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Nicholas Shakespeare, Alice van Straalen (Editor)

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Award-winning novelist Nicholas Shakespeare has written the definitive biography of one of the most influential literary figures of our time: Bruce Chatwin, whose works' strangely compelling combination of research, first-hand experience, myth, and mystification may have been the real substance of his seemingly contradictory life.

Chatwin's first book, *In Patagonia*, became an international bestseller, revived the art of travel writing, and inspired a generation to set out in search of adventure. Chatwin became a celebrity, while remaining a conundrum. With little formal education, he had become a director of Sotheby's. An avid collector, he eschewed material things and revered the nomadic life. Married for twenty-three years, he had male lovers throughout the world. And only at his death did his personal myth fail him. Nicholas Shakespeare, who was given unrestricted access to his papers, spent eight years retracing Chatwin's steps and interviewing the people who knew him. The result is a biography that is at once sympathetic and revelatory.

Bruce Chatwin Details

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Download and Read Free Online Bruce Chatwin Nicholas Shakespeare , Alice van Straalen (Editor)

From Reader Review Bruce Chatwin for online ebook

Yigal Zur says

great portrait of an amazing guy and talented travel writer.

Jim says

A superb biography of a unique individual. Bruce Chatwin was a superb British travel writer -- though he would contest being called that. He was uncomfortable with his Britishness, and he hated being classified as a travel writer.

What distinguished him from travel writers is that he deliberately (and artistically) took liberties with the facts and embroidered them to suit his own views. So if you were to use, say, **In Patagonia** as a guidebook, you would probably run into some angry individuals who were mightily ticked off at Bruce's lack of respect for the story they told him. And yet, he put many places in Patagonia, such as Gaiman near Trelew, on the map. Of course, many readers still persist in using him as a travel guide -- at their peril.

When I travel to Patagonia in November 2011, I will re-read the book -- not for its facts -- but for its essential truths.

When Chatwin died of AIDS in the Eighties, I think the world lost a great writer.

Stephen says

A truly excellent biography of one of the best of the last century's writers - my only criticism was that the bio too easily slipped into hero-worship of Chatwin towards the end. He was a good writer, but also a bastard!

John says

A big book about a big character. A man of very many parts, Chatwin was essentially a wanderer, as he's best remembered I guess – wandering around the world. From a professional middle class background he attended a fairly modest public school. He was his own person from an early age and had an instinctive sense, even in his early teens, for what was collectable in the world of art and antiques. As a schoolboy he was something of an entrepreneur buying an item for 6d and selling it on for halfacrown.

It was this ability which Sothebys would find very useful in Bruce as a teenager, together with his charm and photographic memory. He did his bit to help put the firm on the map. At the time of his joining Sothebys they were very much a poor relation of the other auction house, Christie's. That would change in the few years that Bruce was with them. He did very well, very quickly but became bored and disillusioned and left to read Archaeology at Edinburgh University.

Here he would make an impression too, catching the attention of his professor and fellow students. He would not stay the course though, once boredom kicked in again; but his time there was not wasted and would stand him in good stead when travelling and exploring and ultimately writing.

Whilst at Sothebys Bruce married his colleague, Elizabeth. Immensely loyal, not to say long suffering, she gave him a pretty free rein to wander... and not just travelling. Some of his love affairs on the road were more furtive than others.

Bruce was intense, even reading about him (I had to have a break from him over Christmas) was taxing! His energy was phenomenal, right up to the end of his short but very full life. I felt to age just reading about him, not to mention feelings of inadequacy in the presence of this gifted individual.

A very successful writer, especially towards the end of his life, becoming rich when it was almost too late. Brave in the throes of his harrowing illness the immensity of his character was both a strength and a weakness. As his Aids related dementia took hold his plans and schemes became evermore grandiose and bizarre; his nearest and dearest therefore had a real struggle on their hands.

Self absorbed though he undoubtedly was he could be selfless in helping others, particularly up and coming writers.

Read it for yourself. Enriching but exhausting too!

Chris S says

Very detailed and thorough... and enjoyable. Doesn't shy away from Chatwin's faults either. My only criticism would be that Shakespeare dwells a bit too much on BC's illness towards the end. I'd rather have read more about his life than dwelling on his death. But this is minor. 'Bruce Chatwin' is an great biography and I will definitely re-visit it at some point in the future... but more importantly it's inspired me to go back to BC's own writings again.

Jim Coughenour says

A generous, if unsparing look at the life of nomadic storyteller Bruce Chatwin. Shakespeare catches all the contradictions of the man — his charm, beauty and exquisite brilliance as well as his narcissism, deceit and obsessive mania. All-too-human, dying of AIDS at 48, Chatwin was also surely one of the luckiest writers to have ever written, blessed with an inalienable magic.

Kate says

His erratic behaviour is explained by his feelings about his bisexuality but are they? Today he would be called bipolar: depressions allayed by travel and new starts, easily bored by detail, his interests and plans are “nine-day wonders”, the grandiosity of the scope covered in his book on nomads. James Ivory on Chatwins

ideas for films “it never occurred to me that he wasn’t being entertaining in his letters with preposterous plots and characters”.

Losing himself in rabbit holes, his book about nomadism was not successful.

But with *In Patagonia* he did succeed at transforming the nature of travel writing.

Miss Philby says

Fundamental para entender la obra de Chatwin.

Canadian 135 says

I have mixed views. This is a stunning biography - absolutely thorough, incredibly well researched, and very interesting, particularly the way Shakespeare situates Chatwin's writing within the context of his life. He also talks about the process of Chatwin's writing (which seems to have involved cadging homes from friends all over the world, then overstaying his welcome, being very demanding and self-involved, then flying off somewhere else.) Perhaps you can tell that I ended up absolutely hating Bruce Chatwin as a person. He seemed to have no personal growth, and a peculiar blankness at the centre. Maybe explained by his discomfort with his sexuality. That said, I persisted through the 600 pages, alternately interested (how does his wife put up with all these lovers? How could he advance so quickly at Sotheby's? Did he really not connect with any aborigines before writing *Songlines* - just a bunch of Westerners?) He has lots of famous friends, and travels, for example, with Salman Rushdie to Ayer's Rock in Australia. He is scattered, intellectually and personally. He treats his friends, lovers, and family very poorly, He makes things up. I get a real sense he was larger than life, and had a horrible death. So - kudos to Shakespeare for a truly great biography - but I've never walked away from a bio with less admiration for the subject....

Oceana2602 says

Nicholas Shakespeare's biography of Bruce Chatwin, praised as "one of the most beautifully written, painstakingly researched and cleverly constructed biographies written this decade".

I agree about the pain.

It is incredibly detailed. Too detailed, if you ask me. But that's not why I stopped reading it half way through. Shakespeare, purely by describing, makes me hate Bruce Chatwin. He portrays Chatwin as a man who pretended to be something he wasn't, who lost himself in a made-up reality. He had the ability to draw people into this reality, to fascinate them, but it seems as if it was all a great lie, as if had they seen him for what he was, they wouldn't have been fascinated. I don't know anything about Chatwin, except his books and his photographs. He could very well have been the man Shakespeare describes him as, but I don't care if he was. And I don't want to know. I'd rather not know him at all. That's why I didn't finish the biography, because I feared that if I did, his books would lose their magic for me.

Which, if you think about it, is a great compliment for Shakespeare's abilities as a biography writer. He made me almost hate the man he writes about, that's how much Chatwin becomes alive in this book. Maybe I'll finish it one day, but I doubt it.

Jeanne Mixon says

Bruce Chatwin was born in Sheffield England. He wrote odd stories that were not travel pieces, although that is how they have been marketed. Instead of writing a strict accounting of his travels like Paul Theroux, Chatwin would blend fact and fiction:

Michael Ignatieff Where in your work is the division between fiction and non-fiction?

BC: I don't think there is one.

I started reading this biography because I was trying to read *In Patagonia* and could not figure out what it was. It seemed to ramble all over the place. I typed "Bruce Chatwin" into the Goodreads search because that was part of the name of the collection and turned up this well written, well structured, incredibly well researched biography. I felt that if I learned a little more about Chatwin, maybe I could try to read his work.

Nicholas Shakespeare (what a name!) goes to a great deal of effort to delineate where the books by Chatwin succeed and where they fall short. Chatwin's vision of the world and himself are distorted in certain ways. *In Patagonia*, his first success, is meant to be, as Chatwin says, a tale of wonder and more cubist in its approach. It is not a travelogue. I enjoy reading Theroux because you are with him for every step of the journey -- you see through his eyes, you meet the people he meets, you can smell their feet and inhabit their rooms. Chatwin says that *In Patagonia* was meant to be a tale of wonders starting with the hairy piece of skin he thought was a brontosaurus to his own discovery. The style is "cubist"? Whatever. Each novel is minutely described and explained so now I can try again to read the pieces and see if they make sense to me.

But this book is also a wonderful description of an amazing person. Chatwin worked for Sothebys and the scandals surrounding that place at that time are satisfactorily dished. In every way Chatwin did not fit in. He hated being settled and considered himself like a nomad, but he loved having a home to come back to. He was a self-described bisexual -- a friend said, 70 percent sexually interested in men but 30 percent sexually interested in women. He loved his wife to the bitter end but had numerous male lovers as well. He was also a lover of African and Australian women. But he was universally described as incredibly lonely. He is also both socially uncouth and extremely popular with famous people and common people. He both fit in with writers and had a great deal of difficulty writing. He loved people and tried to find secluded monastic cells to write in. He could not stay in the same place for more than six months at a time.

He was simply a fascinating guy. Just reading this book was entertaining even though I haven't read any of his work. In the end, he died of AIDS. He was involved in the very active gay scene of Mapplethorpe and Edmund White in NYC and at the same time, he was friends with Jackie O. Just an amazing person. It is clear that Nicholas Shakespeare was very fond of him and this is a very loving portrayal although he is also fairly clear eyed about Chatwin's faults.

After reading this book, I am going to give *In Patagonia* another go along with the *Viceroy of Ouidah* and *Songlines*, but I think that my best bet will be *The Black Hill*. The *Black Hill* is the one novel he wrote that was first of all explicitly a novel and not a fact/fiction mishmash but also something he knew intimately about -- life in a small farming community where he spent a great deal of time getting to know everyone. It

sounds like my best bet and it won the Whitbread First Novel of the Year award.

Patrick Cook says

I've been on a bit of Chatwin binge recently. Since all of his work is in some sense autobiographical, and all of it is more or less fiction, obscuring as much as it reveals, it helps to have a book like this to connect the dots.

This is an exhaustively well-researched biography. That is only in part a euphemism for it being very long, although long it undoubtedly is (at over 600 pages, it is quite a bit longer than Chatwin's most famous books — *In Patagonia* and *The Songlines* — combined).

Shakespeare is sympathetic without ever being sentimental or uncritical. A lot of people said the book's unflinching look at its subject made them hate Chatwin. Perhaps it's a matter of expectations, but I didn't end up hating him in the slightest. I went in thinking that he was a mythomaniac self-publicist who sometimes treated people appallingly, most especially in the case of his long-suffering wife. I believe Elizabeth Chatwin is still alive, but when she dies, Shakespeare's biography could provide most of the material for the *advocatus Dei*. She emerges as a woman of astonishing kindness and faithfulness to a husband who was often quite faithless. One gets sometimes indications that she is a more complicated character than that, but in this book she exists largely as a foil to Bruce. That is appropriate, for this is a book about Bruce and only very incidentally about other people he met.

This can lead to asides of spectacularly Chatwinesque exoticism. One such case is when Shakespeare mentions that, in his last days, Bruce was treated by a French AIDS specialist recommended by the Aga Khan's wife, who swore that he had cured her hairdresser. Now, the reader (or at least this reader) will naturally be curious to know more about the Aga Khan's (now ex-)wife, her connection to Bruce, and the case of her hairdresser's mysteriously cured AIDS. But Shakespeare leaves this interest unfulfilled. I'm not sure whether or not this is a deliberate stylistic choice, but is a fitting one: alluding to a very improbable story, which is then never mentioned again is a classic Chatwin trick.

Shakespeare's book confirms Chatwin's flaws, but it also does something remarkable — it manages to convey something of his charm and the fascination he exerted on others throughout his adult life. Chatwin was and remains an easy person to like, even if he was clearly not always easy to know. In the end, Shakespeare's Chatwin strikes me as an appealing, if flawed character. Indeed, he is rather more interesting than Chatwin's own authorial persona, which was deliberately superhuman.

Chatwin was always looking for a solution to the problem of his life, whether that was being an art dealer at Sotheby's, an archaeology student at Edinburgh, a nomad, or a collector. Towards the very end he declared his intention to become Greek Orthodox and indeed to seek ordination in that church, receiving religious instruction from Kallistos Ware (it was typical of Chatwin to go straight to a leading expert even in this). One wonders what would have come of this. In all likelihood, very little, but it is a fascinating insight into the desperation that drove his every action. In the end, Shakespeare portrays Chatwin as a man who could be admired and condemned and — especially by the end — pitied.

Arnold says

An absolute must companion read to any fan of Bruce Chatwin's books most of which are on my shelves. Deeply misunderstood and a manic depressive he seemed to spend an awful lot of his painfully short life trying to find out who he was. All of his books are difficult to read but ultimately enormously uplifting in their perception and writing. Have to admit to being biased as I was at school with the author although he was one year ahead of me

Alan Parker says

Excellent. But finally starting my drift away from Chatwin as my favorite author. What a huge ego!

Sophia Roberts says

Shakespeare has used his substantial material with some skill to weave what feels like an eminently fair portrayal of a man who, gifted with a great deal of charismatic charm, was doubtless destined to burn himself out at an early age.

After read this beguiling biography (that once started I couldn't put down), I was able to appreciate how Chatwin used his considerable energy and sheer zest for living - and 'exploring' - to live out a short, but charmed life. By sheer stint of application Chatwin combined his talents with a formidable discipline to write some remarkable books.

Despite a suspicion that Shakespeare almost hero-worshipped his subject this is a thorough, well researched book that pulls no punches. I didn't like Chatwin by the end of this book, but I did admire him. He wasted nothing.
