

[From: Environment Tobago Newsletter (Scarborough) 6(2)13, 2011]

GETTING AWAY FROM IT ALL

Review of:

Jim Conrad 1991. *On the Road to Tetlama*. New York: Walker 196 pp.
[Twenty-fourth in a series on "naturalist-in" books.]

In 1989, at the age of 42, the author was dissatisfied with his society and his life, in need of a change. He got on a southbound bus in his native Kentucky and after two days he got off in a very different place, a village in San Luis Potosí. Here he lived and wandered for several months in an unaccustomed land, leaving his old life behind, like Gauguin in Tahiti. Jim Conrad wanted to "descend and simply immerse myself inside that shimmering, oversimmered, too-spicy, and maybe ... slightly disreputable stew of central Mexico".

The village of Colonia el Sacrificio was on an east-facing slope above the Pan-American Highway. It was a rustic place of mostly very poor small farmers and petty traders living in "clamorous anarchy". Further inland from the highway the people spoke mostly Náhuatl and little Spanish. In this context, there were many folk beliefs and parts of ancient religion, with an overlay of Christianity. Conrad was far from enchanted by the place, and almost every day he escaped by walking the road to the nearest town, Tetlama, eight kilometers away.

The book comprises 55 chapters, none longer than eight pages, many of just two or three pages in vignette mode. This is quite a different naturalist-in book from those treated earlier. Although Conrad was and is a naturalist -- he includes species-lists of birds of various habitats -- his attention in this book is mainly to the people. There is much about human activities and daily rhythms. The treatment of plants and especially animals is oddly casual, with little mention of scientific names, almost in the manner of an ordinary visitor.

As an example, in wayside weeds "I notice a sound a little like that of a flowering plum tree full of tiny bees, except that this sound is quieter, wetter, and somehow more coldly persistent." Army ants. They flush a scorpion from a crevice. It breaks for freedom, only to run across a dense column of ants, and that is the end of the scorpion. When he related this to the villagers later, they exclaimed "Ay, those are the ants that clean our house for us!" When the army ants raided into a house, the people simply vacated it for an hour or two until they were gone, taking all the cockroaches and other vermin with them.

Sometimes Conrad gives us a surprise ending, as in "Porch Woman". Conrad was single and all by himself, very much interested in female companionship. One day he came upon a real beauty sitting on a porch and stopped to talk. There is eye contact, conversation and apparently major chemistry between them. And then, suddenly, he realizes what it is all about. The lovely lady is a prostitute, and that greasy little man standing watchfully across the street is her pimp.

Scattered throughout the book are 27 wonderfully artful three-tone illustrations by Kelli Glancey.

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