

The Incredible Journey(s)

Written by Mark Shaffer
Tuesday, 25 July 2017 12:54



Ride Along on an Epic Quest in Teresa Bruce's Memoir *The Drive*



Interview by Mark Shaffer
Photographs by Gary Geboy

"We will follow my father's route into the Peruvian highlands, through the looking glass of the girl I once was. I am ready. I have maps. I am prepared. But it will not matter. Whatever will happen next will do so without any regard for my plan or purpose." - Teresa Bruce, *The Drive*

The Incredible Journey(s)

Written by Mark Shaffer

Tuesday, 25 July 2017 12:54

Tragedy is a sneak thief in the night; an unannounced, unexpected intruder who takes the thing most precious to you without reason or explanation and vanishes amid the wailing. Or so it seems.

But tragedy never leaves of its own accord. There comes a time when you either set it a permanent place at the table or drop it at the bus station with a one-way ticket out of your life. In 2003 Teresa Bruce packed hers up in a camper along with her new husband, old dog and a contraband pistol and drove it to Bolivia.

It was the second trip down the Pan American Highway for the author. Thirty years earlier, in the aftermath of her baby brother John John's death in a freak accident, her father loaded his wife and two small daughters into a behemoth of a homemade camper trailer and fled Oregon for the tip of South America and ultimately, South Africa. I've heard bits of t



his tale for years, usually in the roseate glow of a Pigeon Point sunset sipping tequila. But the scope and magnitude of those journeys somehow evaded me until they all came together in her new memoir, *The Drive: Searching for Lost Memories on the Pan American Highway*.

In 2003 Gary Geboy and Teresa Bruce were newlyweds living successful jet-set lives in Washington, DC. He was a cinematographer and she was a Vice President at a global public relations firm. They often worked and traveled together and owned a house on Capitol Hill. And they chucked it all for a Ford F-350 topped with a retrofitted vintage camper and a mission to find the remnants of her childhood, still locked in her father's cobbled-together camper somewhere in the wilds of Bolivia.

The Incredible Journey(s)

Written by Mark Shaffer

Tuesday, 25 July 2017 12:54

Teresa Bruce: This sounds weird, but it wasn't even my idea. It was Gary's when I introduced him to my parents and he heard about the first trip. That childhood trip for us was the story of our family. I call it the slide show version of our history because it accompanied these slide shows that my dad took. When you've lived with that and grown up with it, it's the version of the truth of your family that you know. And when you introduce someone new into the family - like your brand-new husband - he's thinking, *Oh my God, this is the strangest, craziest story I've ever witnessed.* And when he realized how much had been left out of my life by not having my brother there, I think that's when he said, "We should see if we could do this."



The motivation wasn't like, I'm going to go and write about finding this camper of my childhood. The most conscious thing, I think, was the feeling that I needed to say good-bye. Because I didn't get to do that. I was a kid and any tragic, accidental death - as we all now know - leaves you with that sense of "I wasn't prepared." Not that you could ever be prepared. By the time we retraced the journey and get all the way to the end, it hit me that it wasn't about saying good-bye to my brother, it was to understand that he was with me all along. I think that's the deepest take-away from the book: when you love somebody and they're part of your family they don't disappear. It's not so much about letting them go, but about realizing how much they're still a part of you. They're in your blood and your soul and your heart and your memories. Even though he was just a child, his person formed our family. I think it took this search to find a way to say good-bye to realize that he was there all along.

The Incredible Journey(s)

Written by Mark Shaffer
Tuesday, 25 July 2017 12:54

Mark Shaffer: The title, *The Drive*, is a huge understatement. How many miles and how many countries?

TB: 13 countries and about 17,000 miles. If you factor in the first trip, it's quite a few miles, that drive. (Laughs) Yeah, it's a road trip.

MS: And it's Latin America. Parts were dicey enough when you and Gary set out, but back in the early 70's "dicey" was a gross understatement. Your parents and two little girls set off into the unknown in this hulking homemade camper that weighed, what, 14,000 pounds?

TB: Yeah. And if you know anything about campers that's about 12,000 pounds too many.



(Laughter)

MS: Both trips presented some very serious situations.

TB: It's strange. When my parents started off in 1973 they knew next to nothing about the Pan American Highway. There was a National Geographic article that my dad read. My parents didn't speak Spanish, they'd never traveled there, they didn't follow politics, they had no

The Incredible Journey(s)

Written by Mark Shaffer
Tuesday, 25 July 2017 12:54

idea that students were being "disappeared" in Mexico or that there was a civil war in Guatemala wiping out the indigenous population. They had no idea.

For the second trip, I over-prepared. I read everything there was to know. I went to the Library of Congress and stalked every newspaper article about every country. And it made me feel like I could control this, I could figure out where to avoid. But in the end the only place that we decided to avoid was Columbia, which ironically was totally safe when they were there and not safe when we were passing through. Which was a real heartbreak because I remember that vividly as a kid. That country and Venezuela were among my parents' favorites; the slide show stars. There were these incredible mountains and jungles and water and food. It was a high point. But it wasn't worth [the risk].

MS: You could subtitle one of the early chapters "Gary Goes All In."

TB: (Laughs) Yeah. Gary could convince me of anything.

MS: You're newlyweds, have successful careers in D.C. and a nice house on Capitol Hill and you chuck it all to do this thing. You decide to do it in a similar, but more practical fashion with a retro-fitted vintage camper. But you also repeated one of you dad's biggest mistakes.



TB: Yes. I'd say it was the only bad decision of the trip. Because I'd over-prepared and

The Incredible Journey(s)

Written by Mark Shaffer

Tuesday, 25 July 2017 12:54

read all of this negative stuff, and recalling some of the things that happened on the first trip, I got so paranoid I decided to buy a gun. As a DC resident, I couldn't, so I convinced my poor father-in-law in Wisconsin to do it for me. And it was literally an albatross around my neck through 13 countries. It made me physically ill from the worry and the guilt and the fear that if it was discovered Gary would be thrown in jail - because they would've assumed it was his. I'm not the kind of traveler who thinks everyone's out to rob or murder me, but having that gun almost made me into that person. There's a part of the book in Guatemala where I go for the gun because I'm terrified of something - something ridiculous, as it turned out.

MS: You're the only person I know who's pulled a gun on an earthquake.

TB: You can't shoot earthquakes. The topper is that Gary tried to chase it off with a broomstick.

(Laughter)

But by the time we got to Nicaragua and had guns fired over our camper in the middle of the night in Sandinista country, I'd come to my senses. I'm not going to let it steal the whole trip from me. That was a big relief, but I still had the damn thing and couldn't get rid of it.

MS: All the opportunities you had to just drop it in a river in the middle of a jungle, why didn't

The Incredible Journey(s)

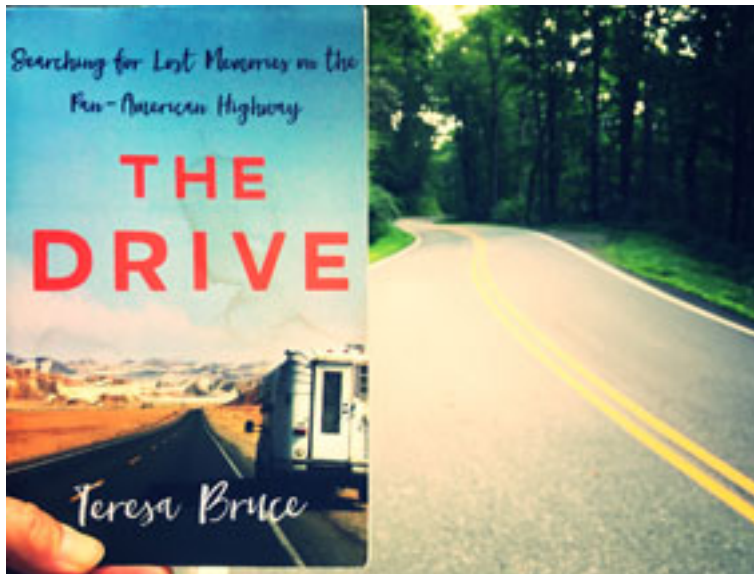
Written by Mark Shaffer
Tuesday, 25 July 2017 12:54



The Incredible Journey(s)

Written by Mark Shaffer

Tuesday, 25 July 2017 12:54



Read the book online at www.teresabrucebooks.com