

BOOK REVIEW

THE EDUCATION OF A TRAVEL WRITER: SO YOU WANT TO BE A TRAVEL WRITER by

Harold Stephens
(Wolfenden Publishers – 2009)

Reviewed by John Barnes¹

Unlike earlier titles which described travels to all regions of the world, including several set in Asia, *The Education of A Travel Writer* is the most recent one by Harold Stephens focusing on travel. The book discusses how he became a travel writer.

As a modern day Marco Polo and largely self taught writer Stephens is well placed to discuss this topic. Stephens has settled in Bangkok, after nearly fifty years of globe trotting.

In the late 1960's Stephens was based in Bangkok as a travel writer for the Bangkok World newspaper which was the morning version of today's Bangkok Post which in those days was a sister publication that issued as an evening paper.

I recall reading several of Stephens' articles written whilst exploring the dense jungles of Malaysia. Prior to purchasing and reading this book I was reminiscing with my students about Stephens and his adventurous life style and interesting writing. This was made in the context of a need for students to have a dream and to make their dream come true. I will now recommend students to read this book as it provides first-hand lessons on this very topic, whilst at the same time, illustrating the adage that *good things do not often come easily*.

Stephens meticulously researches his topic both in libraries and on site and never writes about a place that he has not visited. Stephens continues to research, write and publish 2-3 magazine articles and books concurrently as he feels that this overcomes any tendency to

boredom. Stephens' frequent publications also mean his work remains quite relevant in our rapidly changing world.

The Education of a Travel Writer is exhaustive, yet compact. The volume comprises 232 pages and is divided into 20 chapters; and an additional list of suggested fiction and non-fiction readings of a very diverse range completes the volume.

The book is written in an easy-to-read, autobiographical style, rather than an academic research style. Source details are woven into the fabric of each chapter, rather than being listed as end of chapter notes or the usual reference list or bibliography at the end of the book

Stephens tells us that he always had a love of travel books even as a young boy and was encouraged further by an elder sister to continue that love of reading and adventure as she sent him travel books on where-ever he was going next.

The book explores a wide variety of topics. Covering Stephens early childhood and his love of adventure books such as James Melville's *Moby Dick* and Jack London's *The Cruise of The Snark* (a journey which he later replicated in a schooner that he built here in Bangkok)

After serving in World War 11 as a marine, Stephens returned to college in the U.S. to obtain a degree in writing. Stephens found that it did not equip him adequately for commercial realities of the world of writing and publishing.

An early youthful marriage failed when Stephens was unable to earn a regular income and spent much of his time locked in a room with no view so as to avoid distractions.

Stephens bummed berths aboard freighters and inter island trading vessels and made his

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way to Tahiti, where he found too many distractions to enable him to focus on his writing and where he was too far away from good libraries.

Each chapter in the book is self contained though there are cleverly woven threads inter connecting them.

Readers are assured of an interesting journey by the title of each chapter a small selection of which are:

Chapter 1 - *Defying the Odds* - all about success in the face of adversity.

Chapter 2 - *The Perfect Place to Write* - in Stephen's word a room with no windows or windows set so high that you cannot look out at distractions.

Chapter 3 - *Getting Started* – how he did it.

Chapter 4 - *Who needs money anyway* - how to live the simple life and be rewarded with travel and meals rather than cash. Interestingly one of my students is currently doing this.

Chapter 7 - *Pleasing the editor* – a most important issue.

Chapter 9 - *Handling the critics* – go with what you feel good about rather than what other people want you to be i.e. be true to yourself.

Chapter 10 - *Plagiarizing and Deception* – very important; especially in the academic context.

Chapter 11 - *The importance of reading* – need a say more.

Chapter 13 - *Traveling with travel writers* – personally very interesting for me as Stephens mentions a man who befriended me when I first came to Bangkok 41 years ago.

Chapter 15 - *Needed a motive* – to coin a phrase motivation comes from within from a love of your subject.

Chapter 18 - *Hazards, pitfalls, dangers.*

Chapter 19 - *Some make it, some give up.*

Chapter 20 - *Never too old, never too young.*