

## ELIF BATUMAN | IS TRAVEL WRITING DEAD?

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The question about exoticizing is one I've thought about often, since a lot of the 'travel writing' I've done is about Turkey: a place that was home to my parents, but is basically a foreign country to me. Growing up as a Turkish-American, with Turkish friends and family, I am really conscious of how much people in non-Western countries care about their country's perception in the West – way more than Americans or British people, say, care about how America or Britain appear to Turkey. So, when you're interviewing people in Turkey, in Turkish, for a story that will come out in the *New Yorker*, in English, there are all these power imbalances that come up.

I think most writers do not love being on the side of power. The writer in the Western literary imagination is an individual observer, an individualist, experiencing and observing the world and its structures from the outside, with some amount of skepticism and humor and empathy. If that's what you're trying to do, or to be, it can feel really uncomfortable to realize that, within the story you're trying to write about, there is an equally real sense in which you are actually also the beneficiary and representative of, an insider of, a world-dominating superpower.

But I do feel very strongly that the point of writing is to describe all kinds of experience, including the really common experience of finding oneself in a false position. In a way, the power imbalance built into travel writing is just a heightened version of an imbalance that's there in all writing: an activity or vocation that requires a certain amount of leisure and privilege and education, and isn't equally available to all people in any culture (yet). In the end, I think travel writing is a microcosm for all writing, and the counterintuitive landscapes and stories one finds in other cultures are just another version of the unexpected and counterintuitive landscapes and stories we all find in the world outside ourselves. In describing and moving through these landscapes, the only real recourse we have against charges of exploitation or tone-deafness is to bring as much empathy and as wide a consciousness as we can manage.