



# Unruly Places: Lost Spaces, Secret Cities, and Other Inscrutable Geographies

*Alastair Bonnett*

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**Unruly Places: Lost Spaces, Secret Cities, and Other Inscrutable Geographies** Alastair Bonnett

**A tour of the world's hidden geographies—from disappearing islands to forbidden deserts—and a stunning testament to how mysterious the world remains today** At a time when Google Maps Street View can take you on a virtual tour of Yosemite's remotest trails and cell phones double as navigational systems, it's hard to imagine there's any uncharted ground left on the planet. In *Unruly Places*, Alastair Bonnett goes to some of the most unexpected, offbeat places in the world to reinspire our geographical imagination.

Bonnett's remarkable tour includes moving villages, secret cities, no man's lands, and floating islands. He explores places as disorienting as Sandy Island, an island included on maps until just two years ago despite the fact that it never existed. Or Sealand, an abandoned gun platform off the English coast that a British citizen claimed as his own sovereign nation, issuing passports and crowning his wife as a princess. Or Baarle, a patchwork of Dutch and Flemish enclaves where walking from the grocery store's produce section to the meat counter can involve crossing national borders.

An intrepid guide down the road much less traveled, Bonnett reveals that the most extraordinary places on earth might be hidden in plain sight, just around the corner from your apartment or underfoot on a wooded path. Perfect for urban explorers, wilderness ramblers, and armchair travelers struck by wanderlust, *Unruly Places* will change the way you see the places you inhabit.

## Unruly Places: Lost Spaces, Secret Cities, and Other Inscrutable Geographies Details

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# From Reader Review **Unruly Places: Lost Spaces, Secret Cities, and Other Inscrutable Geographies** for online ebook

## **Thomas Cook says**

I was disappointed in this book. I wanted to like it, and perhaps I am too much of a geographic stickler, but the read did not live up to the premise of the title. The author did not travel to many of the places listed, and there are too many places listed. Nor does the collection hang together. The book works well as a sampling of interesting places, and you can open it up anywhere and have a fun read; leave it in the restroom.

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## **Daren says**

Well, it took me longer to shelve the countries than it will to review...

This was a great drop-in-drop-out book - the way I used it was for a half hour here and a half hour there. There are forty seven short stories in this book, divided into eight themes sections. They average about six pages each, so very manageable.

Of the forty seven stories, there were probably 10 great stories, another fifteen good ones, and at the other end, probably 10 that were terrible. That leaves a dozen that were readable without being much more. On that basis it is more hit than miss, and tracks around three stars for me.

My expectations going in were quirks in geography, hidden corners, border anomalies and probably some off-the-grid type military or political enclaves. These were present, and probably formed the more enjoyable part of my reading, along with a few other unusual chapters. The chapters that didn't really resonate with me were the more ephemeral or theoretical ones - where geography and history slip into sociology and psychology. This is of course purely personal preference, but that's the way it fell to me. I think fewer locations, better selected and in a little more depth would have suited me.

Particular highlights, off the top of my head - the underground cities of Cappadocia, North Sentinel Island, the land border section (India/Bangladesh; Sudan/Egypt; El Salvador/Honduras; and some of the floating islands and enclaves.

Worth a read, but probably I would struggle to sit down and read it cover to cover.

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## **Emma Sea says**

I wanted to like this book a hell of a lot more than I did. I found it all a little too . . . ordinary. The places (or non-places) were well described, but the words lacked that magic sense of evocativeness, and the "what they tell us about the world" just . . . missed, somehow? Maybe it's because it's formatted as a series of almost encyclopedic entries, each about one specific place. There's no overall thematic structure or narrative to tie them together. Or maybe it's because these aren't, in general, places that Bonnett has a link to, that he's visited. He's pulled the information for entries from other books, because they're interesting on the surface. There's little personal connection to Bonnett in here, outside of a few succinctly-stated anecdotes. But place

is mediated through human experience, and without that spark of connectedness everything was just a little hollow and flat.

This is nothing like a gorgeous as any of Mary Oliver's writing about place, or Robert MacFarlane's.

I feel guilty for giving it a 2, but for me it was only OK.

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### **Nikki says**

This was something of an impulsive purchase, and it turned out to be lighter reading than I expected. Each section is very short, sometimes just three pages long, and it leaves you wondering why he included such-and-such a place if there was so little to say about it. After all, the point of this book is to highlight interesting stuff about places that don't exist (that either never have, or no longer do, or can't officially, or...), so surely it's worth spending some time on each one. Instead, a lot of the sections come across as perfunctory, included more out of a sense that they fit the theme than because they're interesting.

There are some interesting facts in here, and I do enjoy the way Bonnett cross-references with fiction — when he talks about St Petersburg/Leningrad, he mentions China Miéville's *The City & The City*, for example. But it was too much of a grab bag of not-always-interesting facts, and sometimes it also came across as rather preachy. Not that I disagree with Bonnett on many of these things, but still, the tone is offputting.

Originally posted here.

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### **Laura says**

As stated in the publisher marketing "this is not a book you need to read cover to cover" and I have not though I would like to go back at some point and do so because it is clear the author has a particular flow to these essays in mind. Instead, I have been like a chicken pecking here and there in the grass when just steps away is a feeding trough neatly laid out. Ad though the reader can amass a wonderful collection of conversational trivia from this marvelous essay collection, it is far more than cocktail party fodder. It is a collection with intellect and scope, a geo-social treatise on place and landscape, on belonging and on the mystery of our ever-changing planet. Bonnett examines the relationship between place and the human psyche and give intriguing examples of both natural and unnatural geological change. More than mere geographical observation and stopping short of environmental activism, the author seeks to engage our "geological imagination". Bonnett strings together stories of earth's transitional landscapes, the paradox of border regions and no man's lands, the rapid appearance and disappearance of islands, inland seas, and communities. Fascinating and impressively presented.

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### **Nancy Kennedy says**

In "Unruly Places," Alastair Bonnett has written neither a tour guide nor a history book. Instead, it's a sort of mash-up of history, philosophy and sociology applied to the geography of little-known places on the earth. In separate chapters, the author examines places as diverse as islands that appear only on maps, underground

colonies, deserted cities, male-only religious territories, and even urban "gutterspace," or slivers of land between buildings.

Facts are my thing. Theory not so much. I found some parts of the book interesting and some of it too conceptual to capture my interest. I knew a little bit about some of the places the author examines -- for example, underground cities inhabited by early Christians -- and I enjoyed learning more about them. But the author's philosophizing often made no sense to me. Of living underground, he says on one page that "there is something down there; something we are drawn to," but just a few pages later says "only the truly fearful choose to live under the ground." Which is it? Are we drawn to it? Or forced underground?

The chapters are brief, some only three or four pages, so you can take this book a little at a time, if you like. It's probably better to read it that way, as the connecting tissue of the book is fairly thin. But if you like to examine the mundane in a poetic way, this might be the book for you. For example, here is how the author starts his chapter on "Enclaves and Breakaway Nations": "I don't have an easy relationship with borders. They frighten and unnerve me. Searched, prodded, delayed; again and again, for the temerity of crossing a few feet of land. They are bureaucratic fault lines, imperious and unfriendly." Not really my thoughts as I cross a border, but then again, I'm not a poet or philosopher.

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## **Brendon Schrodinger says**

Books about maps and weird geography always get me. I'm a sucker for them.

Alastair Bonnett offers up "Off the Map" to us geo-nerds and its premise is to talk about many weird places that have their weirdness due to several reasons. He breaks the reasons down into several categories or chapters: dead places, in-between places, places that never were and renegade places. You'll read about an island that was on maps into the early 2000s, even on google maps, that never existed, a town that grew up in a cemetery, Sealand, the small nation established on a WWII gunner platform off the UK coast, islands made of trash or pumice, 'The World' a sailing ship for the ultra wealthy and many others.

While there were lots of fascinating tales as well as obscure facts in this book it did not quite fulfil my desire. The author is quite eloquent and his observations and conclusions are astute. But there was not much in-between. This book swayed from trivia to philosophical observation in a heartbeat and then the chapter ended and you were thrown into another weirdness. With just over seventy different places to chapters in a 300 page book, you were left on an ride of going "oh that's fascinating", "that's a great observation" to "oh that's the end of that. Maybe I can look up all those extra questions I have on Google."

When a book does this seventy times it's a little frustrating.

It's even more astounding that the author seemed to have travelled to some of these places and interviewed people, all for 5 or six pages of text. It seems like an awful waste. I would have loved to see ten or twelve of these places properly discussed instead of a frenetic whirlwind.

So, definitely one for completists and lovers of geography, especially those who love trivia.

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## **Jill Hutchinson says**

Do you suffer from "topophilia"? I think we all do as it is defined as "love of place". It is the fabric of our lives, a place to call home, memory, and identity. This book weaves topophilia into the author's search for those unusual places in the world that help define it and why, in most cases, people continue to inhabit these spaces. A social geographer, he takes us to areas that we didn't even know existed and to make it easier, he divides his chapters into such topics as lost spaces, no man's lands, dead cities, spaces of exception, and much more. Some are right under our feet such as the underground labyrinth beneath Minneapolis/St. Paul, USA. Some which were thought to exist into modern times and appear on most maps, such as Sandy Island near Australia, don't really exist at all. Or the Aral Sea in Central Asia which has morphed into the Aral Desert where the inhabitants eagerly await the return of the "blue water" which will probably never happen.

The author slows things down a bit in some chapters by his discussions about global warming.....although an important and disturbing condition that is changing the world in which we live, he gets a bit repetitive. Otherwise, this is an armchair traveler's paradise and will amaze you that these "unruly spaces" actually exist.

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## **Paul says**

Apart from some obscure bits of the Amazon rainforest and Indonesian jungles we think that there can be no undiscovered parts of the world; can there? Surely, we must have discovered everything on Google Earth by now. Off The Map sets about putting that record straight. In this book, Bonnett helps us discover secret places, unexpected islands, slivers of a metropolis and hidden villages. Russia seems to have more than its fair share of secret and abandoned cities. There is Zheleznogorsk, a military town that never existed on any map and still retains some of its secrecy today. Probably the most infamous is Pripyat, abandoned days after the nuclear explosion at Chernobyl, it is slowly being reclaimed by nature; the amount of radiation means that the area will not be safe for humans to reoccupy for at least 900 years. Give or take...

Bonnett tells us about disputed borders that mean that the people still living there are unattached to any nation, a man in New York who bought the tiny strips of land alongside tower blocks for a few dollars each. There is Sealand, a fortress built in World War Two and now a self-declared principality in the North Sea. Other islands exist in our oceans too, some that are on maps that have never been there, others made from rubbish that has collected together and occasionally floating rocks; or pumice as it is better known, the residue from underwater volcanoes. There is also a huge vessel called the World, collectively owned by the residents, it ploughs the seas keeping all the riff-raff away. He mentions the abandoned villages of England from the second world war, including one just down the road from me; Arne.

It is a fascinating book, full of weird and wonderful trivia about places that you really wouldn't want to visit on your holidays. It is also an exploration of what makes a landscape and the things we draw from it. Worth reading for anyone who is fascinated by those places that just don't fit the map. 3.5 stars

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## **Dina says**

Grandísima decepción. Es un libro de curiosidades, pero un libro mal escrito. Lo leer por leer. Vas viendo lugares y te vas diciendo a ti misma, vaya que bien, que curioso, pero en ningún momento tienes ganas de

saber más ni de ver cual es la siguiente historia.  
Muy bonito, pero muy mediocre.

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### **Jenny (Reading Envy) says**

I really enjoyed this book, and it will go right next to Atlas of Remote Islands on my geeky geography wishlist.

The author uncovers some obscure instances of secret/lost/unknown places, like floating pumice islands, towns not listed on maps in Russia, underground cities, and disappearing corners.

What about the music festival that happens in an ice cave in Norway? Sign me up.

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### **Jules says**

I liked this a lot, I really did, it's a curious exploration of hidden cities like mystery islands being uncovered and swallowed by the rising sea level, cemetery villages within a city, underground cities built to escape religious persecution and forgotten by time, or artificially created floating ice villages. However it felt really uneven in the quality of the pieces, the more interesting ones weren't explored thoroughly enough, and there's a good dose of authorial self insertion I thought really dragged the pieces down.

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### **Bandit says**

Some destinations aren't on the maps. Some are, but in no conventional way. They don't follow rules, which makes them by definition unruly and this book is a compendium of such locations. My second read by the author and again a terrific adventure. Bonnett is a professor of social geology, meaning not only does he know his subject, but he also presents it in a superbly fascinating, intellectually challenging and stimulating way. Not only did he find dozens of positively bizarre singular places, but he writes about them in a way that makes you ponder the very nature of our connections to these places. Bonnett postulates quite accurately that there are place making place loving species and as such we find ourselves homemaking in outlandish locales, creating creature comforts where none are readily available and bedding down in some very strange places indeed. And all of these locations are given context too, so that they can be understood within the grand scheme of things, both sociopolitical and anthropological. In the modern world where countries make for such uneasy neighbors, Bonnet argues for the world of created (however ersatz and inadequate) territorial boundaries the way I'd argue for democracy...far from perfect but it's the best available. There are places here that desperately strive for independence, while some are equally desperate to find somewhere to belong. Tentative alliances and allegiances based on ancient past or circumstantial present, but also some absolutely random geographical creations, this book spans it all from need to whimsy. And no matter how well read and well informed you are or how seasoned or an armchair traveler you might be, it's sure to surprise you with a place or two that'll boggle the mind, delight and bewilder. Bonnett is a serious writer, and even though I may prefer my nonfiction to be slightly more humorous, his writing easily surpasses my desire for light amusement by just being so engaging and smart. Idea upon idea, this book is a genuine fount of information and food for thought. It really is. My favorite thing about Bonnett's books is the way he makes you think of the world as a wider and wilder place than presented by my standard Mercator projection map on the wall. It

makes you consider the world around us with certain awe and that's just...well, awesome. Great read, edifying, educational, enlightening and terrifically succinct for such a strikingly inspiring undertaking. Recommended.

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## jeremy says

*authentic topophilia can never be satisfied with a diet of sunny villages. the most fascinating places are often also the most disturbing, entrapping, and appalling. they are also often temporary. in ten years' time most of the places we will be exploring will look very different; many will not be there at all. but just as biophilia doesn't lessen because we know that nature is often horrible and that all life is transitory, genuine topophilia knows that our bond with place isn't about finding the geographical equivalent of kittens and puppies. this is a fierce love. it is a dark enchantment. it goes deep and demands our attention.*

alastair bonnett's *unruly places* offers transportive and captivating glimpses into the world's "lost spaces, secret cities, and other inscrutable geographies." divided into eight sections: "lost spaces," "hidden geographies," "no man's lands," "dead cities," "spaces of exception," "enclaves and breakaway nations," "floating islands," and "ephemeral places," bonnett's compendium of geographical curiosities will allure wanderlusters and imaginarians alike.

bonnett takes us around the globe, visiting forty-seven locales of remarkable disparity: an island long believed to exist (that actually doesn't), a once great sea that's now nearly desert, turkish underground cities, a cemetery inhabited by the living, traffic islands, lands of shifting borders, cities abandoned after industrial disasters, cities left unfinished, freeports, secret prisons, intentional communities, illegal settlements, feral cities, a land forbidden to women (including female animals), pumice rafts, trash islands, man-made islands, floating communities, public sex spots, play spaces, and an airport parking lot, amongst many others.

bonnett, a professor of social geography, invites us to think about the nature and meaning of place, drawing our attention to the neglected, forgotten, unknown, and undesirable locations that dot our planet. we are led to consider what specifically it might be that makes place so important to our species (collectively and as individuals). while bonnett's vignettes are wonderfully intriguing and succinctly portrayed, *unruly places* shies away from the deeper philosophical explorations it could have so easily embarked upon. it is, nonetheless, an engrossing tour of some of the world's most enigmatic and curious locales.

*yet while those who care about place have a lot to be troubled about, it would be a shame if this discussion was limited to nostalgic laments. as we have seen, the world is still full of unexpected places that have the power to delight, sometimes appall, but always intrigue. these unruly places provoke us and force us to think about the neglected but fundamental role of place in our lives. they challenge us to see ourselves for what we are: a place-making and place-loving species.*

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## **Althea Ann says**

This is a great book to pick up when you don't have the time (or attention span) to sit down and get engrossed in something lengthy. It feels almost like a compilation of a column from a magazine - a couple of pages devoted to each entry.

The theme is interesting places around the world. The focus is on the interstitial - things that are caught in the margins, between one thing and the other, not one thing or the other, overlooked, decaying, forgotten. Like many others, I find such things fascinating, so I picked up this book both as a potential guidebook and to hear the author's take on such places.

At a few junctures, the authors pontificating can get slightly pompous, in the manner of an academic lecture. Overall, however, his ideas about the psychology of topography: our conception of space, place, and borders (and how those change over time, are affected by politics, etc.), are quite fascinating.

The chosen places, and the factual information on each of them, was also interesting. I did know about a decent percentage of the places mentioned, but I still kept raising my head up from the book to say to whoever was around: "Hey! Did you know...?"

Each item that the author has included an essay on is accompanied by its longitude and latitude... however, what would've really brought this book up to 5 stars is if the author had teamed up with a National Geographic-quality photographer in order to illustrate these locations. For nearly every item, I found myself longing to see it as described - not just to peer at it via Google Earth. A coffee-table edition, with photos, would be a great project!

An advance copy of this book was provided by NetGalley. Thanks so much for the opportunity to read... As always, my opinions are my own.

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