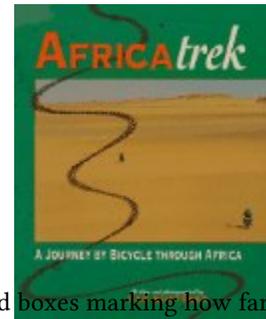


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Dan Buettner. *Africatrek: A Journey by Bicycle Through Africa*. Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Company, 1997. 32 pp. \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8225-2951-4.

Reviewed by Sarah Manyika (University of California, Berkeley)  
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This extraordinary tale is a factual account of a multinational team that successfully cycles across Africa in eight months. *Africatrek* is written by Dan Buettner, the leader and organizer of the five member team that included three Americans, a Nigerian, and a Ugandan.

The author begins by describing the formation and funding of the multinational team. The two primary goals for the team were “to show the world that black people and white people could co-operate” and to “set a Guinness Book world record for crossing Africa” (p.11). The rest of the book is a description of how this team of intrepid cyclists journeyed from North Africa, through West and Central Africa to their final destination in South Africa. As a reader follows the team on its journey, he or she experiences both the frustrations and triumphs encountered along the way. Some of the frustrations include difficult terrain, bad weather, border controls, forced detours, dangerous war conditions, illness, and personal defeat. The description of the treacherous Sahara crossing is particularly well depicted as is the account of Dan’s failed attempt to climb to the top of Mount Kilimanjaro.

Illustrations, photographs, and maps add to the richness of this book by providing informative and interesting images of places and people. Examples include various pictures of team members and the friends that the cyclists made along the way. There are also some excellent photographs that “capture the moment” thereby giving the reader even greater insight into what the trip must have been like. One picture for example catches school children peeking between their fingers during morning prayers while another captures a team member’s feverish look during a bout of malaria. Other features of this book such as a glossary of terms, special orange boxes

with anecdotal information, and boxes marking how far the team had traveled at a given time are all helpful additions.

*Africatrek* has an interesting story to tell but unfortunately the strengths of the book are undermined by some significant weaknesses. These weaknesses range from omissions and glossing of key information to negative stereotyping and misleading information. Details of these weaknesses shall now be explored.

Significant omissions range from instances where it would have been helpful for the reader to know more on a topic to instances where it is actually misleading not to include more information on a topic. Instances of the former include the first map on page sixteen where part of the continent is chopped off, Madagascar is not labeled, and there is no key to explain the map’s different colours and demarcations. Another example of where the reader would benefit from further information occurs at the beginning of the book when the author is describing the selection process for the team. The author states, “I first saw a picture of Chip in a mail-order catalogue” (p. 10), but no further information is given on the nature of this “mail-order catalogue.” What kind of mail-order catalogue was this? Likewise, the reader is kept in the dark as to where and how the fifty-four African candidates were selected. The text contains many such instances of omissions and glossing of pertinent information. However, the more serious instances of omissions occur when events are not placed in context. The failure to include any explanation of the conflict and war in Algeria and Zaire are prime examples. Describing Algeria, the author states, “My introduction to the city was witnessing a young Algerian firing on the government building with a pistol. Police beat him to the ground and

dragged him away” (pp. 22-23). This startling piece of information is then immediately followed by the statement “We nonetheless had a pleasant four-day stay!” There is no contextualization as to why this young Algerian might be firing at the government building and why he was subsequently brutalized. The reader is no more the wiser when a few sentences later we are told that the team has to rush back to their hotel by 10:00 pm because “people caught on the street after that hour might be shot” (p. 23). With absolutely no discussion of the politics of this regional conflict, the section on Algeria closes with the puzzling statement that “Not only did the landscape of southern Algeria change from that of the north, but the people did, too. They got nicer” (p. 26). What exactly does a statement such as this mean? Such decontextualized descriptions inevitably lead to, or perpetuate unwarranted negative stereotypes.

Although *AfricaTrek* makes some steps towards avoiding stereotyping and perpetuating negative images, it doesn’t completely escape the use of negative stereotypes and negative imagery. Algerian border guards are, for example, made to look like simpletons for thinking that a PowerBar was a drug. Similarly, descriptions of African food are particularly derogatory. The descriptions include “spicy okra soup that followed the spoon to

your mouth in snotlike strands” (p. 45), garri that formed “gooey, baseball-sized lumps” and “boiled cassava that looked like thick mush” (p. 44). West Africans take pride in their eclectic cuisine and rather than putting a negative spin on his descriptions of their food, the author might have tried to describe the texture of garri and/or boiled cassava as something more like polenta or even oatmeal. Similarly instead of referring disdainfully to roasted tripe as “animal stomach tissue eaten as food” (p. 41) and to various insects as things “eaten as food” in Africa, the author might have tried making the point that such food is in fact considered a delicacy in many cultures including that of “haute cuisine” in expensive Parisian or San Franciscan restaurants.

It is a shame that a story with so much potential should be marred by the weaknesses outlined above. Some of these weaknesses could surely have been avoided had the author consulted with people from the cultures that he was describing. The book might have been better had it been co-written with input from the international members team of the cycling team.

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