

# Books & Crannies



**B**ruce Chatwin, who died earlier this year at the age of 48, was an intrepid traveler. He was a collector of unusual places, a writer more drawn to the remote, underpopulated regions of the world than to the urbane. However, such was not always the case for this author of two highly unusual travel books, *In Patagonia* and *The Songlines*, as well as three elegant novels, *The Viceroy of Ouidah*, *On the Black Hill* and *Utz*, published just a week before he died.

As a young man, Chatwin had been a rising star at the art-auction firm of Sotheby's, an expert on French Impressionism who was told he had a brilliant career, if only he would play his cards right.

But something about the glamorous life of an art connoisseur did not quite suit Chatwin's nature. As he explains at the beginning of *The Songlines*, his highly acclaimed travelogue about Australia's nomadic aborigines, one morning he woke up blind. The eye specialist who examined him said there was nothing wrong organically, though there was a problem. "You've been looking too closely at pictures," the doctor said. "Why don't you swap them for some long horizons?"

Chatwin decided to go to the Sudan in Africa, where his eyesight immediately improved. He traveled with a band of nomads—tall, lean men whose disdain for village life was unequivocal. One in particular, a joker, became a friend and took him into the desert, where they walked for days, Chatwin in boots, his friend barefoot and singing. Chatwin remembers that while lying under a luminous night sky, the cities of the West began to seem "sad and alien." By contrast, his nomadic friend seemed possessed by a "timeless and irreverent vitality."

And so began Chatwin's lifelong fascination with nomadic peoples, a preoccupation that would lead him to Timbuktu and Cameroon, parts of Chile, Argentina, Pakistan, the Soviet Union, China and finally Central Australia, the setting for *The Songlines*.

Like Chatwin's earlier travel book, *In Patagonia*, *The Songlines* is both idiosyncratic and familiar—familiar in that Chatwin's style is conversational, the intimate voice of one sharing stories with old friends; idiosyncratic in that it is actually several books in one. At the heart of the story is the tale of a long, dusty journey through the Australian bush and the bond that develops between Chatwin and his



traveling companion, an eccentric, big-boned Australian named Arkady.

Arkady, a gentle soul with few possessions save a shelf full of books, is mapping out the sacred sites of the aboriginals, which are being threatened by a proposed railway line. These sites, which exist along something called "the Songlines"—invisible pathways crisscrossing Australia over which the aboriginals believe their ancestors walked, singing the world into existence—are the reason that Chatwin has come to Australia. In Arkady, of course, he finds the ultimate guide and friend.

The story proceeds with a string of short, vivid portraits of the characters Chatwin and Arkady meet as they follow the Songlines: women with names like Mavis and Ruby; an aboriginal painter who outwits his Western dealer; another whose home is a gutted station wagon rolled on its roof. Yet, as Chatwin regales us with tales of weird crimes, superstitions and gossip, developing his plot and characters as if he were writing a conventional novel, he also begins to pepper his text with

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curious, arcane information: thoughts on Konrad Lorenz's controversial book *On Aggression*; a quote from Kierkegaard on the benefits of walking; excerpts from his readings on nomads, the Bible and Moorish proverbs.

In the aborigines he meets, Chatwin finds an awesome intelligence: not only does each man know his ancestral song, he also remembers the precise geological contours of the countryside it describes—land that sometimes stretches for thousands of miles. What, Chatwin wonders, accounts for the intuitive genius of the primitive mind and how does it differ from what Westerners call "intelligence?" Why are sedentary peoples consistently less inventive than those who are migratory? Why are they less satisfied? More aggressive? Or was Pascal correct in attributing all of man's troubles to his inability to sit quietly in a room? Finally, as more and more of these questions accumulate, Chatwin's story becomes an extended inquiry into the nature of human restlessness, a subject that remains for him the central meditation of his life.

If *The Songlines* is not always the most cohesive book, it is not for want of content. Chatwin is a masterful raconteur with an eye for the oddities of human experience as well as a gift for precise, pictorial prose. But above all, he is an original thinker. Even at his most difficult, his questions never fail to intrigue, cajole and inform.

**B**y contrast, *Utz* (Viking, \$16.95) is a near perfect book, gemlike in its economy and polish. A short, enigmatic novel set in Prague during the summer of 1967—a year before Soviet tanks overran Czechoslovakia—*Utz* begins as the story of a compulsive art collector and becomes, after several quiet turns, a curious parable about the nature of freedom and tyranny—in particular, the tyranny of possessions.

Kaspar Utz is an obsessive hoarder. A minor aristocrat with fussy habits and an odd, reclusive nature, *Utz* is the owner of a spectacular collection of Meissen porcelain which, through various adroit maneuvers, he has managed to save from the cataclysms of World War II and Stalinism.

Yet, even as the novel opens *Utz* is beginning to realize he is no longer a free man. Not only has he had to leave his country estate and



move to a tiny, two-room flat in Prague, where his collection — which numbers over 1,000 pieces — is crammed into every available corner, but he is periodically harassed by party officials. They tramp through his apartment to check on the porcelains, extracting promises that all will be given to the state upon his death. For the first time, Utz dreams of making a clean break, of beginning a new life in the West, free of his possessions. When he announces his plans to visit Vichy for a month, the authorities, to his surprise, offer no resistance. He is given the exit papers, but with the proviso that he leave the porcelains behind.

But he cannot, of course. Though Utz manages to get to Vichy, ostensibly to take the waters, he feels adrift as an expatriate, strangely doomed. Compared to the private "Lilliputian" world of his figurines — which he secretly believes are alive — the free world feels like a frightening abyss, his exile far more odious than the terrible, insidious power of the porcelains.

The resolution of Utz's dilemma — whether to remain in the West, where there is physical freedom, or return to Prague, where he is both fed and oppressed by his beloved collection — marks the first in a series of sly, wholly unexpected shifts in the story. It also becomes the device Chatwin uses to dramatize the book's central questions: what constitutes freedom and what is enslavement? What happens when art seems more real than life, possessions more compelling than actual experience?

Chatwin ponders these questions with enormous wisdom and humor, continually setting the tyranny of Utz's obsession against the more absurd and clumsy oppressions of the state. This leads him into an exploration of the subtle psychology of the compulsive collector; the point when the love of art becomes idolatry and the passion to acquire a form of madness. Indeed, as a writer addicted to travel, a collector of places and the stories they hold, Chatwin, who died of a rare bone marrow disease he contracted while in China, is no stranger to compulsion. Yet unlike Kaspar Utz, who reserves his exquisite figurines for his private use, Chatwin constructs his exotic world, then invites us in. — Andrea Barnet

Andrea Barnet is a freelance writer who lives in New York City. She is a frequent contributor to *The New York Times Book Review*.

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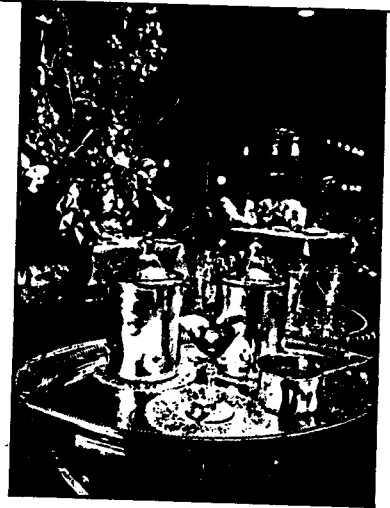
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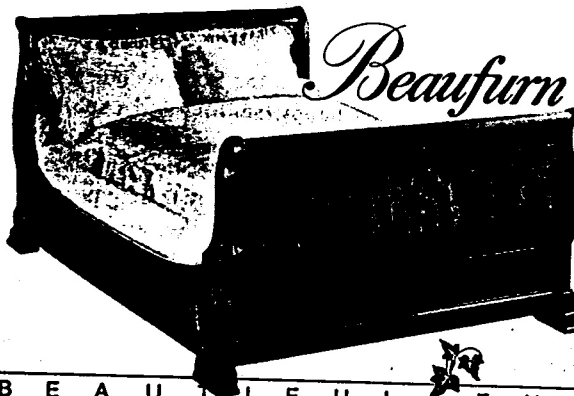


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