointed, but the different experiences were definitely interesting. I think the fact that it took me two months to read it speaks volumes about how much I enjoyed the book.
