



What Am I Doing Here

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When Bruce Chatwin died in January, 1989, at the age of forty-eight, he had published five books, each quite different from the others. He loved books--his tour de force *THE SONGLINES* was a prime example--that blurred traditional boundaries between genres. He wrote novels, but he was not a "novelist." He wrote about his perpetual travels, but he could not be pigeon-holed as a "travel-writer." It is fitting, then, that *WHAT AM I DOING HERE* (no question mark) should cap his career, for it is a perfect miscellany of a book, with scraps of fiction, reportage, and autobiography, reviews and polished essays, ranging across the globe and covering all manner of subjects.

Some of the pieces in this ragbag are flimsy, including most of those designated as stories. Many of the pieces are stylish accounts of exotic people and places--an aging dressmaker in Paris; a Russian architect, a survivor of the flourishing avant-garde of the 1930's; the filmmaker Werner Herzog, on location in Ghana, adapting Chatwin's book *THE VICEROY OF OUIDAH* for the screen. These are standard-issue Chatwin. Then there are the gems. "Rock's World" centers on the botanist Joseph Rock, who became a scholar of the Nakhi people in remote and mountainous Yunan, China. "Donald Evans" tells of the life and work of an American painter, born in 1945, who emigrated to Holland in 1972; he died in a fire in Amsterdam in 1975. In his short life Evans created a unique body of work: He painted postage stamps, "issued" by countries of his own invention. "Ernst Junger: An Aesthete at War" draws on the World War II Paris diaries of the writer Junger, who served in the German army in both world wars.

All three of these pieces deal with individuals of whom it can be said that they invented themselves. Rock was the son of an Austrian manservant, Evans of a real-estate appraiser, Junger of a pharmacist. In each case Chatwin notes his subject's dissatisfaction with conventional life. Given these examples, and Chatwin's own seductive rambles, a few readers at least may be tempted to cast the book aside and head for parts unknown.

Sources for Further Study

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