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RICHARD POPLAK

Colony of requited dreams

China in Africa and the emergence of a new outsourcing hub

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

EMMA HOOPER
Why we sing

JOHN CRUICKSHANK
Lying liars

PATRICK BROWN
Another Trudeau
in China

ROBIN SEARS
Canada's busiest
campaigner



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editor@reviewcanada.ca

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ads@reviewcanada.ca

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3 On Shakespeare, Superheroes and a Cat-Bird-Human

A conversation
 JEET HEER AND MARGARET ATWOOD

6 Dept. of Misinformation

Daniel J. Levitan's *A Field Guide To Lies* is a
 survival manual for the post-factual era
 JOHN CRUICKSHANK

7 Colony of Requited Dreams

China in Africa, and the making of the next
 outsourcing hub
 RICHARD POPLAK

10 Lost in Syria

Deborah Campbell's haunting account of
 her search to find her fixer, and friend, in
A Disappearance in Damascus
 JULIET O'NEILL

13 The Orient Express

Barbarian Lost, Alexandre Trudeau's whirlwind,
 and sometimes cliché-rich, tour of China
 PATRICK BROWN

14 Last Words

Powerfully intimate, frustrating, illuminating and
 gratifying, Ellen Seligman's editing was a kind
 of alchemy, writes the last author guided by that
 hand
 STEVEN PRICE

16 Poems

Small Boat: i
 KATE BRAID

 Literary Soirée
 PATRICIA YOUNG

 jungle dreaming
 GENEVIEVE LEHR

 Night's Work
 KELLY NORAH DRUKKER

18 What George Did

Zoe Whittall's brave new novel, *The Best Kind
 of People*, explores rape culture as seen from the
 inner circle of the accused
 ADÈLE BARCLAY

19 Lives of the Poet

The subject of much posthumous literary
 snooping, the reclusive poet Elizabeth Bishop is
 revealed in her work, suggests Eleanor Cook
 BARDIA SINAEE

20 Blue Notes

In Tim Falconer's memoir-cum-study, *Bad Singer*,
 an answer to why we sing
 EMMA HOOPER

22 Reasonable Doubts

The gap between religious rights and the rights
 of the rest
 SUANNE KELMAN

25 Adventures of a political gun-for-hire

In *Campaign Confessions*, John Laschinger tells
 tales from his 50-odd campaigns in Canada and
 beyond
 ROBIN V. SEARS

26 A Defence of Dying

A secularist takes comfort in the final outcome
 we spend our lives fighting, in Andrew Stark's
The Consolations of Mortality
 ANDRÉ FORGET

29 Welcome to the Machine

Kate Eichhorn on the surprising political and
 cultural legacy of the photocopier, in *Adjusted
 Margin*
 ALISON LANG

32 Letters and Responses

DARIN BARNEY, CLIVE VERONI

Cover art and pictures throughout the issue by **Michelle Simpson**.

Michelle Simpson is a professional illustrator and graphic designer. She graduated from Sheridan College with a bachelor of arts in illustration. Her clients include Rubicon Publishing, *Swerve / Calgary Herald*, *Modern Dog*, *Focus on the Family*, *Guide Magazine* and *Canadian Running*. For more see michellescribbles.com

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The Orient Express

Alexandre Trudeau's whirlwind, and sometimes cliché-rich, tour of China.

PATRICK BROWN

Barbarian Lost: Travels in the New China

Alexandre Trudeau

HarperCollins

304 pages, hardcover

ISBN 9781443441407

THE STORY BEGINS AS SO MANY STORIES have begun since our ancestors first told them in the flickering firelight of caves: long before his quest unfolds, the young hero learns that he is the Chosen One.

When he was very young, Alexandre Trudeau recalls, his father left on a long voyage to a strange and perilous land on the edge of the world. "When he returned, he was changed. He looked and smelled slightly different. He had a beard and a tan and a strange energy about him. He radiated a kind of power, seemed more aggressive and alive than usual ... this was a new father, not the patient and adoring father of before, but the free spirit who had wandered the world. The lone traveller. The observer of things. The holder of secret knowledge."

Alexandre also learns that shortly before he was born, his mother had also journeyed to this mysterious land in the Orient. His destiny was clear. He, too, would travel to that enigmatic land, and unravel its strange secrets: "We're filled with desires—needs even—to go somewhere because untravelled places are dark holes in the mind that draws us toward them. So China lay out there like a gateway. The shapes of my childhood awareness of it, of my father's book, my womb-bound journey there left more mysteries than understanding."

On the cover of *Barbarian Lost: Travels in the New China* we are promised "an insightful and witty account of the dynamic changes going on right now in China." In the opening chapter, "China Calling," Alexandre Trudeau promises more: after years of focusing on "war zones and uncharted hinterlands," he tells us, he was finally ready for the quest: "China was still distant, wrapped in mystery and doubt, immense, troubled, stiff and austere. Still it called."

In eager anticipation of hair-raising adventures coupled with enlightenment and revelations about "China right now," I plunged into *Barbarian Lost* only to find that the bulk of the book—243 of 289 pages—is an extensive account of a rather dull and uneventful trip the author took for just one month in 2006—ten years ago.

The inclusion of a sidekick has been an ornament to much great literature. As a literary device it worked pretty well for Cervantes, Conan Doyle, Twain and Tolkien. In this case, it is excruciating.

Patrick Brown was a foreign correspondent for the CBC for more than 30 years, often in Asia, including Bangkok, Delhi and, most recently, Beijing. He now splits his time between Canada and China as an independent documentary film maker. Follow him on Twitter @truthfromfacts

Despite what he describes as an early "resolve to devote myself to understanding China," Trudeau's long preparation for this "mission to track glimpses, chosen moments that might reveal the grand affairs that lie beneath" did not include learning Chinese. Unable to speak to anyone, take a taxi or order a meal without help, he engaged a young woman, Vivien, as an interpreter, fixer and guide.

It is not unusual for a journalist to work with an interpreter. As a rule, though, journalists do not publish books, or even articles, which depend so heavily on an epic string of interviews with an employee.

Cast in the role of the author's sidekick on the road, Vivien is the book's main character, aside from Trudeau himself. She is quoted directly, on innumerable subjects, on more than a hundred of the book's pages, and mentioned by name on 50 more. A gifted writer with a true ear for dialogue can work the alchemy of transforming the words on the page into a voice in the reader's head. But, as I plodded wearily through the pages of *Barbarian Lost*, Viv's voice started to emerge and it sounded oddly familiar. It took a while for me to realize where I had heard it before: It was Siri, the digital assistant in my iPhone.

Viv has some interesting, if unexceptional ideas, but the dialogues quoted throughout the book have the ponderous didactic quality of a conversation with my digital companion, or the lines spoken by characters in films explaining things the script writer feels need exposition before the plot moves on.

Viv is clearly bright, articulate and resourceful, but the dialogues reported by Trudeau are peppered with clunky observations that simply do not ring true.

During a discussion about the controversial Three Gorges dam project, Viv remarks, "The project had seemed unavoidable for decades. Then it was finally commenced under Li Peng, the most stodgy and repressive of our recent leaders."

Of a Hong Kong newspaper, she says "The *South China Morning Post* is not, perhaps, what it used to be, but it is still a seminal liberal institution in the Far East."

I have no particular difficulty with the thoughts expressed. My problem is in believing that a human being actually uttered those words in the course of normal conversation.

In between these stilted chats, Trudeau offers set-piece essays that bring a disconcerting change of tone, as the author switches from asking questions about China to giving a China 101 lecture on Daoism, Mao Zedong, the silk industry, the Tang dynasty or the history of Hong Kong. Offering his own interpretation of complex and difficult issues, Trudeau can be dismissive of the work of others. On the Cultural Revolution, for example, he makes the astonishing assertion that "foreign historians mostly characterize it as something sinister, grotesque, infantile and bizarre."

Few writers on China who cannot speak or read

Chinese would dare to suggest they have a better grasp of the Cultural Revolution, or any other topic, than, say, Jonathan Spence or Frank Dikötter, who bring a lifetime of scholarship to bear on the original oral and written sources they use for their books.

On learning that I lived in China for many years, new acquaintances frequently feel the need to share their own experience on business trips or vacations. "Our guide was amazing!" they exclaim so often that it has become a standing joke. "She took us to this village in an area where tourists never go. We were the first white people/foreigners/westerners they had ever seen!"

This compelling desire to have others believe that you have been the first foreigner a Chinese person has ever seen is known as Marco Polo syndrome.

"There were practically no other foreigners to be seen there," Trudeau writes of his trip to China with his father in 1990. And of the 2006 trip—the subject of the book—he writes while describing a neighbourhood of Guangzhou, a major city with a large foreign population, "foreigners might occasionally enter during the day, and perhaps it's not unheard of that a white is seen walking the streets at night."

A common side effect of Marco Polo syndrome is disdain for other foreigners in China, like the men Trudeau spots in a Shanghai bar. "The newly arrived foreigners mix with those long marooned in Shanghai, the club's regulars never numerous but always present. They come searching perhaps for the company of fellow foreigners of any sort. They're men with tanned and grim faces, old boys with airs of repressed desperation, with a need to remember—or forget."

This kind of overblown writing makes much of the book heavy going. Describing a group of guys having a beer as if they were grizzled veterans of the French Foreign Legion in a Saharan foxhole does not make them any more interesting.

A book about "dynamic changes taking place in China right now" would be valuable. A book about how Alexandre Trudeau felt during a short trip a decade ago is less so. It is the print equivalent of a fading selfie.

During a boat ride on the Yangtze, Trudeau became depressed.

The outside world grows distant and the journey stands in for life itself. As we move monotonously forward, the metaphor becomes real and the passage takes on the feeling of philosophical inevitability. Because I am no captain of the ship and play no part in piloting us down the river, because I am but a passive subject of the passage, a slight existential panic sets in: that life's not just fleeting, but empty. That I'm wasting away, steadily proceeding toward death.

Reading this on page 117, contemplating gloomily the 172 more pages still to read, I knew exactly how he felt. LRC