

# Books



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# oks take you back to another time in your reading life

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old and the author of dozen travel accounts, s readers, reflected on idary trip and asked ny long-ago itinerary h as me?" And away he he Eurostar, rode the night trains and day e to Mandalay, and the Hayate expresses behis start on the Trans-

### ReadThis



ANDREW ARMITAGE

Siberian Express.

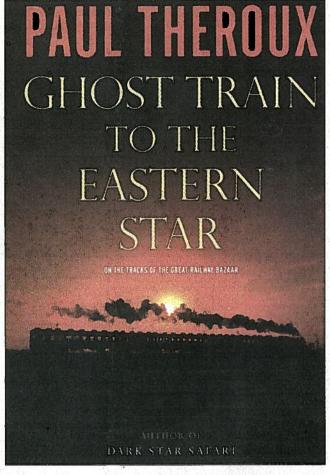
I won't even try to describe what Theroux finds along the way. The world has changed far too much in that third of a century to encapsulate in a short review. Instead, take the long journey yourself and find another, different Theroux. When he embarked on his first trip in 1973, he was a poor, struggling freelance writer whose wife had warned him not to go (she took a lover while he was gone).

Now, all those years later, he is a powerfully reflective writer who can write, "Books are useful. Books will make you thoughtful, and they might even make you happy. They will certainly help you to become more civilized."

Not only will "Ghost Train" give you an international perspective on our various worlds, it is a lesson magnificently written with much to teach and more to learn. Theroux concludes, "The world is deteriorating and shrinking to a ball of bungled desolation. Only the old can really see how badly the world is aging and all that we've lost. We lucky ghosts can go wherever we want. Most people I'd met, in chance encounters, were strangers who helped me on my way . . . the going is still good."

On a late summer day in 1979, camped on an island in Algonquin Park, I opened Robert Pirsig's "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance." After it had been published in 1974, I, like others I had known, had started it twice but "didn't just get it." This time around, I was determined to understand this powerful book, a blend of philosophical arguments and the story of two tortured men, a father and a son named Chris.

Before breaking camp a few days later, sunburned but mentally nourished, I reached the end of the road with Robert Pirsig on his little Honda Superhawk. And then put the book away—but didn't forget it. As the years passed,



I often ran into readers that claimed that "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" had changed their lives.

Among the millions of readers captivated by the book was Mark Richardson. Decades later and currently the editor of the Wheels section of the Toronto Star, Richardson tuned his up 20-year old Suzuki DR600 dirt bike and followed the Pirsigs' route from Minneapolis to San Francisco. The result is "Zen and Now: On the Trail of Robert Pirsig and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" (Knopf, \$29.95).

Robert Pirsig was (and still presumably is) a brilliant man. A writer, philosopher, and a rebel academic with a schizophrenic soul, he was obsessed with the idea of quality. Pirsig believed in taking time to attain peace of mind, and of finding the balance between what he called the Classical world (the scientific) and the Romantic or artistic opposite. A metaphysician who could make my eyes glaze over, he was also a man in love with a machine — the motorcycle.

Richardson's repeat of Pirsig's odyssey was a two-week trip but his book, "Zen and Now", took four years

to write — just as it did for Pirsig. After finishing a 120,000 word manuscript, Pirsig threw it away and started all over, finally producing 200,000 words of sheer brilliance that has been read now by several generations.

And like the legions of "Pirsig Pilgrims" who still follow the writer's original itinerary, Richardson with his original "pink copy" in hand, follows in the tire tracks of his anti-hero. Along the way, he meets many of the people that Pirsig met, sleeps in the same towns and campsites, eats in the same diners and contemplates many of the same issues with which Pirsig wrestled.

Alternating chapters between his own experiences on the road and Pirsig's life, Richardson puts the flesh back on him and his family. Chris, the 11-year old rider on the motorcycle pillion, was murdered at the age of 23 while Ted, his brother, had several serious mental breakdowns. Pirsig himself descended into madness and was given electric shock therapy. After ZMM (as it is now known for short) was published, Pirsig bought a boat, lost a wife and remarried.

Not only is "Zen and Now" a medita-

Zen and Now

On the Trail of

Mark Richardson

Robert Pirsig and the Art of

**Motorcycle Maintenance** 

tion on what is today a classic book, it also revisits its lessons in light of our modern, complex world. And while Pirsig did explore the world of riding and fixing motorcycles, Richardson tops him time and again. Rarely have I read such inspired, magical writing about those two-wheelers that are now making a comeback in our gas-starved age.

Richardson loves his bike that he calls Jackie Blue II. Riding beside a train with a blackbird flying alongside, he writes, "I take my feet off the pegs and skim them along the road, stretching my stiff legs. Holding the handlebars for balance, I lean into the wind, and it's as if the bike is flying. The bird soon goes away and the train soon drops behind, but the feeling stays there as the miles roll on, clickety-clack, reluctant to fade."

"Zen and Now" and "Ghost Train to the Eastern Star" are a pair of books that take you back to another time in your reading life — and complete the circle since then. Who says life does not

Andrew Armitage's Read This appears Fridays.

## blisher expecting '39 Clues' to be the next big thing

media story come a hit

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SOCIATED PRESS

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ning Thief" fame and has an announced first printing of 500,000. Steven Spielberg has already acquired film rights to the series.

Designed for boys and girls ages 8 to 12, each book will have a different writer, including such best-sellers as Gordon Korman and Jude Watson. Backed by a multimillion-dollar marketing campaign, "The 39 Clues" also features game cards a contest with a

ure hunt. The essential outline, including the ending, was set by the publisher. Authors were asked to fill in the details, taking a thread, as Levithan describes it, and turning it into a blanket.

"It's a different kind of challenge," Levithan says. "To use a movie analogy, each director of the 'Harry Potter' films brings their own voice and their own vision to what J.K. Rowling has done. You still feel there's a consisten-

"I love the gaming aspect of 'The 39 Clues," says Jenny Levine, a digital specialist for the library association. "I could also see a lot of libraries forming '39 Clues' clubs the way they've had Pokemon clubs."

Books for all ages often originate with publishers, and countless best-sellers are made through marketing. But a blockbuster, whether "Harry Potter" or Stephenie Mever's "Twilight"

nobody knew it was going to be so big. That's how it works. You need the kids to grab onto a book and tell each other about it," says Beth Puffer, manager of the Bank Street Bookstore, based in New York.

"I can't think of a phenomenon that was presented that way from the start. This is a very unique situation."

Puffer and other booksellers are enthusiastic about "39 Clues," although