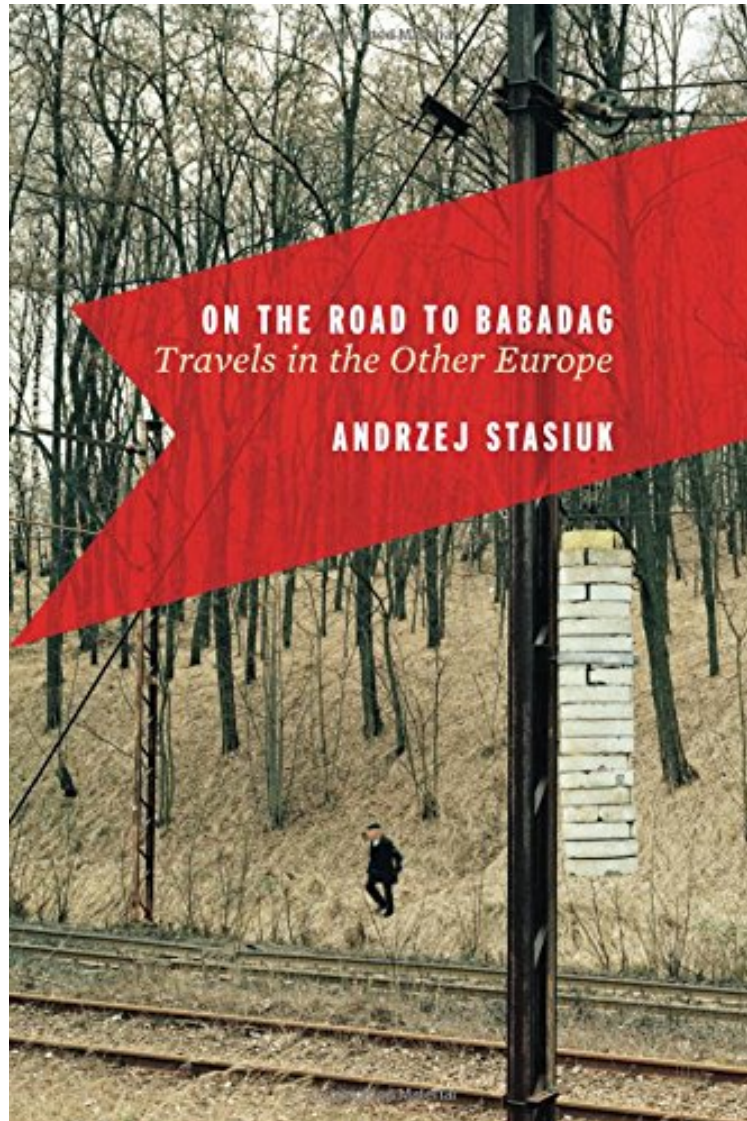


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On the Road to Babadag: Travels in the Other Europe

Andrzej Stasiuk, Petra Hardt

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Andrzej Stasiuk, Petra Hardt : On the Road to Babadag: Travels in the Other Europe before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised On the Road to Babadag: Travels in the Other Europe:

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Lost in Space and Time - Stasiuk's On the Road to Babadag By Robert T. OKEEFFE First, before all else, I must say that for anyone who has an interest in or has traveled through central and eastern Europe, this is a wonderful book, an unconventional kind of travel writing informed by personal obsessions and downright manias (I sympathize with both this kind of travel and its re-creation through writing, be it

fiction or in essayistic form). Readers who might enjoy Stasiuk's three volumes of travel essays that have been translated into English will be equally impressed by his novels from the 1990s and early 2000s ("White Raven", "Nine", and "Tales of Galicia"). To situate Stasiuk's travel essays (this is a terminological convenience, because they are much more than that, including nature-writing, philosophical rumination, and a parable or two) in time, readers should be aware that their English translations came in reverse order of their publication dates in Poland - in Polish "Dukla" was published in 1999, "Jadac do Babadag" in 2004, and "FADO" in 2006. All three refer to an extraordinary number of brief trips taken over the course of a decade or so - I think of them as "raids" into the Carpathian mountains and basin, the Balkans, and obscure recesses of his native land and adjoining countries. In "Babadag" Stasiuk as reporter is on the road in Jack Kerouac style (a comparison he made explicitly in FADO), and, compared to his other two travel works, his pace is unrelenting and the changes of scene constant. At the outset of Babadag he has a detailed map in hand, the "Slovak 200", a reference to its scale. It's large, floppy, and suffers from the normal effects of age - wear at the creases, occasional holes, and the gradual fading of both the grid and individual places marked upon it. In Stasiuk's mind the worn-out map is metaphorical of humanity's progress and eventual destiny: we came, we saw, we settled or conquered, then we were vanquished by our own conquests, and soon we will be extinguished by vast, impersonal forces and processes that we will never be able to control, sharing the eventual fate of all forms of life on this earth -- extinction. Stasiuk has been neither impressed nor fooled by the waves of political enthusiasm and propaganda that during the last 200 years have swept over the regions he loves while they also perplex him - for him politics is mere foam riding on the outer edge of much deeper existential waves. In an area that has been called, for purely chauvinistic and political reasons, either southeastern Poland or western Ukraine since 1918, Stasiuk chooses to use "Galicia", which allegedly vanished from both geography and history as a self-contained unit with the dissolution of the Dual Monarchy at the end of World War I. "Galician stories" have a long, multilingual history: tales in Polish by Wyspianski and the two Brunos, Schulz and Jasieski; in Ukrainian by I. Franko; in Yiddish by I. B. Singer; in Russian by Babel; in Hebrew by S. Y. Agnon; and in German by E. K. Franzos, Joseph Roth, and, of all unlikely people, the young Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, a German who styled himself as a philosemitic Galician Ruthenian, quite an oxymoronic yoking of identities, to which his later role as advocate of sexual fetishism was hitched. All of their tales are pervaded by the temporary verities and permanent conflicts of the Habsburg era, but Stasiuk's stories from the region (both in his essays and his novels, "White Raven" and Tales of Galicia) reflect the late life and afterlife of the more recent Polish dormition under communism. His travels are haphazard, improvised on the whim of a moment, and often punctuated by comical exchanges, but never by melodramatic or high-cultural epiphanies. As a writer he undertakes his trips without the prop of an overarching narrative or unifying meaning, unless it's the permanence of loss and erosion. He's reporting on places, people, and things usually beneath the notice of travel essayists. To Stasiuk these vignettes of the commonplace are memento mori of things not valued highly by civilization but things that create some kind of deep personal resonance in his mind. Still, even the fanciers of high culture should beware, because their beloved institutions and artifacts will also eventually be overturned by cosmic forces that create us and will some day digest us like a meal - space and time consume themselves, and humans and their creations are their transitory fodder. His frequent observations of crumbling stone or timber homes that are literally sinking into the ground, pressed down by immense skies and soon to be part of the natural landscape, illustrate the trend of these forces. Stasiuk is attracted to historical figures steeped in violence and its unintended, self-destructive consequences. Thus in "Babadag" we read his musings on men (and in "Dukla", on women) who were involved in bloody events or who met brutally violent ends: Skanderbeg, Georghe Doja, Corneliu Codreanu, the Ceaucescus, and that hobgoblin or harbinger of the Polish historical and literary imagination, Jakub Szela. If the reader is unfamiliar with these men and their roles in history, the side-exploration of their lives and deeds is worth undertaking - each one is a token of adventure or hope that ends badly. The main difference between Babadag and Stasiuk's other collection of travel reports is his open engagement with the question, "Why am I doing this?" His mania is examined through introspection about the effect an old photograph has had upon him (the photo is included in the book). Sometime in the 1920s the Hungarian photographer Andre Kertesz took a shot of a blind fiddler crossing the dusty road of a small town in Hungary, accompanied or led by a young boy, possibly his son. This photograph grips Stasiuk's soul and suggests to him not only a lost world but one in which the damaged and the powerless persist from day to day because such persistence is the be-all of their existence; they are resigned to all kinds of limitations upon their lives, but keep up the daily struggle, finding pleasure and joy amid meager circumstances while occasionally erupting into displays of rage and hatred. Stasiuk has undertaken the mission of memorializing such transient souls and their habitations (it's akin to his admiration to the valiant commemoration of the dead by the living building bonfires in cemeteries on All-Soul's Eve, as described in "FADO"). Babadag itself is a small town somewhere toward the mouth of the Danube, which becomes a vast, complicated, marshy estuary where it flows into the Black Sea. The area is the literal sump of much of Europe, and its small towns, settlements, and isolated tumble-down homes are situated upon flat spits and unstable sandbars, little colonies of social comfort that float only a few meters above a prodigious natural force that can overwhelm and punish them at any moment. He admires how people hang on here and create little knots of unlikely conviviality in unlikely places, though as he travels further along the margins of Romania he is totally baffled by the existence of its two most

recent bastard offspring, Moldova and Transnistria, places he describes as parodies of modern states. The one exception to Stasiuk's normal avoidance of cities and bourgeois ambiances is his trip to Ljubljana in Slovenia, whose prosperous appearance and friendly citizens surprise him no end, but soon enough he "gets even" with the idea of sedate souls living a comfortable and socially constructive life by crossing the border into Hungary, where he can always find the rogues, the damaged souls, and the eccentrics who delight him. But Hungary is Paradise compared to Albania, which he presents as the shunned and avoided nightmare of Europe: "Yes, everyone should come here. At least those who make use of the name Europe. It should be an initiation ceremony, because Albania is the unconscious of the continent. Yes, the European id, the fear that at night haunts slumbering Paris, London, and Frankfurt am Main. Albania is the dark well into which those who believe that everything has been settled once and for all should peer." Along with the Gypsies whom he admires, Albania's totally entropic, bereft and avaricious society points the way in his mind to the condition which we will not be able to avoid, i.e., joining the "losers of Europe" because we will be brought low by natural and social forces that we cannot rationally guide or control. It's a strong and idiosyncratic point of view, and, whether his readers can accept it or not, Stasiuk's writing clarifies the possibilities and lays out the likely consequences of our ineradicable human frailties. To his way of thinking these bleak prospects rest upon neither cynicism nor skepticism, but realism. On a final note I should comment on the quality of the translation. I do this as a reader whose knowledge of the Polish language is very limited. "On the Road to Babadag" reads extremely well in English, as do all of the translations of Stasiuk's fiction and non-fiction. Michael Kandel has done a very good job, and I should add that both the "mind" and "voice" of Stasiuk in this translation are consistent with those inferred from (and experienced by the reader) the translations of his other two books of travel essays ("Dukla" and "FADO"), which were done by the equally talented Bill Johnston. This leads me to believe that little has been lost in bringing Stasiuk's writing over into English and that he has been well-served by those men and women who devote themselves to this labor of love -- their praises should be sung by readers who would otherwise remain blind and deaf to the quality of Eastern and Central European literature.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Best when read aloud
By Witold
The idea of a book about the "other" Europe is very compelling. The book consists of what might call "travel vignettes" in no particular order. The author is traveling without an apparent plan; frequently, we don't even know exactly where we are. I was able to relate to some of the places only because I had visited them, otherwise, honestly, I am not sure if I would survive more than 50 pages.
The language is beautiful but it remains constantly the same throughout the book, which, by the end, when one expects at least a hint of a conclusion, becomes a source of a slight disappointment. The most serious issue is lack of clarity and the rather unsettling feeling that we are going in circles. He wants us to get tired. What we do get is a uniquely lyrical poetic style that has its own pace. The book is truly at its best when read aloud. It sounds very musical and one feels, hears and "smells" the scenery. The translation, by the way, is absolutely superb.
I am curious about other books by Stasiuk. I wonder if all his books are the same.
1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Go along for the ride. You will be glad you did.
By Donna Miller
Stasiuk's travels take you to places you may not necessarily want to book a room at, but he teaches you about their history and present in an unforgettable way. I had my Atlas open the whole time.

Andrzej Stasiuk is a restless and indefatigable traveler. His journeys take him from his native Poland to Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia, Albania, Moldova, and Ukraine. By car, train, bus, ferry. To small towns and villages with unfamiliar-sounding yet strangely evocative names. The heart of my Europe, Stasiuk tells us, beats in Sokolow, Podlaski, and in Husi, not in Vienna. Where did Moldova end and Transylvania begin, he wonders as he is being driven at breakneck speed in an ancient Audi loose wires hanging from the dashboard by a driver in shorts and bare feet, a cross swinging on his chest. In Comrat, a funeral procession moves slowly down the main street, the open coffin on a pickup truck, an old woman dressed in black brushing away the flies above the face of the deceased. On to Soroca, a baroque-Byzantine-Tatar-Turkish encampment, to meet Gypsies. And all the way to Babadag, between the Baltic Coast and the Black Sea, where Stasiuk sees his first minaret, simple and severe, a pencil pointed at the sky. A brilliant tour of Europe's dark underside travel writing at its very best.

"Stasiuk is one of Poland's best-known contemporary authors and *On the Road to Babadag* is a welcome addition to his growing English-language corpus... Unfailingly stimulating and ably translated by Michael Kandel" -- Toby Lichtig
Times Literary Supplement "Stasiuk's journeys are vivid poetry... What formally also underpins Stasiuk's travels, and rather beautifully embodies his resistance to the future, is how his prose communicates the working of memory, mirroring its inconsequentiality. His accounts are fragmented, shuffled, continued later or not. Time breaks down as it is past; in his mind events cover space and time in an even, translucent layer" -- Julian Evans
Prospect "Now English readers can enjoy the rewards of Stasiuk's entrancing attempt to stand in the way of progress. It's an exceptional writer who can rise to such an impossible challenge" Independent "A eulogy for the old Europe, the Europe both in and out of time, the Europe now lost in the folds of the map, *On the Road to Babadag* is valuable reading for UK readers. If we can't read our way around Europe, how will we ever find our place, our identity, within it?" Guardian "At once powerful, punkish, angry, and disorientating in its quest to probe into Europe's dirty laundry" Scotland on Sunday
From

the Inside Flap Andrzej Stasiuk is a restless and indefatigable traveler. His journeys take him from his native Poland to Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia, Albania, Moldova, and Ukraine. By car, train, bus, ferry. To small towns and villages with unfamiliar-sounding yet strangely evocative names. The heart of my Europe, Stasiuk tells us, beats in Sokolw Podlaski, and in Husi, not in Vienna. Stasiuks journey is through the dark side of Europes moonthe flip side that lies behind the tourists favorite destinations, and reveals a very different and more sharply etched Old World. Where did Moldova end and Transylvania begin, he wonders, as he is being driven at breakneck speed in an ancient Audi loose wires hanging from the dashboard by a driver in shorts and bare feet, a cross swinging on his chest. As one funeral procession moves slowly down a main street, with an open coffin on a pickup truck, an old woman dressed in black brushes away the flies above the face of the deceased. From Byzantine-Tatar-Turkish encampments to Gypsy mansions, from Byzantine churches to the first minaret between the Baltic Coast and the Black Sea, simple and severe, a pencil pointed at the sky, Stasiuks journey brings to life a strange world just beyond the edge of the familiar. This is travel writing at its very best. From the Back Cover PRAISE FOR NINE: "An accomplished stylist with an eye for telling detail . . . I caught a flavor of Hamsun, Sartre, Genet, and Kafka in Stasiuks scalpel-like but evocative writing." Irvine Welsh, New York Times Book "Stasiuk takes us into parts of Polish and post-Communist life whose day-to-day realities we might not have otherwise imagined." Eva Hoffman, New York of Books "A kaleidoscopic view of Warsaw in transition and in chaos, following the collapse of Communism . . . The technique is masterly, and the carefully calibrated atmosphere of dread and threat beautifully sustained." Kirkus s "A sobering vision of the new face of central Europe in a narrative that is at once hallucinatory, haunting, and abject." Publishers Weekly (starred) "Nine stinks like cheap cigarettes and tastes like a busted lip but is tenderly observant and elegantly translated." Booklist