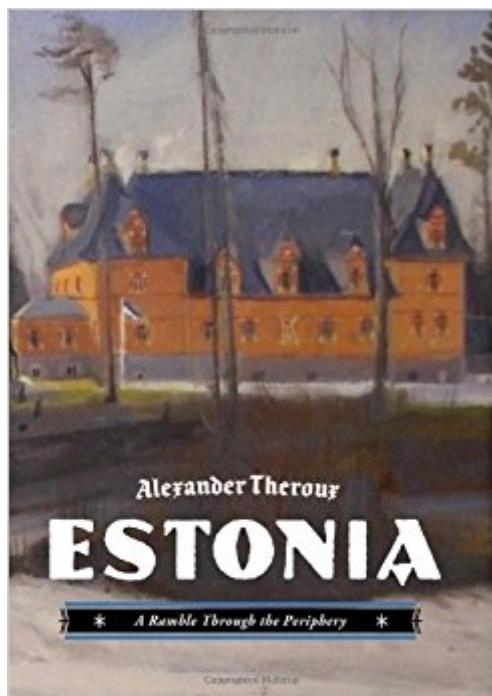


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# Estonia: A Ramble Through The Periphery



## Synopsis

“Seeing Estonia” was my focus. Any journey with Alexander Theroux is an education. Possessed of a razor-sharp and hyperliterate mind, he stands beside Thomas Pynchon as one of the sharpest cultural commentators of our time. So when he decided to accompany his wife, the artist Sarah Son-Theroux, on her Fulbright Scholarship to Estonia, it occasioned this penetrating examination of a country that, for many, seems alien and distanced from the modern world. For Theroux, the country and its people become a puzzle. His fascination with their language, manners, and legacy of occupation and subordination lead him to a revelatory examination of Estonia’s peculiar place in European history. All the while, his trademark acrobatic allusions, quotations, and digressions which take us from Hamlet through Jean Cocteau to *Married with Children* render his travels as much internal and psychical as they are external and physical. Through these obsessive references to Western culture, we come to appreciate how insular the country has become, yet also marvel at its fierce individuality and preternatural beauty such is the skill of Theroux’s gaze. This travelogue of his nine months abroad also brims with anecdotes of Theroux’s encounters with Estonian people and in some of its most bitterly comedic episodes his fellow Americans whom he at times feels more alienated from than the frosty, humorless Europeans. *Estonia: A Ramble Through the Periphery* is as biting and satirical as it is witty and urbane; as curious and lyrical as it is brash and irreverent. It marks a new highlight in an already stellar career and a book that continues Fantagraphics’ exceptional line of prose works.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“Estonia bristles with fascinating detail.” - Ian Thompson, The Times Literary Supplement

Alexander Theroux is an award-winning novelist, poet, and teacher whose prose works include *Laura Warholic* or, *The Sexual Intellectual*, *Estonia*, and the two artist monographs *The Strange Case of Edward Gorey* and *The Enigma of Al Capp*. His novel *Darconville's Cat* was chosen by Anthony Burgess as one of the 99 greatest post-war novels. He lives in Massachusetts with his wife and children.

I hated this book. I made myself read it because I felt like I owed it to myself to see what this author so many people love thought of Estonia. I was blessed with a trip to Estonia at the beginning of September, 2013, and I loved it. This book is a disservice to anyone who may be contemplating a trip to this tiny Baltic country. Theroux uses Estonia as a stomping ground, as a backdrop for him to just rant. The entire book is him complaining about all of the things he doesn't like about Estonia, Estonians, and things that have nothing to do with either, like Israel. He went on several rants about that. I just felt like I was reading a book written by some old cranky bigot, which I guess for some people is charming, but I felt like he was an insensitive, idiot. What made me the most angry about this book is that throughout the book there are about 5 paragraphs that could have been conversation starters, addressing the nature of oppression, and so on. This could have been a very good book but he chose the easy way out and just wrote what he must have thought his readers would want to hear. I am happy to give this book to the library, but only because I could never bring myself to trash a book.

I have been to Estonia about 3 times and come from an Estonian heritage, so I was interested in reading this author's take on a year in the country. As it was his personal take on life there I have to give him leeway for that but generally it was an unsatisfactory book. The impression was rather dour overall and left me more with an takeaway of his problems and issues with life and being there than on the country as a whole. I personally think this does not reflect an accurate or an interesting view of the country, but if you wish to read a book about an individual's life abroad and the struggles therein then this might be a good book to read. But for an accurate picture of Estonia and its people

I would skip this book.

I must first admit that my personal bias as an exiled (by the Soviets) Estonian, living down under in another "periphery" colours my view of this book. Having read one of the first reviews for the book and noted the negativity expressed there, I was somewhat intrigued as to what Theroux's problem had been during his "winter of discontent" while accompanying his wife on a Fulbright Scholarship in Estonia. I made the mistake of purchasing the book to discover that the author was merely using his "Estonia" as a sort of stage to show off his intellectual prowess and extensive reading by using a series of quotes which seldom helped to clarify and more often created confusion as to what exactly he was on about in describing the country accurately. Indeed he seems to spend more time talking about other countries than the country that the book's title claims to be about. I generally have not minded being the brunt of uninformed "witsisms" about the land of my birth over the last sixty years, but I found this tome more akin to the sort of writings produced by Putins FSB and Nashi youth propaganda machine. Sadly it also reinforces for others a feeling of also being shafted by another occasional "ugly American" (I am reminded of a lesser reaction, from some quarters, to his brother Paul's travel book on the Pacific Islands and New Zealand). My only recommendation is to Mrs Theroux, PLEASE next time when you are traveling, leave your husband at home!

This book says more about Alexander Theroux than it does about Estonia and Estonians! He seems to be a glass half empty person and someone who failed to get to know Estonia and the Estonians as we have done. He appears to have expected Estonia to be just like any part of the United States and, as it isn't, been thoroughly disappointed in it in every respect. I've never read such a negative book nor one that is merely a writer's self indulgence in his own misery. I gave up on it very soon and would recommend that no one wastes their money on it. The oil painting by his wife which appears on the cover says it all! It should be called "A Peripheral Ramble Through the Periphery" to emphasise how little he knows about Estonia or its people. No sense emerges of his engagement with the people or with the culture as we know it; his principal viewpoint seems to be that neither is like America and its people and culture and, therefore, not worthy of careful examination or analysis.

Hello, I feel compelled to write a review as I am an American living in Tallinn and purchased this book. It is one of the most hateful books I've ever read. There is even an entire chapter called "Why I hate Estonia", and almost every sentence starts with "I hate..." Here's how that chapter starts: "I hate the pointless cold. I hated the fact that most people are sour but consider that normal. I hated

the ungrammatical '5,2 litre' alcohol content comma, when it should be a period '5.2' liter!"The author is badly uninformed about the region. Sentences like "I have heard similar things about Latvia". Riga, Latvia is a 4 hour bus ride away...Many of the authors complaints are about how unfriendly the people are. In my experience it's the exact opposite and Estonians are noticeably friendlier than Americans. At one point in the book he mentions "There is a disconcerting amount of graffiti in Estonia". Again, badly misinformed about the region. There is significantly more graffiti in cities such as Berlin, Prague, and Kiev.

Despite its title, the book "Estonia" by Alexander Theroux is not a travelogue. It is basically author's reaction to sights and sounds in Estonia, i.e. it is about Theroux himself. As an Estonian, I found a number of factual errors (that do not matter greatly, however). The book must be read with patience, despite the frequently outspoken lingo. There are many gold nuggets to be discovered among the chaff. Raul Pettai

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