



# ROAD SCHOLAR

James Jeffrey talks travels and tribulations with renowned British writer Colin Thubron



**Time traveller:** Colin Thubron

**I**N his wanderings, Colin Thubron has been stalked by the KGB, quarantined for SARS, shadowed by war and surrounded by ghosts; he's even tackled Brezhnev-era Russia in a Morris Marina, universally hailed as one of the worst cars invented. But the novelist and travel writer recently declared one of Britain's 50 greatest post-war writers by *The Times*, insists he isn't intentionally making things difficult for himself.

"I've always rather despised those travel books that make difficulty part of the trip, like pushing a peanut across Borneo," he says with a laugh. For Thubron, who splits his time between London and his girlfriend's place in Philadelphia when he's not on the road, the difficulties arise because he travels in a way that is most likely to bring him into contact with the locals.

"It does have a journalistic element. You feel in a way as if you have two of you going: there's the one who's travelling, and there's the one who's going to write about it sitting on his shoulder. So you do things you'd never imagine doing if you were travelling just for pleasure."

But Thubron does sometimes draw the line. During the odyssey that became his latest book, *Shadow of the Silk Road*, he temporarily put his traversal of northern Afghanistan on hold when war erupted.

"I would very likely have been kidnapped or shot or something. It's all about proportion, what you're likely to get out of it, and how much danger you are putting yourself through," he says.

There have been moments when he has questioned his own sanity or momentarily mislaid his nerve, such as in the middle of scaling a cliff face in the rain to reach an Assassin-sect castle west of Tehran. ("I thought, this is stupid, I'm too old for this sort of thing, I'm going to fall and break my head open.")

Another was in Meshed, in northeastern Iran, when Thubron was caught up in a tide of Shi'ite pilgrims at the shrine of Imam Reza.

"I was swept along and I let myself be carried in, though it was a dangerous place to be caught as an unbeliever, because I was fascinated by the architecture and about what the experience would be. I wasn't going

to do it: I'd made up my mind and decided it was a foolish and perhaps unethical thing to do. And in the back of my mind was a story that had been resonating in my head for years (I don't know if it is true or not, so I didn't write it) of an American who was caught years ago in the tomb chamber there and they killed him by pouring scalding coffee down his throat."

Thubron never sits down with an atlas to pick his next destination. "These books come out of the gut. I just get a feeling I want to go to a certain part of the world — I've never really known why one part and not another — and build on that. In this case, I wanted to go back to many of the parts of the world that had always interested me. I'm in my late 60s and I perhaps feared I hadn't got much longer to write, so I wanted to go back to those parts that for 40 years of my adult life have been the centre of my interest: Islam, the ex-Soviet Union, Central Asia, China and so on.

"The one thing that links them all is the Silk Road. I didn't really want to write about the Silk Road. Then when I began to research it, quite casually, I became fascinated by the whole phenomenon of it, the transport of ideas and inventions as much as goods."

The research gathered momentum, stretching over 18 months as Thubron devoured books and resurrected his "rudimentary" Mandarin and Russian skills before setting off on the journey he describes as "the most ambitious I've done, not just in length but the complexity: so many different languages and cultures".

"As with my last book on Russia, *In Siberia*, I wanted to give a voice to those parts of the hinterland that are not part of the economic boom. With China, there's so much written about the boom on the east coast but you don't hear about the remoter parts where it's had a psychologically crushing effect.

"China's had a traditional respect between the generations and suddenly you have these very fast generational changes. You have all these villages where a lot of young people have just gone away, and it's happening in Russia as well, leaving these psychological casualties, people who feel



redundant and left behind by history. I want to give voice to people ignored by journalists and unseen by tourists.”

His novels — including *A Cruel Madness* and *Falling* — tend to have static settings: an asylum, a prison and inside an amnesiac’s head. “They’re almost the opposite of travel books. They’re books of incarceration. I get to curl up inside myself in a way I can’t in a travel book, where I’m looking outward all the time and responsible to another culture.” Novels allow him to excavate a different part of his personality, but by the end of it he says he’s sick of himself and ready to launch into the outside world.

“My career’s been like a pendulum. I think if I were only writing travel books or only writing novels, I would run dry.”

Despite a century of predictions of the death of travel writing, Thubron sees a healthy future.

“The world’s changing all the time, so it needs new interpretation. The accessibility of the world’s changing all the time. In the 1970s I did a journey by car across Lebanon, Iran, Afghanistan and into Kashmir and north Pakistan; you couldn’t do that journey now. But in those days, it was unimaginable that the Soviet Union and China would open up in the way that they have.”

New generations will also see things differently, travelling with their own values and experience.

“There’s always this interplay between the traveller and the place he’s going to. As long as the world keeps changing, there’ll be room for travel books.”

Thubron’s books resonate with the past as much as the present, most nakedly in

*Shadow of the Silk Road*, in which Thubron imagines conversations between himself and the ghost of a long-dead Sogdian trader (“just me talking to myself”), the most novelistic technique to surface in his travel

books and, as he explains, a way of overcoming his dread of becoming repetitive.

Contemplating the possibility of time travel, Thubron’s wishlist of destinations is a long one, oscillating between 8th-century Damascus and the dawn of the Islamic age; being Marco Polo at the court of the Mongol dynasty in 14th-century China; visiting ancient Rome in the 2nd century AD.

“Oh,” he says in a tone of surrender, “I’d like to go everywhere.”

In the meantime, Thubron is maintaining his momentum.

“I have the idea for a rather different kind of travel book: something more slim and focused. So I am planning to take the Hindu-Buddhist pilgrimage to the holy mountain of Kailash in Tibet, travelling in from Nepal. I’ve hardly researched this yet, so I don’t know how feasible it is. But that’s the idea at the moment.”

Given that his mother was still hot-air ballooning across England well into her 90s, it’s hard to imagine that Thubron, for all his worries about his age, doesn’t have time on his side.

“I still feel the visceral thrill of being on the move,” he says. “The curiosity hasn’t left me yet.”

Colin Thubron is appearing at the Perth Writers Festival. His latest book is *Shadow of the Silk Road* (Random House, \$24.95).

## Giveaway

Courtesy of Random House, we have 12 copies of *Shadow of the Silk Road* to give away to readers. Put your name and address on the back of an envelope and tell us in 25 words or less why you’d like to win a copy. Send to: Silk Road Giveaway, PO Box 215, Eastern Suburbs MC, NSW 2004.