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Book Review of *The Places In Between* by Rory Stewart

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THE PLACES IN BETWEEN

by Rory Stewart (Harcourt, 2006)

A Book Review by Melanie Reese Senn

I'm the annoying relative who always gives books for Christmas. I'm also tactless enough to hunt down the recipients, sometime during the following months, and ask whether they enjoyed their books. For Christmas 2006, a few lucky individuals got *The Places In Between*, Scottish writer Rory Stewart's account of his travels through Afghanistan. The *New York Times* had named it one of the 10 best nonfiction books of that year.

A few months after Christmas when I asked my father-in-law how he liked it, he rubbed his chin for a moment, apparently trying to remember what I was talking about, and then said with feigned enthusiasm, "Oh yeah! I read the first part of that. *Interesting*." Then he asked, "More wine?" and pouring me some, stealthily changed the subject. Similar responses came from the others. Maybe it wasn't such a good book? Since I hadn't read it yet, I liberated my father-in-law's unloved copy from his bookshelf and took it home.

I finally got around to the book in September, a few weeks after having my second baby (one thing I love about nursing is how much time it gives me to read). *The Places In Between* was composed with conveniently short chapters, about 5-7 pages each—so manageable. Each morning, Charlie Roy and I cozied up with our respective beverages and Stewart's story. We ate it up.

In early 2001, Stewart had planned to travel across Afghanistan, but the Taliban wouldn't let him in. Then came September 11 and the United States invaded. The Taliban fell and Stewart was finally able to execute his trip. He planned to travel across Afghanistan from Herat to Kabul, but he wouldn't be soaring through mountain ranges in a Blackhawk, or churning up desert sand in his Hummer; he'd be walking the whole way through the central mountains of Afghanistan. Walking. In winter.

Rory Stewart likes to walk across countries. He tells us that before embarking on his Afghan journey, he'd just finished walking for 16 months across Iran, Pakistan, India and Nepal, about 25 miles a day. I loved him already, at page xii.

But as I read, it dawned on me why my gift wasn't being read, despite my having given it to good readers. While the book gives us a fascinating look at Afghan villages and the incredible landscape in between them, it's not mind-blowing or shocking or even really all that *exciting*. It doesn't have the style or savviness of New Journalism, which, while I'm a fan, can read like nonfiction dressed up as fiction. Stewart simply walks and tells us what he sees along the way; he even provides simple sketches of the characters he meets. But the prose isn't lofty or boastful. And unlike many stories of journeys, Stewart doesn't make the book only about *himself*. We're not regaled with Stewart's past or love life; he doesn't tell us how he *feels* about *everything*. He observes and reports, and even when he's cold and wet, even when he's losing too much weight from dysentery and lack of food, even when he's so exhausted that he's not sure he can go on, he doesn't seek pity. He simply tells us what's happening:

Nine times during the night I had to clamber over Akbar, who was sleeping by the door. I groped my way down the unlit stairs and past the sheep pen, opened the heavy wooden doors, and stumbled into the continuing snowstorm....My dysentery was so bad I twice soiled my trousers before I could get to the door. I was losing a lot of fluid and none of the antibiotics or antispasmodics I was taking seemed to be curing me....I wondered if this would be the way I died. (197)

I find the pathos in his book even more effective for its subtlety. And though Stewart might be a quiet, keen observer, he's not passive by any means. In fact, some of the most interesting moments happen when he has to defend himself; at one point he yells at a man who is holding a gun and walks away, wondering if he'll be shot. Much of the tension in this book comes from his interactions with the men he meets (unfortunately, Stewart doesn't gain access to women, and their absence is felt) and the fact that he must rely on their hospitality and mercy.

Since he is not self-aggrandizing, he doesn't make himself the hero. But the book ends up having an unlikely hero: Babur.

For about the last two-thirds of the book, Stewart is accompanied by a large old dog, "the size of a small pony." Now Stewart must find shelter and food, not only for himself but for Babur, and must keep the dog—and himself—going even when they are both cold and hungry. The relationship that results makes *The Places In Between* endearing and unforgettable. It becomes a very moving dog story: *Travels with Charley*, Afghan style.

Senn: Book Review of *The Places In Between* by Rory Stewart

This would be a good book to read about Afghanistan even if the United States weren't so involved there but since we are, it's a crucial book—required reading for all. Not because it explains the Taliban or our military presence there. It doesn't, not really. Countless articles and books and even Hollywood films do that. No, we should read it to get a sense of Afghanistan's interior, of its villages, of its culture, of its incredibly beautiful landscapes—all from Rory Stewart's unique perspective. We should read it because a Brit walked across a country for weeks on end during a time of war and lived to tell the tale, simply and brilliantly. 