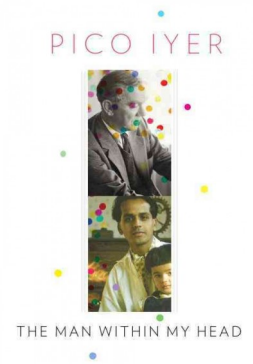
The Man Within My Head



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The spirit of Graham Greene whispers through these pages. Pico Iyer is my favorite contemporary travel writer. The Man Within My Head differs from most of his books because he delves more into his own past than usual in this volume, detailing many connections he sees between his own life and that of Greene: they lived near each other in Oxford but never met, and each suffered a major house fire. They also traveled to many of the same places including Viet Nam.

Especially involving are the sections about Pico's childhood. He lived first in Britain, his father having come to England from India as a Rhodes Scholar. He was an only child and some of his earliest memories are stacking magazines with articles by his father. The little Pico loved to arrange them and stare at his Dad's pictures. When he was in grade school both of his famous parents were invited to California to be part of a think tank promoting ways to end violence. Pico tried to be an American student, to wait in the hills for the school bus with his plastic lunchbox, but he soon realized that education in the states did not challenge him. He asked his parents to send him back to England to attend boarding school.

Soon he became one of the "last name" boys. They addressed each other only by surnames or nicknames derived from them. Traveling back and forth to the states three times a year made Pico extremely comfortable with both the rewards and hassles of living in more than one place.

In this book, he records travel to Mexico, Cuba, Africa, and many other places. Sometimes he's the only person of Indian ancestry in a village. Whenever he meets another single immigrant from the subcontinent, he wonders what quirk of migration caused the person to land in such a remote place.

In Ethiopia he comes to view the Christians celebrating the Orthodox Christmas in January. They arrive, all dressed in white, after three day walks from small villages. In their eyes he sees spiritual transformations. On this trip, a speeding van crashes, and they spend their day being Good Samaritans and driving the accident victims to a clinic deep in the outback.

Cuba is where he meets and befriends Carlos, a crafty, intelligent survivor who more than anything wants to emigrate from his country. Iyer remarks that he's met Carlos's type all over the world, but he is still fascinated by people like him. How cleverly they work the system to get what they want. Carlos uses an earlier imprisonment and stubborn persistence to get a visa to the States, but then is shocked by how different life is here from what he'd expected. He ends up working as a hotel manager in Florida--a place he swore he would never live because it was too close to Cuba.

Greene once proposed naming his autobiography "101 Airports." Iyer certainly has visited more. The earlier novelist wrote an autobiography entitled *Ways of Escape*. I think both of these gifted writers were drawn to travel because of its solitary aspects. At times they railed against the loneliness of it, but other times each felt sheltered in the cocoon of being a foreigner in a new land, never quite fitting in but always enjoying the novelty of new people and fresh experiences.

To try some vintage Pico Iyer, see Video Night in Kathmandu. If this book piques your interest in Graham Greene's travel writing, his book about a remote trip to Liberia beyond the reach of civilization, Journey Without Maps, is an excellent starting point.

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Posted by Dory L. on Apr 19, 2012

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