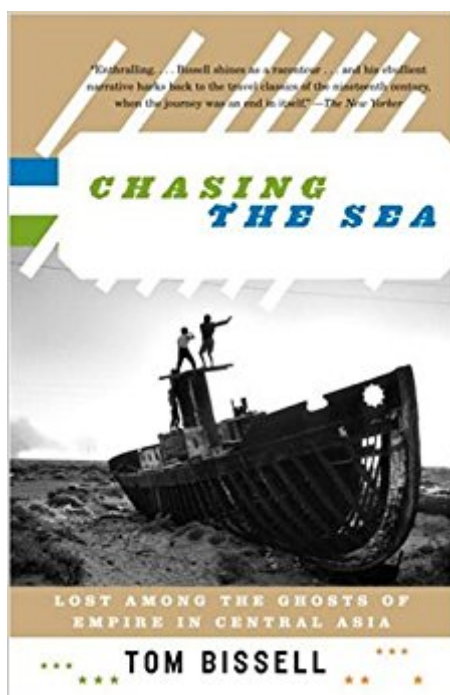


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Chasing The Sea: Lost Among The Ghosts Of Empire In Central Asia



Synopsis

In 1996, Tom Bissell went to Uzbekistan as a naïve Peace Corps volunteer. Though he lasted only a few months before illness and personal crisis forced him home, Bissell found himself entranced by this remote land. Five years later he returned to explore the shrinking Aral Sea, destroyed by Soviet irrigation policies. Joining up with an exuberant translator named Rustam, Bissell slips more than once through the clutches of the Uzbek police as he makes his often wild way to the devastated sea. In *Chasing the Sea*, Bissell combines the story of his travels with a beguiling chronicle of Uzbekistan's striking culture and long history of violent subjugation by despots from Jenghiz Khan to Joseph Stalin. Alternately amusing and sobering, this is a gripping portrait of a fascinating place, and the debut of a singularly gifted young writer.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Bissell's first journey to the former Soviet republic of Uzbekistan as a Peace Corps volunteer in 1996 was cut short by heartache and illness. Memories of that failure dog his return in 2001 to write about the rapidly deteriorating ecosystem of the Aral Sea. Once the size of Lake Michigan, the sea has already lost most of its water and will likely disappear by the middle of the next decade, leaving thousands of square kilometers of salty desert. Journalist Bissell examines that story, but also ponders broader questions about Uzbekistan and its people. Hooking up with Rustam, a young interpreter, he sets off on a road trip across the country. The format of the ensuing travelogue-cum-history lesson resembles that of itinerant political commentators like Robert Kaplan, right down to the repulsively exotic cuisine (e.g., boiled lamb's head) and digressory mini-essays

on the history of European imperialism in Central Asia. But Bissell rails against the way other authors "pinion entire cultures based upon how [their] morning has gone," aiming for a more accurate and balanced portrayal. An ongoing dialogue with Rustam over the region's history and culture, and the extent to which both were shaped by the Soviets, adds a personal dimension. The account doesn't flinch from portraying the region's corruption-crooked cops appear regularly on the scene-but despite the frequent bouts of despair, for both the region and himself, Bissell refuses to give up on the Uzbeks entirely. The humor and poignancy in this blend of memoir, reportage and history mark the author as a front-runner in the next generation of travel writers. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

The title of this erratic but enthralling travelogue refers to the attempts of fishermen in Central Asia to pursue the receding waters of the Aral Sea, which has shrunk, since 1960, to less than a third of its original size. In 2001, the author, a self-described "adventure journalist" and failed Peace Corps volunteer, arrives in Uzbekistan to investigate this ecological disaster. Bissell doesn't so much chase the sea as meander toward it, and nine-tenths of the book concerns his detours to Samarkand, Bukhara, and the guerrilla-infested mountains of Kyrgyzstan and his run-ins with suspicious local police forces. Bissell shines as a raconteur, if not as an analyst, and his ebullient narrative harks back to the travel classics of the nineteenth century, when the journey was an end in itself. Copyright © 2005 The New Yorker --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I have been a fan of Tom Bissell's writing ever since I came across it in Harper's Magazine. I specifically remember reading a short story set in Central Asia that eventually would be included in his entertaining short story collection *God Lives in St. Petersburg and Other Stories*. There were other nonfiction pieces as well, starting with the magazine version of what would become a book about his father, who fought in the Vietnam war, and later their trip back to Vietnam: *The Father of All Things*. And also, the magazine article about the natural disaster that is the Aral Sea that begat this book, *Chasing The Sea: Lost Among The Ghost Of Empire In Central Asia* (2003). I doubted that I would ever read this book, thinking it would be unlikely that I would develop an interest in Central Asia. Well, since I am returning there for a second visit (the first was five years ago in 2010), to Kyrgyzstan again for a volunteer conference in English language education. I figured that this book would be good background reading for a return visit, and it was. In fact there were some sections that took place in Kyrgyzstan and all countries in the region must be referred to when

talking about the history of the region. This book is one of those books that is hard to describe and pin down, something the Marketing department loved I am sure. It is a personal memoir of Bissell's connection to the region, which began as a largely unsuccessful stint with the Peace Corps where he lost it and quit nine months into stay. It is also a sort of travelogue that allows him to ruminate on the upheavals that have rocked the region and Uzbekistan throughout the centuries. It is also an act of reportage on Uzbekistan as it was when he was traveling there in the early 2000s. Despite these threads, there is yet another, it is also largely about his earthy, idiosyncratic translator Rustam, who guides him throughout the novel dropping bon mots of wisdom along the way in his American slang-laced vocabulary. Bissell eventually makes his way to the Aral Sea where his reportage on the human devastation of this lake ended up as a Harper's Magazine article and the impetus for this book. That being said this section of the book is a scant 50 pages: it's the journey, not the destination that matters. I think it is, here, in this book, that Bissell takes Robert D. Kaplan to task for uninformed reporting in the region and scare-mongering. (I know that I read another article somewhere in which Bissell questions many of Kaplan's conclusion about this region and questions observation made while reporting). I used to be something of a Kaplan devotee, and still thinks he can bring a lot of insight into the regions he visits. But the scare-mongering has been his calling card which has become stale and I lost a lot of respect for him infatuation with Marines when he was embedded with them for his books Imperial Grunts, which is less than objective. However there are many memorable descriptions of people, cities, the surroundings, poor driving, bad food, and excellent descriptions and similes that were clever and engaging.

Ambivalence is a part of modern life. We can't escape it in the complex modern world. Those who want to live without ambivalence may wind up in some kind of fundamentalist movement that promotes the "only truth". Me, I'm ambivalent about a lot of things. However, sometimes you run across a Mt. Everest of ambivalence, the epitome of having conflicting feelings about something, the man who celebrates Yom Kippur every single day.....God forgive my sins, I am a rotten person. God, save me because I'm not so bad after all. CHASING THE SEA evokes these feelings in me. It's a damn good book in a way, but why do we need to follow the gnashing of the teeth, the midnight soul cringings of one Tom Bissell ? This is a guy who went to Uzbekistan in the Peace Corps, copped out for his own reasons, but couldn't live with them, went back, still didn't much like the place, and wrote a book on his experiences which would definitely get him banned permanently not to mention plunging his Uzbek acquaintances into political difficulties (which could prove fatal in that unlucky land). He undertook to bring money to the wife of an exile---he failed to do so. He finds

much of Uzbek life unpleasant; the persistence of Soviet influence, the secret police, the corruption, the violence, the garbage, the lack of compassion for others, the food, the ugly architecture. He likes comfort, but he doesn't much like the 'Americanization' that occurs when the comfort exists. He didn't like most of the Westerners he met, with a few exceptions. What did he like ? Ah, this is where it gets messy. He liked the fact that he went back and wrote about it, though it seems to me he only stayed five weeks. His trip redeemed himself in his own eyes, but he managed to write a grassroots report from Uzbekistan nonetheless. His stated aim was to write about the ecological disaster of the Aral Sea. The book has 353 pages, but he only begins to write about it on page 302. Ambivalence yet again---should I really write what I came to write, or shall I not ? Did I really come to do that, or is it only an excuse to pursue my inner demons? He does write. He does it well. The ending is excellent, perhaps the best part of the book, with a more-than-decent ecological message for everyone. At one point, Bissell talks to a young Karakalpak man who had been to England. This man remarked that his experience changed everything. "I saw a situation, my own country, that I thought I knew very well, from another point of view. It was like looking into a bottle when you have spent your life seeing it only from the side." Bissell comments that he then lied and said he knew exactly what the man meant. He lied because he did not like travel, and he admits that he does not see things from another point of view. This is why I have to confess to some ambivalence of my own. For me, Bissell's overarching ambivalence---of going to a place you don't like, to write about things that turn you off, and having experiences that you'd rather not have, missing your comforts, not empathizing with most people---and still doing it---is the downside of this book. An interesting picture of Uzbekistan in modern times, a detailed portrait of a country still finding its way in the community of nations, a country much under the thumb of a dictator--this is the positive side of CHASING THE SEA. So, is it a good book ? You be the judge. I've just set up what I think are the contradictions here. I'm ambivalent.

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