

Paris to the Moon, Rowing to Latitude and The Island of Lost Maps

reviewed by [Patrick Henry](#) in the [September 25, 2002](#) issue

Surprise at unanticipated convergences and resonances is one of the delights of reading what you happen to toss into the suitcase hurriedly on the way out the door for a vacation. My daughter gave me Miles Harvey's *The Island of Lost Maps* for Father's Day. I bought *Paris to the Moon* because Adam Gopnik's *New Yorker* essays had convinced me that Gopnik is the best writer of English prose today. And I found *Rowing to Latitude* on the "Discover Great New Writers!" shelf at the local Barnes & Noble, where it became irresistible the moment Jill Fredston catapulted me back to my childhood: "One of my favorite children's stories," she says in her acknowledgments, "is Holling Clancy Holling's Paddle-to-the-Sea." God's plenty is in these three books.

All three authors are adventurers. With his wife and young son Gopnik moved to Paris. Early on they saw, in a shop window, a 19th-century engraving of a train leaving the Right Bank, headed for the moon. This is an apt image for Gopnik's exploration of French culture, cooking, politics, medicine and more, though he disarmingly calls the book "less a tour of any horizon than just a walk around the park."

"There are two kinds of travelers," he says. "There is the kind who goes to see what there is to see and sees it, and the kind who has an image in his head and goes out to accomplish it." The first way, we assume, is the better. But that's our prejudice, not Gopnik's fresh insight: "The first visitor has an easier time, but I think the second visitor sees more. He is constantly comparing what he sees to what he wants, so he sees with his mind, and maybe even with his heart, or tries to."

Gopnik sees so clearly, with such sharp intelligence, and writes so fluidly that he carries you right along, and you come to care deeply about things you'd never have thought would matter to you at all--rivalries between Parisian restaurants, for instance. Gopnik's generalizations persuade because they are grounded in concrete

detail, in anecdote. Musing on how the French have been overtaken and surpassed in various arenas, he concludes, "The Enlightenment took place here, and the Revolution worked out better somewhere else." His observations on language--from which every preacher could learn--are rooted in his invention of a bedtime story for his son, a baseball tale that in its particulars provides Gopnik with marvelous analogies for the craft of writing.

Fredston and her husband, avalanche specialists in Alaska, spend their summers rowing. To date they have covered more than 20,000 miles--she in a scull, he in a kayak--along the coasts of Canada, Alaska, Labrador, Norway, Svalbard and Greenland. She is an evocative writer who observes minutely, has a rich vocabulary for weather, water, clouds, wind, rocks and ice, and is both loving and wry in her appreciation for the people, bears and whales they meet along the way. She extrapolates from her unusual experiences--ten-hour days in a boat, week after week--to make profound observations on life and the world, but she never pontificates. In one of her summary sentences she says, "We have had the opportunity to learn from the misjudgments of others, and we have been imbued with determination to use our time wisely, to cause as little pain as possible to others, to pay attention, to live and love with few regrets." Not exactly congruent with the gospel, I suppose, but very wise, and better than some of what passes for Christianity these days.

In a chapter on Greenland, Fredston notes that on the map, over the ice sheet, is the word "unexplored." Harvey's book is about the multiple meanings of maps, and the obsessions people have had with them over the centuries.

He didn't start out to write so broadly. As a newspaper reporter, he was following a story about map thief Gilbert Bland Jr., who was caught when a young woman doing dissertation research at the Peabody Library in Baltimore got suspicious. From this story of a crime spree, Harvey moves backwards, inwards and forwards, to the way maps were guarded as state secrets in the 16th century, through his own growing fascination with the psychological quirks of map collectors and his recognition that he isn't so different from the collectors, to the way we talk about mapping the mind and mapping the genome. Maps are pictures of what people want and of what they fear at least as much as of what they know. Harvey's book is, in a way, an illustration of a point Fredston makes: "Most of our journeys begin as thin lines we trace with pointed fingers across the surface of a map."

The title of Harvey's book refers to the moment he was ushered into a room where an FBI agent had assembled the dozens of old maps that Bland had stolen. The maps had been recovered when the authorities agreed to a plea bargain that gave Bland a reduced sentence for telling them where he had stashed the maps and from what institutions he had pilfered them (many libraries didn't know he had cut maps out of their books). The table in the room was piled high with "the island of lost maps."

In an exhilarating passage, Harvey writes about how "from the earliest of times islands have had a special place in the human imagination." Atlantis, Avalon, Never Land, Jurassic Park--these and many others appear in his catalogue. But he goes on to say of the island of maps lying before him: "As I approached its shores, they all seemed to be speaking to me at once, telling a million different stories in a thousand different tongues--tales of oceans crossed and shorelines glimpsed, of new worlds explored and old orthodoxies exploded, of empires gained and lost, of wars waged and genocides committed and peoples enslaved, of forests felled and cities built and borders drawn and railways laid and prairies cleared." A lot of this sounds like a description of the Bible.

Reading these three books was for me like a car trip I took a few years ago. For nearly two decades, I have driven I-94 from Collegeville to the Twin Cities several times a month. This time I was accompanied by Donald Jackson, calligrapher to Queen Elizabeth II. Engaged in a multiyear project of writing and illuminating *The Saint John's Bible*, he sees with an acuity that far surpasses mine. I doubt I love God's creation any less than he does, but he is more alert to it. His commentary on the passing scene along the Interstate was like Gopnik on Paris, Fredston on coastlines, Harvey on maps. That trip to Minneapolis, thanks to Jackson's observations, provided for me an experience like Fredston's when she was teaching her stepdaughter the finer points of rowing: "I began to learn what I knew."