



No Man's Lands: One Man's Odyssey Through The Odyssey

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When NPR contributor Scott Huler made one more attempt to get through James Joyce's *Ulysses*, he had no idea it would launch an obsession with the book's inspiration: the ancient Greek epic The Odyssey and the lonely homebound journey of its Everyman hero, Odysseus. *No-Man's Lands* is Huler's funny and touching exploration of the life lessons embedded within *The Odyssey*, a legendary tale of wandering and longing that could be read as a veritable guidebook for middle-aged men everywhere. At age forty-four, with his first child on the way, Huler felt an instant bond with Odysseus, who fought for some twenty years against formidable difficulties to return home to his beloved wife and son. In reading *The Odyssey*, Huler saw the chance to experience a great vicarious adventure as well as the opportunity to assess the man he had become and embrace the imminent arrival of both middle age and parenthood. But Huler realized that it wasn't enough to simply read the words on the page—he needed to live Odysseus's odyssey, to visit the exotic destinations that make Homer's story so timeless. And so an ambitious pilgrimage was born . . . traveling the entire length of Odysseus's two-decade journey. In six months, Huler doggedly retraced Odysseus's every step, from the ancient ruins of Troy to his ultimate destination in Ithaca. On the way, he discovers the Cyclops's Sicilian cave, visits the land of the dead in Italy, ponders the lotus from a Tunisian resort, and paddles a rented kayak between Scylla and Charybdis and lives to tell the tale. He writes of how and why the lessons of *The Odyssey*—the perils of ambition, the emptiness of glory, the value of love and family—continue to resonate so deeply with readers thousands of years later. And as he finally closes in on Odysseus's final destination, he learns to fully appreciate what Homer has been saying all along: the greatest adventures of all are the ones that bring us home to those we love. Part travelogue, part memoir, and part critical reading of the greatest adventure epic ever written, *No-Man's Lands* is an extraordinary description of two journeys—one ancient, one contemporary—and reveals what *The Odyssey* can teach us about being better bosses, better teachers, better parents, and better people.

From the Hardcover edition.

No Man's Lands: One Man's Odyssey Through The Odyssey Details

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Andrew says

An account written by an American journalist of his visits to the historic sites of Homer's "The Odyssey". It's interesting if you like literary travel books (like Paul Theroux's accounts) -- and this one mixes the story of "The Odyssey" with current places, along with the historic background of the tales from the Trojan War.

This is a good armchair travel book: it will introduce you to some aspect of traveling in the Mediterranean with which you're unfamiliar. It might even spark interest in Malta, Italy, Greece or Turkey -- with some warnings about how or when NOT to travel.

Huler also works in a little sociology, telling the story of wartime events in Crete and how they were retold by an oral poet. Greek-American scholar James Notopoulos discovered that in nine years the events had added a beautiful young woman sacrificed for the good of Crete and deleted non-Cretans from the tale.

He also notes that nuraghe towers were built on Sardinia -- conical stone structures built by the thousands on Sardinia sometime in the 1200-900 BC period, all without the benefit of mortar. That's enough to spark a little more historical research.

Kit says

This is the latest offering in Literary Extreme Sports: the author sets out to recreate the journey of Odysseus (and write a book about it). The parts that are essentially a lecture on the Odyssey are really interesting, and left me wishing that the book had been a popular critique/explanation of the Odyssey instead of what it was, which was part travel book, part essay on the Odyssey, and part mid-life crisis. (At least the author mentions at one point that Odysseus probably wouldn't have considered the Odyssey a mid-life crisis.)

The parts where the author looks for existential meaning out of his trip were the weakest ones, because it seemed that he was trying too hard to make his revelations come at exactly the point in the story where they would parallel Odysseus'. And the whole idea of recreating Odysseus' travels doesn't really work, seeing as how some of the places in the Odysssey are obviously fictional. And those books where you have to go around the world to find Deep Existential Meaning drive me up the wall anyway. On the other hand, parts of the travel narrative were really funny. I kept turning the pages, even though when I got done I wished they had added up to more.

Allison says

I loved the premise of this book. After falling in love with *The Odyssey* the author traveled to the sites (or places hypothesized to be the present-day sites) journeyed to by Odysseus. And, on top of the great premise, Huler wrote a fantastic travelogue. He incorporated aspects of history, geography, literature, mythology and biography into a well-written, and often humorous, account of his wanderings. However, in the last 20 pages

or so the author recounted the birth of his first child (which occurred shortly after his return from his Mediterranean trip) and his thoughts about this experience. I understand that becoming a parent is a life-changing event and that there are some interesting contrasts to draw (Odysseus' journey caused his to miss his son's childhood). But, I found the section to be self-important. It annoyed me so much that I almost didn't finish the book.

John says

I've been a real fan of the historical footsteps genre lately, and this one is pretty good. I've never read *The Odyssey* myself, although the teacher in my required Jr High Latin class would read parts to us at the end of class if we behaved; being mostly nerds, we loved the soap-opera aspect of it.

Huler deserves great credit for planning a trip based on a travel story, where the exact locations of events are uncertain. I thought his "analysis" of the plotpoints, with modern parallels, quite funny, but I'm now curious to hear how non-North Americans find it; I detected a New Jersey accent in his delivery, and the cultural references are almost entirely American ("Gilligan's Island" etc.). Definitely recommended.

Phair says

It was a bit better than just OK but suffered from a lack of pictures (he spent a lot of time sketching- we couldn't get to see some of the sketches at least?) The travels are not presented chronologically so that was a bit confusing. He muses a lot about life, philosophy, & the heroic journey. The author laments the coming of the European Union which he feels diminishes the 'adventure' of European travel by blurring the borders. Overall it was interesting. p258-9: "a pilgrim approaches his journey not with understanding, but with hope; not to discover something new but to rediscover something ancient. A pilgrim wishes not to discover Lourdes or Mecca or Jerusalem but to be near it, to be nourished by its power." Ulysses' journey was an adventure, the author's was a pilgrimage.

Liska says

This is an interesting book of contradictions. On the one hand, it's got an interesting premise, the pull of being a true-life story and a fairly honest one at that, and some awesome/hilarious/awesomely hilarious summaries of most of the stories in the *Odyssey*. It even made me want to re-read the *Odyssey* itself. Almost.

But on the other hand, it digresses to random, unnecessary arguments about the merits of various religious systems; and the witty, snappy summations of Odysseus's life give way to present travelogue sections written in pretentious, flowery language that often doesn't even observe standard word order for prose (at which point he never passes up an opportunity to mention that he's a journalist).

That last one will probably only bother you if you're an elitist English major, but it's still highly distracting from an otherwise worthwhile read. While I want to give this book full marks for its originality and reinterpretation of the *Odyssey*, the actual story is about Huler's quest as it were through the greater Mediterranean, and that story merits it only an average rating, no matter how above-average the scope.

Above all, I AM SO GLAD I'M FINALLY DONE WITH THIS STUPID BOOK.

Colin says

I picked this one up from the library. A quirky book following Scott Huler's trip around the Mediterranean following the voyages of Odysseus, following his discovery that he had never really read the *Odyssey* (following a read of Joyce's *Ulysses*). Part memoir of the journey, part analysis of the *Odyssey*, it suffers somewhat from the author's scattered retelling of sections of his own journey, but it was a fun and interesting read.

Ensiform says

The author, dragged reluctantly into reading Joyce's *Ulysses*, discovers that, despite what he'd remembered, he has never read the Homeric epic which inspired it.

Once he begins to finally read the tale, he's fascinated, and eventually embarks on a trip across Turkey, Greece, and Italy in the possible footsteps of the probably mythological hero – while his wife, at home, waits for him, pregnant with her first baby. The parallelism is appealing, and Huler milks it for all it's worth, noting how the gods play games with his plans, just as they did with Odysseus, and he's tempted by a flight attendant on Malta, just like Odysseus with Calypso, and he gets homesick too, just like Odysseus! He takes it a bit far, making sure to carefully match an Important Life Lesson to every leg of the travel, a lesson that both he and Odysseus learned. But it's a fun and informative read. The travel writing is nice enough, but Huler excels at explaining the episodes in Odysseus' story, framing them in context of the character's life and making his decisions seem eminently reasonable, whether he's ignoring his crew to boast to the Cyclops or hiding his identity from his wife. Armed with helpful comments from classics professors and centuries of exegesis, from the learned to the crackpot, Huler is a very companionable, knowledgeable guide to Odysseus' world.

Carolyn Rose says

Often amusing tale that took me to what might have been the places mentioned in the *Odyssey* and provided larger context for the travels

Nancy says

This book is part travlogue, part literary analysis. No one was more glad than I when Scott Huler concluded his tracings of Odysseus' journey as I had tired of his whining about missing his wife. All in all, the book does have some merit. His background information, retelling of Odysseus' adventures and analysis of Odysseus would be valuable to the student of any age. I could see this being read in conjunction with a study of The *Odyssey* if it were assigned in parts or as a review for the older student. It does not necessarily have to be read word for word to be enjoyed.

David Radavich says

A friend recently sent me this captivating book by Scott Huler - part memoir, part travelogue, part coming-of-middle-age, part rumination on life and Homer's *ODYSSEY* - and I have savored it a chapter or two at a time across the author's Odyssean adventures. Huler retraces the sojourns of that wiliest of Greek heroes, from Turkey to Tunisia, Sicily, Italy, and Malta and many points in-between. The writing is full of wisdom (though sometimes verging on the corny) and free-spiritedness. This is the modern-day *LONELY PLANET* guide to the exotic worlds of the *ODYSSEY*. A mind- and soul-expanding read.

Loren says

I couldn't get through it. It reminded me of Tony Perrottet's travels in the same part of the world, but those books are much more enjoyable. This was a jumble. It begins 12 stops into Huler's retracing of the *Odyssey*, with him glad that the two pretty stewardesses he meets aren't interested in having sex with him because his second wife is home alone, eight months pregnant, and anticipating his return. Ick. I'm more interested in the *Odyssey* -- and Mediterranean travel than this guy's midlife issues. The more he compares himself to Odysseus, the more he loses in comparison.

It did make me want to reread the *Odyssey* myself, though. And go back to Greece.

Cheryl says

Once in a while I fall in love with an author of the book I am reading. I don't know how common that is, and it only happens once every year or so for me. I fell in love with Scott Huler during *Defining the Wind*, and have been waiting, waiting, waiting for another chance. His other books have been about Nascar, Continental Airlines, and being a Cleveland Browns fan, which shows the depth and breadth of his range as a writer, but did not appeal to me at all. This author is funny and smart and thoughtful and philosophic and grounded and I loved this book. I was fascinated by the Greek pantheon when I was in school, but was never able to get too excited about the epics such as the *Odyssey* or the *Iliad*. I laughed when I read how the author thought he had read the *Odyssey* and lived his life by principles he thought he remembered from the *Odyssey* but actually did not ever read it. I loved the curious and questing spirit that inspired him to try to retrace Odysseus's footsteps. That sort of love for the world, for learning, for travel, for growing as a person is amazing, and uncommon in our cynical and world weary time. It should be celebrated and feted and win awards and be read by everyone. In my version of a perfect world, at least.

The book is a fantastic balance between a travelogue, history lesson, and literary critique. Huler is aware of the holiness of places and being in the moment, but also was very honest about how he was personally on a pilgrimage or quest to look at his life and the principles he believed in and see where they fit with his new life as a father, and that honesty is so appealing and cool. As he travelled, he was able to evaluate his interpretations of the story and see them in a new light, with lessons to share. It is said that there are a few stories that seem inherently human, that is, found in many cultures separated by the planet, with similar themes and ideas and lessons. So as foolish as the hero often seems, the events of the story teach us about the human condition, and what honor and loyalty and faith and courage are. If I were to try to read the *Odyssey*

(not sure if again is the right word, since I am not sure I read it either), I could see it in a whole new way and learn something from it. It is said to be a quintessential middle aged man's tale, but I take exception to that, because women also wander, have quests, adventure, find wells of courage, and sometimes have to be told to stop to ask for directions or help. I related to this story and I am not middle aged nor male, so there is a universality to both the epic and the book.

"Extended travel reminds you that you are an animal. You spend a lot of time outdoors, sniffing the air, redolent of sage or salt; you watch the sun arc throughout the day, the moon grow full, then slight; you feel the predominant local wind kick up at dusk or dawn. Your bad gets heavy, your muscles tired. Forgetting to fill your belly before restaurants close for the afternoon can cause despondence... You get blisters, windburn, mysterious stomach ailments. That is, you exist physically, all day long, in ways that during most of you everyday life you never notice." I am ready to pack my bag, I want to do this again... Much of my travel has been in the U.S. but it is still true that I would have more physical and landscape awareness that ever before. On a climb to a sleeping volcano the author remembers a theory of Aristotle's where he stated wind originates from the inside of the planet, and the vented steamy fumaroles in the mist seem to make the previously scoffed at theory more real and concrete. I love that imagery. I read a dry but interesting account of the first European's "discovery" of Yellowstone National Park and the idea of being the first to see something, or experience something is a feeling I have felt or thought of as a spiritual exercise that brings awe and reverence to many times in my life. It explains so much of the ancient's theories and explanations of the natural world.

This last quote has almost nothing to do with the book, or the *Odyssey*, but it is really interesting take on the difference between the sexes.

"All of the wars, all of the journeys, all of the roaring and the bellowing and the blood-all of this is what men do because we can't have babies. At birth, you are in the presence, literally, of life and death, of the thin line between them. Your accomplishments vanish in comparison to what you see as your wife endure as she labors, risks all for the prize against which none compare. I think all the massive enterprises men undertake, we do simply to try to make ourselves feel a part of something."

Katy says

Scott Huler's interest in Homer was rekindled by James Joyce, but rather than read the Irishman's *Ulysses*, he undertakes a journey of his own following as closely as possible the journey of Homer's hero as he strives to return home to Ithaca. Six months of preparation and research went into Huler's re-creation of Odysseus' journey, and his narrative is both entertaining and informative.

tea_for_two says

The *Odyssey* has always been one of my favorite stories and I've studied pre-classical Mediterranean culture, but I'd never thought about the stories from the *Odyssey* in a geographical context. Huler explains the controversy surrounded Odysseusian geography as well as his reasons for choosing the locations he visited. He also reviews the stories of the *Odyssey* and the historical controversies surrounding the Trojan War and Homer. An excellent book that I thoroughly enjoyed, though it made me nostalgic for the summer I spent in Greece.

