

'Freedom is only the insistence of a soul to be left in peace to enjoy the sunrise'

Julian Sayerer's latest book sees revelations and revolutions in Israel and Palestine, says Michael Kerr

At the 2017 Edinburgh Festival, Julian Sayerer told an Israeli writer that travelling by bike allowed you to cut through to something deeper in places, to tell the truth about them. In that case, she said, he should go to Israel and Palestine. The result is *Fifty Miles Wide*, in which he weaves from the ancient hills of Galilee, along the walled-in Gaza Strip and down to the Bedouin villages of the Naqab desert. He talks to Palestinian cyclists and hip-hop artists; to Israeli soldiers training for war and to a lawyer who took a leading role in peace talks. His book took courage on the road and is adventurous on the page. It conveys powerfully what life is like for people on both sides of "the world's most entrenched impasse". At the same time, it's full of free spirits and the joys of freewheeling. In the extract below, Sayerer heads for the first time into the hills of Palestine.

'SENTENCES FORM AS THE WHEELS TURN...'

Julian Sayerer finds philosophy in the hills of Palestine

The goats watch me watching them. Those on the edge of the flock look fearfully at me, this possible predator, standing beside another possible predator, less familiar and with two wheels. I see eyes, shining black as jet, set on each side of the head so that a goat can see in panorama and detect threats approaching as it grazes. And I wonder if the goats detect that my eyes are in the very front of my head, targeted and precise in their vision, inadvertently revealing my distant history as a carnivore, a hunter who once had to track his prey and strike. One intrepid goat moves a little towards me, pushes out of the herd of shining eyes. The animal waits, watching me, then starts and runs on thin legs back to that stream of goats flowing over the road and away. I pick up my bicycle, return to its wheels; gradually momentum comes to my pedalling, and I begin to shift. The land at last gives me its rhythm, puts patience in my head and cadence in my legs, offering the small magic of the world that is all it ever takes to remind you: take your time, enjoy this. I look down between my forearms and handlebars and at my turning feet. Here is the desk where I get most of my work done. Here is where I feel thoughts most keenly and so here is where I write, where sentences form as regularly as the wheels turn. In the deep blue sky above, as I round a high hillside, there is a silver flash and tethered to that sky the plump body of a blimp comes into view. Floating there, above a small military building, it gathers surveillance images of the goats and the shepherds going about their lives. Closer round the bend comes the throb of engines and I see soldiers



GETTY IMAGES; ALAMY

packed into a sand-coloured jeep, wearing shades, the beat of the V8 engine leaping from under them as the boys have a whale of a time. For a split-second I see them before the jeep passes by, each smiling face like a boy scout with hardware, kids sent to earn that "battle-tested" badge for which Israeli military products – having already been tested on Palestinians – command a price premium. There were times, riding through the West Bank, when I would consider how the Arabs of Palestine, for all that they had it bad, at least were lucky in that they didn't have to worry about being invaded by the United States. And then I'd pass a military jeep with its smiling teenage soldiers in their sunglasses, and I'd realise that they perhaps felt they already had been. As I ride, a frustration weighs me down, pulls me backwards, for often it feels like the occupation is designed in such a way that it will kill all hope. With the guns in the jeep, the military eyeball lurking above the olive trees and watching everything, the totalitarian presence leaves me, more than once, asking what use there is in even writing any of it. And then I pedal forward, that motion by definition optimistic, and again I realise that there is nothing for it but to keep on trying. Left I bank, down into the next turn, around the terraced hillside and into warm sunshine. And I see the chain turn over again, reminding me quietly that I know no other way than this. Up and over the crests of hills I rise on the air currents and then blow back down, carefree for a while, and every child

Last word
'Of all possible subjects, travel is the most difficult for an artist, as it is the easiest for a journalist'

WH Auden in *The Dyer's Hand*, 1962

WHAT GOES AROUND
Julian Sayerer, below, encountered goats on his travels in the Middle East



shouts "hello!" and each old man calls out "welcome!". Sweat runs in my eyes, vision blurring, sun and mist pour down over a countryside where recent rains evaporate towards the sky. Far into the distance, I see the land like a milky white sea, the backs of many hills rising at the surface just barely, as if whales are lifting out above and then slouching back beneath the waves. That was a sight to behold, that late afternoon, where one after another and endlessly repeated, I saw for the first time the magic of those hills of Palestine. Immersed in them, I rode upon their rising and falling heartbeat, until it was not a landscape that I rode through but a cardiogram, where up and down my emotions they sank and soared. That afternoon, I think I understood how it could be that those Palestinians I met, none of whom had ever lived in their own independent country, could still feel with such strength the freedom that was in their spirit. Because to sense freedom is like seeing a person you love out of the corner of your eye and for only a moment in a crowded room. You still recognise them. Riding through and along the hillsides, I passed a babbling spring near the village of Nabi Saleh. I passed an open window to a kitchen that let out the smell of sautéing onions, evoking impossibly strongly the sense of home. In another small town came the sound of notes practised on a recorder or flute in a room above, dropping down to the street below. Such things were evidence – no matter

NEWS FROM THE WORLD OF TRAVEL WRITING

◆ Jini Reddy, a London journalist with multicultural roots, has always felt herself an outsider. She has longed, too, to enjoy the "spiritual bond" with the land that indigenous people she has met on her travels seem to have. In *Wanderland* (Bloomsbury), she explores Britain in search of "the wild unseen". Reddy is a guest on the latest episode of *The Stubbish Light of Things*, a new podcast from the novelist and nature writer Melissa Harrison (tinyurl.com/y88bnyhp).

◆ The £10,000 Ondaatje Prize of the Royal Society of Literature, for a work that best evokes "the spirit of a place" (tinyurl.com/yczyur8x), was awarded this week to Roger Robinson for his poetry collection *A Portable Paradise* (Peepal Tree Press), which moves between Trinidad and London and takes in the Grenfell Tower fire and the Windrush generation.

◆ Where does Suffolk heathland meet Arizona desert, pictured below? In a moving essay by Francisco Cantú, a former US border patrol officer (and author of *The Line Becomes a River*), for the latest *Virginia Quarterly Review* (tinyurl.com/y99pkaf5).

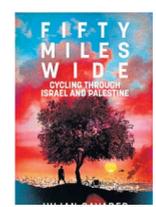
◆ From *The Daily Telegraph* archive: Paul Mansfield follows the trail of the bluesman Robert Johnson, pictured above, through the Mississippi Delta (tinyurl.com/yb25xbhf).



the official status that an occupying force claims for itself – that somewhere in this world there is a great beauty, and that a part of it belongs to us all. That is how freedom forms, I realised it there in Palestine, and pure as my wheels turning under me, the idea only grew in me as I rode. It was all part of the same immutable law. Anyone who ever saw such sunlight at an afternoon's end, the long rays of light refracting in red earth to illuminate the gently burning sky, will know innately and forever what freedom is because, at root, freedom is only the insistence of a soul to be left in peace to enjoy the sunset. Hours up and hours down I laboured, coming slowly to realise that there is no holy site in Jerusalem or anywhere else that could hold a candle to those hills of Palestine, for they were the most precious of all sights. Among them that afternoon, eventually I found a moment of peace, my legs turning regular circles that

accelerated even as the landscape slowed and, finally, speed returned to my wheels as I shot fast out of the frame and into the next.

© Julian Sayerer 2020. Extracted from *Fifty Miles Wide: Cycling Through Israel and Palestine* (Arcadia Books, £9.99). Julian Sayerer wrote his first book, *Life Cycles*, after breaking the 18,000-mile world record for a circumnavigation by bike. He won the Stanford Dolman Travel Book of the Year award for *Interstate* and its depiction of a less-seen United States. His most recent journeys and writing have been prompted by the refugee and financial crises in the eastern Mediterranean region.



PASSAGES TO INDIA

To city and country, out on the river, and under the rain

MAXIMUM CITY
Suketu Mehta (Headline Review)
Missing that metropolitan bustle? Open Mehta's plump

and populous debut on Bombay (Mumbai) and you'll feel it. He'll initiate you into "the choreography of commuting", in which, however crowded the train, people are always ready to "adjust", and introduce you to many of the dreamers and schemers who come to this city in the hope of making it:

shoeshiners and perfume sellers; gangsters and cops; a hitman who kills for peanuts; and a diamond merchant who renounces his millions in the hope of salvation.

ON A SHOESTRING TO COORG
Dervla Murphy (Eland)
Dervla Murphy is renowned not

only for her frugality on the road but for her insistence on hitting it alone. In 1973, though, she took her five-year-old

daughter Rachel to Bombay, intending to wander with her to the far south. They fell for the province of Coorg, and stayed for two months. Murphy's diary celebrates their good luck in happening upon a place where she feels "miraculously restored to the Garden of Eden, to the

world as it was before Eve ate the apple of technology".

EMPIRES OF THE INDUS
Alice Albinia (John Murray)
The Indus rises in Tibet and flows west across India and south through Pakistan. It's worshipped by peasants and honoured by poets, but it's a

threatened river, too, diminished by dams that have transformed the lives of humans and non-humans alike. Albinia followed it



MUMBAI BLOOMS
A flower seller is the pick of the bunch

upstream on the ground and back in time in the library for this magnificent debut book, which won the 2009 Dolman prize.

CHASING THE MONSOON
Alexander Frater (Picador)
Most travel writers are intent on escaping the rain. Alexander

Frater, in 1987, went looking for it, keeping company with the spring monsoon all the way across India. The result is an exuberant

rollercoaster of a book, embracing drought-stricken desperation at one moment and joyous celebration the next. Frater died in January, just short of his 83rd birthday. Read this and you'll understand why for three years in a row – from 1990 – he was named travel writer of the year in the British Press Awards.

