



Lynn Z. Bloom

## Why the Worst Trips Make the Best Stories:

### The Comic Travels of Geoffrey Wolff and Jonathan Franzen

“We travel, initially, to lose ourselves; and we travel, next, to find ourselves.”  
Pico Iyer, “Why We Travel”

Bad trips make the best stories, the most compelling tales of comic travel, which inevitably involve travail. Tragic trips, such as the Everest climb detailed in Jon Krakauer’s *Into Thin Air*, in which a dozen people died<sup>1</sup> through tragic intermingling of egotism, masochism, nationalism, and hubris, enable readers to dangle over crevasses, crawl up precipitous slopes, and hang breathlessly on every word. As de La Rochefoucauld observes, “We all have strength enough to bear the misfortunes of others.” With the author, whether a hero or heroic failure<sup>2</sup> we make it through, ascending the narrative arc from innocence to life-changing crisis, whose spiritual or intellectual profundity illuminates our return, sadder, wiser, cleansed of pre-travel detritus. Such tragic trips embed only a scintilla of existential comedy, and then only in the cosmic sense that the author has lived to tell the tale.

In contrast, the traveler’s tales I will discuss here are in a different realm because they are rendered as comedy rather than tragedy. Indeed, comic narratives, too, have comparable possibilities for devastation, even death. In accord with Iyer’s epigraph, they often tell stories of great expectations gone

<sup>1</sup> Nine died during the actual climb, three others succumbed soon afterward (Krakauer 1).

<sup>2</sup> For a range of opinions on the events, people, motives, and climate—political and geographical—of those fateful high-altitude hours on Mt. Everest in May 1996, see Michael Elmes and Bob Frame, “Into Hot Air: A Critical Perspective on Everest.”

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awry, through error, sin, miscalculation, and elements beyond their control. But trips rendered in a comic mode cannot be considered tragic, even if they're terrible and the central character (very likely the author) is on the knife-edge of devastation or death. In *Feeling and Form*, Suzanne Langer explains why: "The [comic] world is as promising and alluring as it dangerous and opposed. The feeling of comedy is a feeling of heightened vitality, challenged wit and will, engaged in the great game with Chance. . . . There is no permanent defeat and permanent human triumph except in tragedy; for nature must go on if life goes on, and the world that presents all obstacles also supplies the zest of life. In comedy, therefore, there is a general trivialization of the human battle. Its dangers are not real disasters, but embarrassment and loss of face," the opposite of tragedy (347-8).

Thus the settings may be ugly or otherwise challenging, the locals conniving and unpleasant, the food inedible, and the weather uncongenial, but these trips are comic because the authors of such *Tristes Comiques* construct themselves as comic personae, anti-heroes. Out of condition and out of place, neither is an Indiana Jones. Both Wolff and Franzen, traveling as strangers in strange lands, seek escape from quotidian cares and restoration of soul and spirits. Overconfident to the point of calamity, smug in their cultural chauvinism while making critical mistakes,<sup>3</sup> after harrowing adventures in which they could have died, both return chastened, wiser, restored—Wolff physically, Franzen spiritually. Travelers' tales, like fish stories, are full of unreliable narrators—and why not? If one is in a remote spot, who's there to check up? Nevertheless, because both present themselves ironically, full of self-deprecation and self-parody from start to finish they win our trust, and ultimately our affection.

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<sup>3</sup> Highly nuanced works in which the traveler seeks a thorough understanding of the country, such as Frances Trollope's *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832) and Mark Twain's journalistic *Innocents Abroad* (1869) are beyond the scope of the discussion here.

## Bad Trips Off the Radar

Excluded from this discussion of “Worst Trips” are travelers’ condescending litanies of woes which imperial eyes and cultural insularity used to consider comic. These are no longer good stories, but egotistical compendia of cultural chauvinism, neither politically correct nor ethically acceptable. As Phil Voysey notes, “Places and cultures are in a constant state of transformation. History is in a constant state of revision. Exoticism,” and indeed, what’s funny, are ephemeral constructs of “the mind of the outsider” (np), subject to fairly rapid change that renders the comedy (travel included) dated or obsolete. What seems hilarious in one time or place may be so highly offensive in another that the very essence of its bad taste—say, the sexist, racist, classist staples of pre-World War II *Esquire* and college humor magazines—will doom the work to the dumpster. This is not necessarily because the work is sexually offensive (coarseness endures) but because its stereotyping becomes passé as the readers’ values, cultural orientation, and political agenda change. They could of course, change again. As Louis Kronenberger reminds us, “The pendulum-swing of taste always makes it hard for people to know what they really like . . . There is nothing at which the Comic Spirit must smile more than our fickle and inconstant notions as to what constitutes comedy” (11).

A single example of an outdated bad trip will suffice. S.J. Perelman’s *Westward Ha! or Around the World in Eighty Clichés* presents, in the manner of Groucho Marx,<sup>4</sup> a confident though self-deprecating male jingoist’s alternately satiric and slapstick account of the known tourist world in 1946, sponsored by *Holiday* magazine. *Westward Ha!* is a compendium of disparagement,<sup>5</sup> a bad trip in which all men are macho, all women are girls (aka “sloe-eyed gazelles in saris,” and available for purchase (103), and all natives

<sup>4</sup> This is not surprising, considering that Perelman was a script writer for the Marx brothers.

<sup>5</sup> Which presages, it must be said, Lévi-Strauss’s serious, surly opening of *Tristes Tropiques* (1955): “Travel and travellers are two things I loathe—and yet here I am, all set to tell the story of my expeditions,” riddled with “shame and disgust. So much would have to be said that has no possible interest; insipid details, incidents of no significance. Anthropology is a profession in which adventure plays no part; merely one of its bondages, it represents no more than a dead weight of weeks or months wasted en route; hours spent in idleness when one’s informant has given one the slip; hunger, exhaustion, illness . . .” (17).

--“dragomen, panders, peddlers, mendicants, fortunetellers . . . and assorted mountebanks” (119) are above average—in bureaucracy, rapacity, and mendacity. For instance, “emeralds” are revealed on appraisal to have “been cut down from a very rare Coca-Cola bottle” (81). All the sights, whether in China, Samoa, Egypt, the Belgian Congo, or Paris, fulfill either the title’s promised clichés, the author’s calculated cultural insularity (war-ravaged Tuscany becomes a “recollection of unending heat and dust, a blurred succession of churches, fountains, and largely hideous sculpture” 130), or both. Perelman returns “absolutely unscathed,” with “none of that rich harvest of serenity and wisdom . . . that broad tolerance for human frailty” travelers characteristically experience (158). If, as Pico Iyer observes in “Why We Travel” “we travel in part just to shake up our complacencies by seeing all the moral and political urgencies, the life-and-death dilemmas, that we seldom have to face at home” (np), then Perelman has happily missed the boat, indifferent to Iyer’s understanding of the convention that “travel is the best way we have of rescuing the humanity of places, and saving them from abstraction and ideology.”

### **The Trip from Hell: Geoffrey Wolff, “A Day at the Beach”**

If the Wolff family vacation in Sint Maarten had been a good trip, Wolff would have had nothing to write except the cliché postcard (today, a tweet), “Having wonderful time. Wish you were here.” Like Franzen, Wolff is the ironist—although not the master—of his fate. Fortunately Wolff, then 50, experienced *The Trip from Hell*, and “Hell is story-friendly,” as novelist Charles Baxter has said (Gottschall 52). Midway through the tale in which one comic woe succeeds another, he has a heart attack which cleaves the work, “the story of a heart murmur on a tropical vacation” (122) in half, the comic balanced against the potentially tragic. The travelogue half exploits the disparity between what vacationers dream a Caribbean holiday will be, and what actually occurs—the paradigm for ironic accounts of comic bad trips. Because Wolff’s medical case history in excruciating detail is another story in a different mode, I’ll concentrate here on his parody of a travel narrative.

**Anticipated: The Ideal.** The Wolff family—paterfamilias author, devoted wife Priscilla, and two charming teenage sons—travel easily from Providence, Rhode Island to Sint Maarten, the Dutch half of the 33.6 square mile Caribbean island Saint Martin. There they enjoy a meticulously-planned Christmas vacation at a sparkling, isolated, upscale resort, swathed in sun, sand, and succulence. For one of Wolff's parsimonious persuasion, the price is right, the relaxation total, the re-visit, inevitable.

**Actual: The Story's Very Bad, Very Good Bones.**

**Motif #1. Everything on this vacation is the antithesis of the ideal** except the Wolff family, whose members, except the author—the butt of his own humor—remain lovable throughout. *Arrival:* The luggage is delayed. “I am not,” admits Wolff, “famously even-tempered”—as is demonstrated by his incendiary reaction to this (“I felt a bellicose rush of blood to my face; I was showing my fighting colors.”) and all other indignities and impediments to the ideal. **Setting:** ugly, unhealthful. The rented seaside condo, reached via “a rutted mud road, deeply puddled” and mosquito infested, has a bay view “dominated by a rusted dredger” and a “half-finished concrete resort and casino, a mausoleum of doomed real-estate speculation.” **Environment:** noisy and polluted. The condo is dead against the airport runway's chain-link fence; each throbbing blastoff, from dawn to dusk, sprays the family with a mist of jet fuel. **Aesthetic:** loathsome. The condo's déclassé décor is dominated by “huge, lurid oil paintings of black-and-Day-Glo swans.” **Equipment condition:** dangerous. Anyone who opens the refrigerator gets zapped with high voltage. **Clientele:** the wrong social class. The next door neighbors are a huge, raucous, wickedly sunburned “happy family” from Queens, who “were having better fun than we,” laughing, smiling, taking group pictures. Dubbing them “the Buffet Busters,” the Wolffs snobbishly reject not only their “friendly approaches,” but the “amorous urgencies” of Butch, their masturbating mutt (121-25).

**Motif #2. Money Matters. Cost, of everything:** Exorbitant. Mostly, the Wolffs spend money, at casinos “very Atlantic City,” when they'd rather have “blown a wad” at ritzier Nice or Baden-Baden. They

fork over outrageous sums for mediocre food: fast food pizza for four is \$85 US; “\$200, plus tip (*sans vin*) for a local fish, très nouvelle, teensy”—and this is in 1987. **Rental car:** Their parked vehicle receives a costly body blow while they’re out eating a miserable Christmas night dinner of sandwiches. A fight so terrible erupts between husband and wife that their terrified teenagers “hike to their runway-side villa, from France to Holland” to escape the vituperation. **Robbery and loss:** The family is robbed as they sleep--“no keys, identification, credit cards, cash, or traveler’s checks.” **Fear and anger:** The theft exacerbates Wolff’s rising paranoia, and irascibility in nearly every subsequent transaction: with the police, American Express, excursion boat personnel, store clerks. “You stole our tickets,” he weeps, “I will tell about this. I am . . . a writer!” Wrong! His son finds the purloined documents in the travel bag where Wolff himself had put them for safekeeping, and for the first time in the story, contrition ensues (125-32).

**Motif #3: Could things get worse?** Of course, and therein lies **the heart of the plot, the major medical disaster. Critical item forgotten:** Wolff, though packing early and checking often, leaves the carryon with his essential heart medicines—“the conventional pharmacopoeia of a fellow of late-middle years”—Benemid, Vasotec, Inderal—at home, in his driveway. This portentous error is compounded by his **failure to do the obvious**, to order a prescription from home to be overnighted to Sint Maartin—or filled there. **Dangerous replacement:** Wolff’s quest to get an alternative hypertension prescription sets his blood aboil, and the resultant alarming side effects of the wrong medicine, procured from a sleazy pharmacist “willing to sell me anything that wasn’t what I had been instructed to use,” punctuate his days and nights. **Life-threatening medical crisis:** Wolff’s hair-trigger tension intensifies his shortness of breath, “as though a barber were wrapping a steaming towel around my face.” Priscilla takes this seriously, but he writes it off “to heat, and stress, and those double sawbucks flying pell-mell from my pockets into the pockets of strangers.” When our unathletic hero runs, he finds it “difficult to breathe, but now there [is] an iron band under my arms, clinching my chest”—the classic heart attack symptom. Again, during a “final swim” before departure from a place he can hardly wait to leave, “dunking, wrestling” with

his sons, he collapses, loses consciousness, has convulsions; “the untrained eyes of my wife and sons have seen [my] death” (“Day” 128-34).

After a wild ride to the Philipsburg hospital, a diagnosis of “heart disease,” and a night of testing Wolff is released to fly home—for what will turn out to be major heart surgery and the installation of a new aortic valve, whose intricacies are anatomized for another twenty pages in a medical narrative that is tranquil in comparison with the high voltage vacation. In transit, Wolff feels an emotion unusual for irate travelers—gratitude, for the Buffet Busters (“how kind . . . how quick to help, how competent”), for the condo managers (“instead of bills we got checks, refunds to atone for the nastiness of the refrigerator”), for the car rental appraiser (who is “just”), even for Butch (who is “concerned”) (“Day” 141). As a fitting finale to this excellent story of a very bad vacation, Wolff survives, and lives to recount with gusto its horrendous details, undiminished by his four sentences of profound appreciation. If, as Iyer says, “all the great travel books are love stories—from the *Odyssey* an the *Aeneid* to the *Divine Comedy* and the New Testament—and all good trips are, like love, about being carried out of yourself and deposited in the midst of terror and wonder,” then by this calculus “A Day at the Beach” has put Wolff exactly where he belongs.

**PS: “Matterhorn.”** A year later Wolff, on the “downslope of middle age,” decides to “stir things up” by climbing Switzerland’s iconic Matterhorn. He, of course, has “never climbed before or dreamed of climbing” (156) and intends never to do so again. In a singular, prudent act he has hired a guide, Josie, tactful, taciturn: “I’d like to climb the Matterhorn,” I said . . . . “So you said,” Josie replies. Enough said; we already know how the entire two weeks will play out when “Josie said he would like to observe my stamina.” (165-8). Readers lust for bravery, and prudence is not on our literary radar. No one ever says “Have a safe day at the slopes.” “But this was not to be,” sighs Wolff, “I turned my back on the summit, and moved out, down” to yet another level of comic travel (171). “Matterhorn” thus becomes a counterpoint in caution to “A Day at the Beach,” an elegiac finale to derring-do and thus to the worst best

trips, even when they are begun with, as Samuel Johnson pronounces of a second marriage, a triumph of hope over experience.

### **A Sojourn to the Knife-Edge of the Sublime: Jonathan Franzen, “Farther Away”**

In the course of a book tour “promoting a novel nonstop for four months, advancing through my schedule without volition,” Jonathan Franzen, 51, has gone “dead from within.” Jolting awake every morning with “the same reviving doses of nicotine and caffeine,” drinking every night “for the same brain-dulling pop of pleasure,” bored out of his gourd. When his “two drinks a night [have] worsened to four,” he needs a respite from this very bad, deadening kind of travel, and space to come to terms with the suicide of his beloved friend, David Foster Wallace, two years earlier. So to get away from it all Franzen decides to travel 5000 miles “Farther Away,” to Masafuera (aka Alejandro Selkirk)—Robinson Crusoe’s “forbiddingly vertical volcanic island” off the coast of Chile (17-19). Getting there is certainly an arduous way to recuperate from the rigors of a book tour.

Utopias are very difficult to reach, impossible, really. Depending on which legend one is pursuing, they are accessible only after crossing burning deserts, scaling high mountains, breaching impenetrable fortifications—major reasons they exist in imagination but not reality. Dystopias should be easier to get to, there are many roads to hell. But Masafuera—which has its good points, abundant lobsters and occasional spectacular views, “dramatically beautiful . . . a dazzling near-infinity of colors” in an “immense sky” (47) when the clouds part—is not. To reach this capriciously accessible island, “five hundred miles off the coast of central Chile,” requires a flight from New York to Santiago (15.5-25 hours), another 2-hour flight from Santiago to Robinson Crusoe Island on an eight-seater plane that leaves only twice a week, and then waiting around, “sometimes for days, for weather conducive to landing on the rocky shore” via a boat ride of 5-18 hours. Buffeted passengers must finally transfer to a lobster boat to finally reach land, braving the “gale force winds . . . pushing against the oppressive immensity of the gorge and the coldly heaving sea”

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only to encounter “dead trees,” and “breathtaking quantities of flies” as well as “millions of seabirds and thousands of fur seals” (24). Yet that is where Franzen expects to find relief, as George Santayana observes in “The Philosophy of Travel,” through escaping “into open solitudes, into aimlessness, into the moral holiday of running some pure haphazard, in order to sharpen the edge of life, to taste hardship, and to be compelled to work desperately for a moment at no matter what”( 6). And there he will scatter a matchbook of Wallace’s ashes, proffered by Wallace’s widow, into the gale winds that render the island uninhabitable.

**Form.** This brilliant, complicated essay braids three strands of a meditation on solitude into a subtle, sinuous structure. *Comedy:* Franzen’s own travels to Masafuera (translated as “Farther Away”), a dazzling antithesis to the machismo ethos of adventure travel extolled in such works as *Into Thin Air*. *Eulogy:* a compassionate depiction of Wallace, mentally ill, as “that farthest-away island,” whose fiction, like his friendship, made his most devoted readers, those emotional and spiritual isolates, feel “recognized and comforted” and “loved” (39). *Literary criticism.* Franzen concentrates on *Robinson Crusoe*, “the great early document of radical individualism, the story of an ordinary person’s practical and psychic survival in profound isolation” (18), a novel whose protagonist (drawn from the real-life Alejandro Selkirk) he sees as analogous to both Wallace and himself.

**Setting.** As a traveler Franzen is the very model of a modern major anti-hero. Masafuera is a quixotic destination, the antithesis of Wolff’s dreamy Caribbean isle—an isle will do, hard to reach and harder to stay there. Nevertheless, because Masafuera possesses the very qualities that would repel most travelers, it is exactly the right place for Franzen’s homage to both Wallace and Defoe, the perfect place where he can run away and be “alone there, like Selkirk, in the interior of the island, where nobody lives, even seasonally.” Even better, for Franzen, for whom “seeing new bird species was the only activity I could count on not to bore me,” the island is “the only known breeding site” for one of “the world’s rarest

songbirds, the Masafuera rayadito,” which he is willing to brave hell and high water to see (17-25). Its pursuit lends a faintly Darwinesque aura to this Crusoesque narrative.

**Gear.** That Franzen plays several comic roles concurrently is soon clear, from both the absurdity of what he does, and the self-mocking irony of what he says. As an urban innocent, he “indulges in a little orgy of consumerism at REI,” augmenting the basics—tent, backpack, knife—with “emblems of civilization-in-wilderness,” such as “a plastic plate with a silicone rim that flipped up to form a bowl,” and “large stores of food,” including the eco-purist’s “organic vegan freeze-dried chili.” This prudent profligate is a living paradox: he buttresses his quest for solitude with redundant gear, a two-way radio and a satellite phone, but forgets backup batteries for the ten-year-old GPS. His only map is a “letter-sized printout of a Google Earth image,” whose scale leads him to optimistically misinterpret its contour lines: “What had looked like steep hills were cliffs, and what had looked like gentle slopes were steep hills . . . at the bottom of a tremendous gorge . . . the island’s green shoulders rose thirty-five hundred feet into a cap of broodingly churning cloud” (19-24).

**Camping In, Camping Out.** Franzen’s biggest mistake, however, like that of many travelers, results from cultural chauvinism. A park ranger with a “poker-faced” pack mule leads our hero to a *refugio*, a ranger’s hut at 3000 feet. Anticipating a “primitive shack,” he is dismayed to find, OMG, the *Refugio* Hilton, a sturdy structure “tethered to the ground by cables,” equipped with all the necessities—“propane stove, two bunk beds with foam mattresses,” sleeping bag and “a cabinet stocked with dry pasta and canned foods.” His myth of “solitary self-sufficiency” is shattered; he needn’t have brought a thing. Yet to validate lugging so much so far, Franzen decides to pretend the *refugio* doesn’t exist,” and—as a latter-day Crusoe—to camp out. Readers, safe and dry at sea-level, can gleefully anticipate the writer’s next move. Although he pitches his tent where he can’t see the *refugio*, Franzen is soaked from the supersaturated environment and is “no more able to wean myself from the *refugio*’s conveniences than from the modern distractions that I was supposedly here to flee.” He uses the *refugio*’s “big pot and the propane stove to

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heat some bathwater,” and realizes that “it was simply *much more pleasant*, after my bath, to go back inside and dry off . . . and get dressed than to do this in the dirt and the fog.” Already “compromised,” he totes a foam mattress to the tent, “But . . . that’s the end of it,” he tells himself, having spent seven hours in these activities, before devoting what’s left of the day to reading *Robinson Crusoe* to psych himself up for the next day’s hike (25-27).

**The Solitary Quest.** As an eco-traveler, Franzen is looking “for a mostly lost authenticity, for the remnants of a world now largely overrun by human beings but still beautifully indifferent to us,” represented by the elusive rayadito (27). He rises early and hikes above 3600 feet in thick fog, trying to skirt “two deep canyons,” bushwacking “through dense, dripping ferns” which “concealed slippery rocks and deep holes.” As an anti-hero, “very afraid of cliffs,” he gets vertigo from the “mere thought” of hiking along 3800 foot ridges in pursuit of the bird. After several hours of picking his way through “sickeningly precipitous dead end” ridges, lost despite scattering “electronic bread crumbs” from his faltering GPS, he edges out toward yet another “small pinnacle,” sees himself “spread-eagled against a slippery rockface in blinding rain and ferocious wind”—and gives up, telling himself, “*What you’re doing is extremely dangerous*” (37)—a comic yet life-affirming confessional. That night, after scattering Wallace’s ashes, Franzen wimps out sleeps in the *refugio*.

**The Sublime Finale.** The next day “*desperate* to escape the islands,” he endures an eighteen hour boat ride back to Robinson Crusoe with “twelve hundred lobsters [and] a couple of skinned goats,” seasick all the way and now homesick, eager to escape the solitude he had so eagerly sought the week before. However, because all flights are full he has “the experience of being truly stranded on an island” for an extra week—“an exercise in deprivation from the very busyness that I’d been so intent on fleeing, a busyness whose pleasurability I appreciated only now.” To mitigate the frustration of being away from those he loves, he reads *Pamela* with the grateful understanding that “it was Richardson who first granted full fictional access to the hearts and minds of individuals whose solitude has been overwhelmed by love

for someone else.” In an incandescent finale that illuminates this essay’s tightly-braided strands, Franzen-as-critic concludes that ultimately Defoe “showed us how sick and crazy radical individualism really is. No matter how carefully we defend our selves”—as Wallace did in his fatal illness—all it takes is one footprint of another real person to recall us to the endlessly interesting hazards of living relationships” (47-51). And home he goes, wetter, wiser, re-animated and ready for the complications of everyday life—fulfilling precisely Santayana’s “Philosophy of Travel.”

**The Unreliable Narrator?** Travelers’ tales, like fishermen’s tales, are subject to invention and exaggeration. These range from complete fabrications, such as *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (1357), fantastic imaginary voyages by an invented adventurer, to the countless departures from the literal, what Per Krogh Hansen calls “extratextual unreliability,” that people returning from exotic and dangerous adventures incorporate in their accounts to make good stories even better. Since the audience wasn’t there to check up on the narrator, and the tales represent fast-paced activities in and evanescent encounters which couldn’t be replicated even if fact-checkers descended on the site, why not spin a good yarn, particularly if the author is, as Wolff has proclaimed in sinister tones, “a writer,” in fact, a novelist.<sup>6</sup> From a novelist’s perspective, given the hyperbolic nature of this really really bad story, why not make it even worse? It would be relatively easy to check up on his veracity because he is vacationing in a highly specific set of circumstances, surrounded by people—including his family and numerous medical personnel. But does this even matter? In contrast, it would be very hard to provide external verification for the story of Franzen’s, also a novelist. He is alone on Masafuera, own Daniel Defoe, and his tale is captivating, complex. It is also internally consistent—another criterion for reliability. To visit this remote island requires careful advance planning and timing; one cannot get there or leave on impulse. Could his preliminary investigations in the age of the Internet left him unaware of the existence of the *refugio*? Can

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<sup>6</sup> Wolff is also the son of a con man, whose character he anatomizes with relish in *The Duke of Deception*, and brother of Tobias Wolff, not above faking recommendations that would get him into prep school, as he recounts in *This Boy’s Life*.

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Franzen *really* have trusted a large-scale Google printout for a map, on paper that could easily dissolve in the rain? Can he know so little of the territory that he is continually at risk of “being grabbed by a gust of wind and blown off” (37)? Suppose, during his quest for the Masafuera rayadito, he actually spied one? Only his life list will know, but that he didn’t see this mysterious bird fits the story much better. Who’s to know? And, for readers of creative nonfiction who accept the convention that what the author claims as true is for narrative purposes true, that’s sufficient.

**The Takeaway:** What’s the appeal of comic accounts such as Wolff’s and Franzen’s? Why should we care about the misadventures, misery, and near-disasters of unathletic guys, on the downslope not just of age but of common sense, affluent enough to travel long distances at considerable expense (even if a publisher is footing the bill) to make damfools of themselves? Ultimately, we are intrigued by them, just as we are by Don Quixote and Robinson Crusoe, because they disclose their fears, their flaws, their inadequacies and limitations, whether inner bigotry (Wolff) or the inability to keep a friend from committing suicide (Franzen), to readers more like them than we dare acknowledge in public. Their machismo has led them to the brink, they haven’t died, and their own irony invites readers, now become their allies and friends, to relax—into laughter or simply a comfortable release of tension. Humor undermines individual pretensions, just as it subverts polite, politically correct society.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, it’s the extraordinary writing, surprise by surprise, scene by painful scene that could have been inspired by Munch’s “The Scream,” that leads to existential understanding and makes these bad trips so good.

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<sup>7</sup> John C. Meyer’s “Humor as a Double-Edged Sword” provides a scintillating theoretical overview of three pervasive theories of humor—relief, incongruity, and superiority. Meyer’s hilarious illustrations clarify the complex paradox of “humor in communication as, alternatively, a unifier and divider” and thus a delineator of social boundaries, particularly fitting in comic travel accounts (310).

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