Stranger in a Strange Land: Tales of Travel and Migration
A. E. Newton Student Book Collection Submission 2025

"A man walks down the street
It's a street in a strange world
Maybe it's the third world
Maybe it's his first time around." – Paul Simon[1]

Following the 2024 presidential election, I had a lengthy conversation with a close friend about the cultural divisions that afflict our country. He shared a distinction between "somewheres," those who have roots in a specific place and remain there throughout their lives, and "anywheres," those who change location with ease.

This dichotomy has resurfaced in my mind many times since—not simply in conjunction with the presidential election, but also in my own life. My mother left her native Belgium for Rochester, Minnesota, at age fourteen. I grew up bilingual in North Texas and attended a French international school in Dallas, spending summers with my grandparents in France. During my first semester at Swarthmore, my parents moved to Northern Minnesota. I tend to spend vacations there now, although circumstances inevitably bring us back toTexas from time to time and so we pack up the Subaru and drive for three days. I have since learned Italian and spent a semester in Rome. I write this from a hotel room in Ames, Iowa.

I would consider myself an anywhere. Not as seasoned an anywhere as some, it is true: I think of my grandfather, who spent my infancy rotating between Hong Kong, Paris, Belgium, and the United States. But an anywhere regardless. I told my mother about this distinction recently and her response encapsulated my own feelings: "I know I'm an anywhere, but at heart I think I would like to be a somewhere."

"Stranger in a Strange Land: Tales of Travel and Migration" is a collection of books about anywheres. Some of them are happily anywheres; some of them would really rather be somewheres. These books have captured my imagination because of my own experiences with travel and my family's experiences with immigration. Though it includes writers as disparate as Homer and Jhumpa Lahiri, this collection is united by a shared focus on several key questions: how can travel and migration be transformative? How can one balance the excitement of discovering a new place with the sadness of leaving a familiar one behind? Themes that recur include homesickness, excitement, and opportunity. The title of this collection is a quotation from a very ancient migration story—the Book of Exodus.[2]

Books about Belgian—and, more broadly, Francophone—culture are listed under "My Own Roots." Some of these (Nothomb's *Stupeur et tremblements*) focus on Belgians and Francophones experiencing life abroad, while others (Brontë's *Villette*) speak to the experience of moving to Belgium. This dichotomy reflects my own status as a second-generation immigrant, connected to two cultures but belonging to neither. Books in the "Venturing Outwards" category center on cultures that I have myself explored in depth, primarily through language study: these include books written in Italian, Spanish, Latin, and Ancient Greek (the latter two of which I have learned as a Classics major at Swarthmore). "Great Journeys," the final category, includes other travel narratives—immigration sagas, epics, and the like—from cultures across the world, from Turkey to (the fictional) Lilliput. *Bon voyage !*

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[1] Paul Simon, "You Can Call Me Al," by Paul Simon, Warner Bros., track 6 on *Graceland,* 1986.
[2] Exodus 2:22 KJV.

My Own Roots

1. Brontë, Charlotte. *Villette.* New York: Penguin, 1982.

My family spent a significant portion of fall 2020 in Duluth, Minnesota. Lockdown restrictions were still in place and we were all working or taking classes from a small rental house by Lake Superior. I had read and adored Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* over the summer, so when my father offered to place a pickup order at the local bookstore—the marvelous Amazing Alonso's Paperback Exchange, packed floor to ceiling with books—I knew that I wanted *Villette*.

The yellow, disintegrating volume that I subsequently acquired ended up affecting me profoundly. *Villette* is a story about feeling out of place: its heroine, the 23-year-old Lucy Snowe, meets with various misfortunes in her native England and sails to the nearby country of Labassecour (a fictionalized version of Belgium, where Brontë spent time in her youth). By a stroke of good fortune, she quickly finds employment as a governess, then a teacher of English; but despite her professional success, Lucy experiences isolation and homesickness as she struggles to learn French, adapt to the customs of Labassecour, and resist various attempts to convert her to Catholicism. *Villette*—at once a meditation on the struggles of immigration and a celebration of the friendships that ease it—resonated deeply with me. My own isolation, caused by the pandemic and by my physical distance from friends and relatives, made me sympathetic to Lucy's battle with loneliness, and the book's shocking ending spurred me to read it a second time immediately after I finished. In fall 2023, while studying abroad in Italy (my own Labassecour), I acquired and read an Italian translation, and my most recent experiences with language study and living abroad renewed my sympathy with the novel's heroine.

2. Christie, Agatha. *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*. New York: Bantam Books, 1961.

The day I picked up a dusty old copy of *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* from my grandfather's bookshelf was revolutionary: I would spend the better part of the subsequent four years, from fifth through eighth grade, with my nose buried in Agatha Christie novels. Once I started this novel—Christie's first, and thus the inaugural case of Belgian detective Hercule Poirot—I could not stop. My mother, grandparents, and I ventured to the Belgian Embassy in Paris that day to renew my mother's citizenship, but I was so entranced by the novel that I refused to put it down as we walked through busy city streets. As my grandmother frequently reminds me to this day, this conduct resulted in my running into a pole. I was equally charmed by the masterful plot, the lucid style, and the eccentric detective, whom I sympathized with in part because of the frequency with which his associates thought he was French ("I am BELGIAN!"). I later learned about the conception of *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* through Christie's autobiography: the young Christie witnessed crowds of Belgian immigrants relocating to her native England during the First World War and, moved by their struggles to adapt to their new environment and the harshness with which they were treated by their new neighbors, sought to depict a sympathetic Belgian character as her detective. *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* merits a place in this collection because of its thoughtful depiction of the difficulties of immigration and of countering national stereotypes.

3. De Larrabeiti, Michael. *Provençal Tales*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988.

I bought this book at a small used bookstore in Worcester, Massachusetts, when visiting a close Swarthmore friend who lives there. I was immediately intrigued by the title: I have always

been interested in folktales and the time I had spent in France made me doubly eager to read this work. Englishman De Larrabeiti travelled to Provence as a young man in the late 1950s and fell in with a group of shepherds, whose vivid and memorable narratives he records in this book. *Provençal Tales* reveals a genuine curiosity about other cultures, a willingness to listen and immerse oneself that I found inspiring and memorable.

4. Nothomb, Amélie. *Stupeur et tremblements.* Paris: Albin Michel, 1999.

I acquired and read this novel—the title of which translates to "Fear and Trembling" in English—for a tenth-grade French literature class taught by an Argentinian woman, the wonderful Madame Pepin. Belgian novelist Amélie Nothomb spent her infancy and adolescence travelling around Asia with her diplomat father. *Stupeur et tremblements* is a semi-autobiographical work that details Nothomb's return to Japan as a young adult and professional: while she retains happy memories of the country from her infancy, she experiences isolation, culture shock, and homesickness as she adapts to the norms of the Japanese working world. I found *Stupeur et tremblements* especially poignant because of the context in which I read it—at a school populated with immigrants and third culture kids—as well as because of its thoughtful depiction of being torn between multiple cultures.

5. de Saint-Exupéry, Antoine. *The Little Prince.* Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009.

If people have spirit books, then *The Little Prince* is mine. My grandmother—one of the first women to attend art school in Belgium—made a series of oil paintings with me as the little prince when I was a child. I once embroidered the prince's rose, the flight of birds, and various other motifs in the style of Saint-Exupéry on a pair of jeans. The last time I was in Paris, I saw an exhibition about Saint-Exupéry and his work at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs. I own this book in three languages—English, French, and Latin—and once almost bought a copy in the Romanesque dialect of Italian. I list this particular edition here because it is a pop-up book, in which Saint-Exupéry's marvelous drawings come to life. My parents bought it for me at an exhibition about pop-up books in Denton, Texas, that I saw as a child.

The titular prince of Saint-Exupéry's book lives on a small planet with a rose, whom he loves and cares for. Upset by her petulance and ingratitude, he resolves to set forth and explore the universe. He ventures to other planets where he meets other characters, each on their own planet: a king who issues orders to nobody in particular, a geographer who charts lands to which he has never been. His peregrinations ultimately bring him to Earth, where he encounters the narrator (who has just experienced a plane crash), a fox, and various other characters. The prince's distress at learning that his planet and rose are not unique yields to his recognition that his love for them makes them special regardless. This (admittedly very melancholy) book is at once a celebration of the imaginative powers of children and a meditation on the conflicting draws of our own lands and those we seek to explore.

6. Slimani, Leïla. *Le Pays des Autres*. Paris: Gallimard, 2020.

My grandmother bought me this book at a small bookstore in Orgeval, a village near her house in France, while I was visiting her there over the spring break of my freshman year at Swarthmore. It lingered in my various dorm rooms unread for two years before I picked it up during my junior spring, nostalgic for the French language. *Le Pays des Autres*—"The Country of Others"—recounts the story of how Frenchwoman Mathilde falls in love with Amine, a

Moroccan man she meets during the Second World War. The pair marry and move back to Amine's hometown, but Mathilde's fantasies of romance and adventure soon fall away as she discovers the hardships of culture shock, homesickness, and language barriers. This novel is a nuanced and moving reflection on the sense of displacement that immigration causes as well as on the tense colonial dynamics at play between France and Morocco. My copy of this novel is currently exemplifying the theme of this collection itself: I lent it to a close friend, Swarthmore alum, and fellow Francophone who is currently living in Morocco, and as such it has itself undertaken a second transcontinental journey.

Venturing Outwards

7. Calvino, Italo. *Un ottimista in America.* Milan: Mondadori, 2019.[3]

During my second summer at Middlebury Italian School, I audited a graduate course called "The American Dream" that focused on representations of the United States in twentieth-century Italian music and literature. We listened to Piedmontese jazz sprinkled with Anglicisms and read travel narratives—such as Calvino's—from Italian authors who were enchanted, mystified, or intrigued by the United States. *Un ottimista in America* ("An Optimist in America") is a whirlwind description of beatniks, the New York subway, the civil rights movement, and so much more, born from a journal that Calvino kept while travelling across the States in 1959 and 1960. Calvino's wholehearted zeal for American culture—a zeal that he compares to romantic passion—made this book a fascinating glimpse into the joys that come from discovering other countries, and one to which my own study of Italian and love for Italy made me sympathetic. I checked this book out from the Italian School library and, as such, do not own a physical copy.

8. Cervantes, Miguel. *Don Quijote de la Mancha*. Madrid: Real Academia Española, 2004.

I first read this book as a junior in high school, towards the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic: confined to my house and neighborhood, always immersed in literature, I found myself sympathetic to Don Quixote and his yearning for the adventure that he found in chivalric romances. I remember packing a picnic, walking to a secluded spot in the woods, and spending an afternoon reading of the distinguished knight's journeys through Spain. While I lived vicariously through Quixote's mishap-ridden adventures, they also taught me about the limitations of literature as metaphorical travel: the hero ultimately discovers that he cannot replicate the glorious peregrinations of the Orlando, or Amadís of Gaul. My high school Spanish teacher, whose support and sense of humor also played a part in sustaining me through the pandemic, gave me this Spanish language edition as a parting gift and I reread half of it after my freshman year at Swarthmore.

9. Egeria. *Journey to the Holy Land*. Translated and edited by Paul F. Bradshaw. Turnhout: Brepols, 2021.[4]

This fourth-century C. E. travel narrative by a woman from Roman Spain would be a perfect addition to my book collection. I have selected Bradshaw's edition because it features both the Latin text and a facing-page translation. As a research assistant for Professor Bret Mulligan at Haverford, I read excerpts of Egeria's narrative in Latin in order to prepare online vocabulary lists and was delighted by her descriptions of spiritual practices and Biblical sites

[3] Desired acquisition.
[4] Desired acquisition.

throughout modern-day Palestine, Syria, and Turkey. Beyond Egeria's commitment to venturing to historical locations important to her faith—which earns this unusual work a place in my collection—the *Journey to the Holy Land* is valuable as a glimpse into the evolution of Latin after the Classical period and as a rare example of a Late Antique Latin document written by a woman.

10. Homer. *The Odyssey*. Translated by Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin Books, 1999.

As an Ancient Greek major, I consider the *Odyssey* to be an obligatory inclusion in any collection of travel narratives. I was introduced to the great Homeric epic through a children's version in first grade and it remained imprinted on my brain the way some stories do. I read the Fagles translation for the first time in high school, over the pandemic, and was struck by its lyricism. I have read bits and pieces of the Greek as a Classics student, and at one point memorized the first ten lines. Even though it is separated from the most recent books on this list by almost three millenia, the *Odyssey* addresses a number of the same themes that surface in other works: homesickness, desire for adventure, and nostalgia.[5] Almost as obligatory as mention of the *Odyssey* is that of Alfred, Lord Tennyson, whose poem *Ulysses* meditates on the character-forming nature of Odysseus' many travels:

> I am a part of all that I have met;
> Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'
> Gleams that untravell'd world whose margin fades
> For ever and forever when I move. . .[6]

11. Lahiri, Jhumpa. *In Other Words*. Translated by Ann Goldstein. New York: Vintage Books, 2017.

A dear friend and fellow Middlebury Language School student gave me this bilingual edition of Lahiri's book as a parting gift after we finished our first summer together at the immersive summer Italian school. *In Other Words* is a moving reflection on immigration, travel, and language learning: in it, Lahiri reflects on her Bengali heritage and describes learning Italian and travelling to Italy as a way out of the constant struggle between her American and Indian identities. When I read this book (primarily in Italian, with an occasional glimpse at facing-page English translation when necessary), I felt a deep connection to its author, both because of her multicultural heritage and her inexplicable pull to a language and culture that was not her own. I eventually published my reflections on Lahiri's book in an article for the Swarthmore Review. Studying abroad in Rome renewed my appreciation for Lahiri's insightful work, and—as I navigated the difficulties and pleasures of being an American in Italy—I found myself coming back to *In Other Words* again and again.

12. *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis.* Edited by Giovanni Orlandi and Rossana E. Guglielmetti. Florence: Edizioni di Galluzzo, 2017.[7]

I read the *Navigation of Saint Brendan*—as this work is entitled in English—after completing my freshman year at Swarthmore: eager to keep my Latin up over the summer, I had

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[5] Incidentally, the English "nostalgia" comes from two Greek words that appear in the incipit of the *Odyssey—nostos,* "homecoming," and *algos*, "pain."
[6] Alfred, Lord Tennyson. "Ulysses." Poetry Foundation, accessed 28 December 2024, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45392/ulysses.
[7] Desired acquisition.

asked Professor William Turpin of the Classics department for advice on what to read next, and he offered to employ me to proofread his commentary on the *Navigatio*. My mediocre Latin did not prevent me from being delighted by this charming work, a tenth-century Irish narrative that recounts how Saint Brendan ventures forth in a small boat to find the "Isle of the Blessed." Along the way, Brendan and his fellow monks encounter some volcanoes; a sea monster named Jasconius (whom they initially suppose to be an island); and the apostle Judas, enjoying a brief reprieve from the tortures of Hell while sitting on an iceberg. Recollecting the time I spent with the *Navigatio* brings a smile to my face even now, and, apart from its amusement value, this book is a celebration of adventure and exploration. Professor Turpin's work is now available online through Dickinson College Commentaries, but I do not own a physical text myself and have thus listed the critical edition that he used as a desired acquisition.

13. Pavese, Cesare. *La luna e i falò*. Rome: Newton Compton Editori, 2021.

While roaming aimlessly around Rome in the fall of 2023—a favorite pastime of mine during the semester that I spent there—I came across an underground bookstore called the "Libreria M. T. Cicerone." I decided to take a look and ascended to street level some time later, with *La luna e i falò*—"The Moon and the Bonfires"—in hand. I had read excerpts of this book in a course on the American Dream (see entry no.7) and finished it while in Rome. *La luna e i falò* recounts its protagonist's return to the small Italian town in which he was raised after decades of travel in the United States. Always considered an outsider abroad, he finds that his years of living in the States make him seem foreign even in his native country. He is left stuck between two cultures, strongly marked by both of them but belonging to neither.

I returned to Belgium for a family reunion shortly after finishing *La luna e i falò*. Spending time with my extended family in my mother's native country made me all the more sympathetic to Pavese's narrator. On the one hand, I felt at home speaking French with a Belgian accent, eating *kramiek* for breakfast, recalling hilarious *poisson d'avril* pranks (April Fool's is much more of an event in Belgium than in the States). But I could never fully leave behind my American-ness: I could never summon up more than a blank stare when spoken to in Flemish, and I didn't really know the crowds of relatives that thronged me at the family reunion. Pavese's book captures this cultural conflict and, paradoxically, provides a place for those who belong to none.

Great Journeys

14. Cather, Willa. *My Ántonia.* New York: Dover, 1994.

My Ántonia lingered on my bookshelf for many years before I read it. I received it as a Christmas gift from my parents years ago, maybe a decade, and decided to pick it up after a good friend and Swarthmore English major urged me to do so. Cather's 1918 masterpiece follows the titular character, a young Czech immigrant whose family moves to Nebraska, as she learns English, adapts to prairie life, and forms friendships in her new rural community. Cather imbues the American West with a distinctive character that is based on the immigrants that settled there, with Ántonia—dazzling and memorable—at their forefront.

15. Forster, Edward M. *A Room with a View*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.[8]

[8] I list this here—and rather than in "Venturing Outwards"—because I acquired and read it before I learned Italian or went to Italy.

I pilfered *A Room with a View* from my dad's bookshelf years ago, when I was in middle school, and read it shortly thereafter. Forster's 1908 novel opens in Florence, where its heroine Lucy Honeychurch is travelling with the guidance of her cousin and chaperone. As Lucy deals with the conflicting pulls of love and duty, Italy comes to represent freedom from the social obligations and need for propriety that define her life in England. Mildly idealized view of Italy notwithstanding, *A Room with a View* presents a compelling case for how travelling abroad can shed light upon the restraints and shortcomings of one's native culture.

16. Greene, Graham. *Travels with my Aunt.* New York: Penguin Books, 2004.

This is by far the most flippant work on what is, in general, a fairly serious list. I bought *Travels with my Aunt* at Birchbark Books & Native Arts, an independent bookstore in Minneapolis owned by Ojibwe novelist Louise Erdrich. The bookshelves at Birchbark are covered with post-it notes featuring recommendations from Erdrich and other employees. When I learned that *Travels with my Aunt* came highly recommended by Erdrich, who is one of my family's favorite writers, I knew immediately that I had to invest. I had no regrets. Greene's novel follows complacent middle-aged bank retiree Henry Pulling as his eccentric and occasionally criminal Aunt Augusta—whom he meets at his mother's funeral (but was she *really* his mother?)—drags him along for a dizzying set of adventures that bring the pair to France, Turkey, and Paraguay. Filled with hilarious interludes (a dog church! An Andy Warhol wannabe!), *Travels with my Aunt* is also—admittedly perhaps secondarily—a book about the transformative power of living abroad.

17. Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Namesake.* New York: First Mariner Books, 2004.

My mother gave me this book for my birthday two years ago, knowing that I had read and enjoyed Lahiri's *In Other Words*—see entry no. 11—the previous summer. *The Namesake* charts the story of the Ganguli family, who move from Calcutta to Massachusetts in pursuit of educational opportunities. Ashima and Ashoke struggle to stay connected to their Indian heritage as they raise a family in the States, while their firstborn son, named Gogol after his father's favorite writer, explores the conflicting cultural claims that inform his identity. *The Namesake* resonates with my own experience growing up with two languages and cultural identities, and is a moving reflection on the difficulties of doing so.

18. Márquez, Gabriel Garcia. *One Hundred Years of Solitude.* Translated by Gregory Rabassa. New York: Harper Perennial, 2006.

I bought this book in ninth grade, shortly after reading *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* in English class: Márquez' dreamlike, imaginative narrative had enchanted me, and I was eager for more. I eventually read it twice over the course of the following few years, once for fun and a second time—during the pandemic—for a high school English class. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* recounts how José Arcadio Buendía and his family found the town of Macondo after journeying far from their native land. As José Arcadio and his descendants develop roots in Macondo, the town—once a utopian fantasy, a new Eden—is afflicted by civil wars, government intervention, and colonial interference, and the members of the Buendía family relive a cycle of violence, jealousy, and love that leads to the novel's startling end. Poetic, multifaceted, and gripping, Márquez' masterpiece is the first migration-based family saga that I read, and it remains a model to which to compare the others.

19. Pamuk, Orhan. *The White Castle.* Translated by Victoria Holbrook. New York: Random House, 1990.

I bought and read *The White Castle* for a high school English class. As an ardent fan of Jorge Luis Borges at the time, I was sure to enjoy any work of literature that featured doppelängers, frame narratives, and unreliable narrators, and that wove together philosophy and fiction. As such, my interest in this novel—from Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk, whose *Red* I have since enjoyed—was predestined. The narrator of *The White Castle*, a young Italian scholar, is captured by Ottoman ships. In his new home of Constantinople, he becomes a servant to an eccentric and rather belligerent scientist—one who looks exactly like him. Tortured both by his uncanny resemblance to the Ottoman scientist and by memories of his native Italy, the narrator loses his grip on the boundaries that separate him and his "master"—and East and West more generally—as the story progresses. How much are we defined by where we come from? To what extent can we assimilate into another culture? These are questions that *The White Castle* explores, and also ones that have been integral to my own life.

20. Swift, Jonathan. *Gulliver's Travels*. New York: Penguin, 2003.

I bought and read this copy of *Gulliver's Travels* for a virtual summer program hosted by St. John's College in the summer of 2020. About a decade previously, I had read a children's version and was entranced by the title character's journeys to Lilliput (an island inhabited by very small people), Brobdingnag (a peninsula inhabited by very large ones), the flying island of Laputa, and other exciting places. As a high school student, I was astonished at how far the novel's satirical nature had flown straight over my head when I read it as a child. The various populations that Gulliver meets in his adventures exemplify human foibles: the bitter rivalry between the Lilliputians and the Bledfuscudians over which end of an egg to crack epitomizes the triviality of human conflicts, while the abstract pursuits of the Laputans reflect those of Swift's contemporaries in the Royal Society. On a higher level, *Gulliver's Travels* is a satire of travel narratives more generally, and a meditation on the dangers of idealizing other countries. Gulliver's last journey brings him to the land of the Houyhnhnms, enlightened horses who rule over the uncivilized and humanoid Yahoos. When he returns home, Gulliver is so convinced of the supremacy of the Houyhnhnms that he shuns his wife and children, preferring to consort with his horses. The wise traveller—if Swift would allow for such a possibility—must maintain a measured appreciation for those he meets on his journeys, rather than (to paraphrase a skeptic maxim) to open his mind so much that his brains fall out.