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**[Jarman, Mark Anthony. Touch Anywhere to Begin]**

*The Central European journal of Canadian studies*. 2022, vol. 17, iss. [1], pp. 107-109

ISBN 978-80-280-0288-6 (print); ISBN 978-80-280-0289-3 (online ; pdf)  
ISSN 1213-7715 (print); ISSN 2336-4556 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.78047>

Access Date: 19. 02. 2024

Version: 20230517

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## *Touch Anywhere to Begin*

Mark Anthony Jarman

Fredericton: Goose Lane Editions, 2022, 256 pp. ISBN 9780864929198 (paperback)

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Mark Anthony Jarman's latest is a loose collection of travel essays that avoids the smug, cool stance that mars much of the genre. In eighteen pieces exploring "The Bright Drug of Travel" (214) Jarman moves from Venice to Mumbai to Shanghai, as well as to less obvious travel destinations such as Blasket Sound and Trogir on the coasts of Ireland and Croatia. And he goes further, guiding us towards unfamiliar places and states. "Jesus on the Mainline" takes us to a local emergency ward and a short hospital stay after the author's brain bleed; "Offering from a Wolf" describes an eleven-day period during which Jarman's friend, the author R.M. Vaughan, had gone missing after jumping from a Fredericton bridge – Jarman and his partner Clarissa "rushed back from Lunenburg, wipers on top speed, cars on the highway shedding whole snakeskins of spray and I just wanted to stay out of the ditch. Where is Richard?" (236). As *Touch Anywhere* points out, travel takes many forms.

For many of us who travel for work or pleasure, privileged passport-wielding sorts who slip through border crossing with ease, a journey teeters on the edge of calendar time. We quit our regular abodes, our regular working lives, and just get away. For a few days or weeks we can pretend we have escaped not just to other climes but to other times.

With humour and directness, Jarman brings this sense of time to the fore. In Venice during – but not *for* – Carnevale, he ponders costumes passing by his café window: "Periwigs and vast hoop dresses, Johnny Depp pirates, Batman and Spider-Man, Boy George, sexy cops and nuns, steampunk goggles, zebras, pandas, bunnies, even a young woman with a small basketball hoop propped above her head," before delivering a punchline: "I am not sure how any of these costumes are linked to Medieval Venice." (12) We can read the punchline as pure sarcasm, and perhaps it is. However, sarcasm requires an uppity, knowing, confident stance and Jarman doesn't dabble in *knowing*, either here or in his fiction. Many of the pieces in *Touch Anywhere*



deal more in questioning and befuddlement than in revelation. Sometimes it's correct to be confused, to "feast on doubt" (24).

Somewhere, Hemingway wrote: "Like all Greeks he wanted to go to America." I can't remember where that line is from, but the confidence behind it irks. Hemingway exudes a smug sense of *this is the way it is*. Jarman, another masculine traveller from North America, is circumspect. In "My Night with the Generals," about an evening trip to a strange out-of-the-way private club in Shanghai, Jarman questions odd foreign behaviour, then reminds himself: "I must keep in mind that China is not foreign; I am foreign" (25). A few lines later: "How soon we forget, how we enjoy looking for difference, looking for flaws" (25). Even if we know what proper behaviours and mindsets are, frequent reminding is needed.

Jarman has a knack for getting the pulse of a place. Or placelessness. "Vienna's Apology to the Pigs" begins "I kind of hate Vienna" (175) and neatly outlines an irony of travelling in the twenty-first century: for all their distinguishing plaques, monuments, and glorious or gory histories, many cities are "milquetoast simulacra" (176). "Vienna's young citizens are clones of every other young citizen in the world, a vista of sidewall haircuts and oiled beards and hipster toques, NY ballcaps under Abercrombie & Fitch hoodies," and so on (176). "Vienna checks with Brooklyn and Berlin and Apple and Portlandia before adjusting a forelock or playlist" (176). Hairstyles and products and places mingle into indistinguishable soullessness.

Each piece in *Touch Anywhere* has been previously published in *Walrus*, *Brick*, *SubTerrain* or elsewhere, and though I read most of them previously, it's a convenient pleasure to have them all (a few of them updated) in one volume. Also, the essays hang together. Some essay collections made up of previously published material fall into repetition or feign a unity that is not there. Not the case with this collection. A few chapters offers surprises on familiar travel destinations. "Meat and Metal in Mittel Europa" argues that Central Europe can out-*Fleisch* Texas and that, given the "many old metal and hair bands still out on the circuit" in these realms, "life does have a second act" (75). (W.A.S.P., Loudness, Testament and Mississauga's own Billy Talent are all coming to Ljubljana soon.)

Travel for tourism, like visiting a ballpark or a museum, is almost outside time. I can't put a date to the last time I trained myself off to nearby Vienna or Zagreb or Venice or Trieste, and it doesn't matter much whether it was 2017 or 2007. At times, however, *when* we visited a place can't be forgotten. *Touch Anywhere* leads off with a Venetian piece called "Drunkards! I Molest You!" It takes place in Venice in February 2020, at a time when smooth border crossings suddenly seemed in doubt: "The museums closed days ago. Will the stations and borders close and trap us?" (16). Venice and its environs were the heartland of COVID back in the virus's early days in Europe.



The pieces in *Touch Anywhere* have been revised since they were first published. When we read a work is of course as important as when it was written. I first encountered “Jesus on the Mainline” in *Queen’s Quarterly* in 2020, back when it was labelled as fiction. Rereading it in 2023, after having been slid like a tray of cookies into an MRI machine or three, I can better appreciate Jarman’s description of those claustrophobic confines: “The MRI machine is very noisy with a sci-fi Kraftwerk soundtrack, in my ears God-like percussive synth resonates like amplified blows: BAM BAM BAM! I expect Germanic voices to chant MRI, MRI, MRI” (151–2). Leave it to music-savvy Jarman to find the right band for describing the sounds of the non-silence in the tube.

*Touch Anywhere* is a reminder that travel, like the rest of life, can be “puzzling warrens and wrong turns and beautiful dead ends” (216). Jarman embraces the *mystery* of other places, without giving into exoticism.

