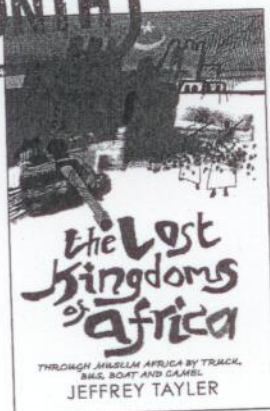


**BOOK OF THE MONTH**



**THE LOST KINGDOMS OF AFRICA**

Jeffrey Tayler

(Little, Brown, £16.99)

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Once a place of exoticism and prosperity, the Sahel region of Africa is now grindingly poor. Comprising the states of Chad, northern Nigeria, Niger, Mali and Senegal, it's an area largely ignored by the West, deemed so unremarkable that even its AIDS statistics are considered nothing to write home about.

Jeffrey Tayler has lived in Morocco, knows his way round a camel, and speaks fluent Arabic and French. But he's also an American, so travelling alone through the Sahel, where tensions between Muslims and Christians are on a knife-edge, might at first appear a touch foolhardy.

Taylor is no stranger to hardship and hazard, but he's more than grateful for his 'good samaritans' – local people who guide him through an obstacle course of moody militia and checkpoint chicanery, asking for little more in return than friendship and a fair hearing; 'I wondered,' he writes, 'would an Arab have been welcomed so warmly in the American heartland?' And yet he can't contain his horror at what he sees, or his disbelief at those who argue for greater understanding, yet staunchly defend the 'traditions' of slavery and female circumcision.

*The Lost Kingdoms of Africa* is a moving and hugely important book, whose author speaks eloquently for the forgotten people of the Sahel. Lord knows, on this evidence, somebody needs to.

Jim Blackburn

**AMBER, FURS & COCKLESHELLS**

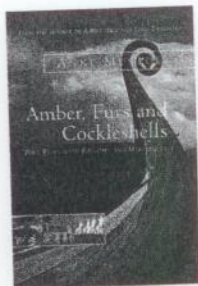
Anne Mustoe

(Virgin Books, £7.99)

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Mustoe sets off on her bike along three classic trails – the Amber Route, the Santa Fe Trail and the Pilgrim Way to Santiago de Compostela. Contemplating the travel writer's take on the chicken-and-egg dilemma: What comes first, *the journey or the book?* Mustoe decides that for her the journey comes first, the book being almost an afterthought. Here is a truly independent traveller, but the writing doesn't always come easily.

By nature, all travel writing must be backward-looking but Mustoe's classical bias sometimes leaves her prose bogged down in the British Library rather than out on the open road. Nonetheless, there are occasions when she plays the hand of history nicely – using it to point out the original 'Mr Lonely Planet' (Pausanias, with his practical guides on Greece for the Romans), for example.



Mustoe delights in a kind of linguistic travel to the place from which words derive. Locating the birthplace of 'croissant' in Vienna, and amber in the Greek word for 'electricity', she enriches the symbolism of her journey. But it is this fascination with the past that is also the book's downfall. In getting down to the very root of things she sometimes struggles to get to their tips – the raw nerve endings of immediate observation are often left buried in history as a result.

Sally Thomson

**BEAUTY TIPS FROM MOOSE JAW**

Will Ferguson

(Canongate, £12.99)

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*Beauty Tips* is the result of Ferguson's three-year odyssey around his homeland: over the sub Arctic, through polar bear migration grounds, aboard seaplanes, tundra-buggies and underground railroads. Packed with history and anecdote, it's also



a witty examination of the myths that shape the Canadian sense of self.

The book is also a memoir, and it's here that it really succeeds. Ferguson's early struggles to forge a sense of identity give a context to the larger themes of the book. Canada has always been overshadowed by America, and its people relegated as flannel-wearing rednecks. Add to that the fact that half the country speaks French, there are a number of indigenous peoples and thousands of immigrants, and you have a country that is 'not so much a country as it is a collection of outposts... all re-invented and re-imagined in a new land.'

Though not always as funny as Bryson, Ferguson displays a wonderfully eccentric wit. In one such moment he compares his homeland to that of his Japanese wife, who comes from 'a land of narrow lanes and ancient hot springs, where cherry blossom petals fall across temple ponds.' Ferguson, on the other hand, hails 'from the land of enormous objects and big-ass highways. A land of fiberglass landmarks and open skies.' A fine coda for this lively and disrespectful book.

Piers Moore Ede

**YADAV: FINDING THE HEART OF INDIA**

Jill Lowe (Summersdale, £7.99)

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The granddaughter of a Tory MP is not supposed to fall in love with an Indian taxi driver. Yet Jill Lowe, aged 52, did just that, and this tale of her subsequent life in rural India is both stark and intensely moving.

Lowe led a conventional middle-class life until her husband left her. With no money, and hating her job as a London tour guide, she set off on a three-month trip to India, mainly because it was cheap. Her driver, Yadav, was instructed to take her to Rajasthan but instead she ends up at his farm in Haryana. Amid cattle and mud huts, Jill realises she has fallen

in love and her eventual happy marriage overcomes all cultural, religious and geographical boundaries.

This book does not give an over-romantic or sentimental view of India. Lowe litters her text with the darker side of her journey, including dirty beds, extreme poverty and Yadav's whisky habit. Balanced with loving descriptions of village festivals and *chai* drinking, this tale becomes much more than a travelogue; just as Lowe is fully immersed in Indian culture, so are we. The book also charts Lowe's healing in the arms of a man who loves her. In a simple way that mirrors her Indian village life, Lowe shows us how love can blossom, even in the most unlikely of places.

Victoria Heath

