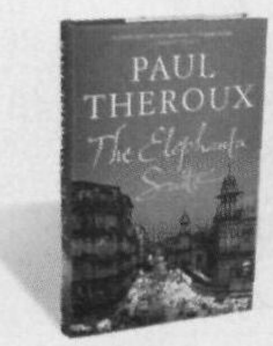
BOOKS

Not-So-Innocents Abroad.

Three impenitent tales of modern India, from a master traveler

BY PICO IYER



AN AMERICAN BUSINESSMAN in Mumbai attends a fancy banquet to raise money for abused women and picks up a local woman there, to complement the underage schoolgirls he's keeping on the side. Another American man makes an elaborate, prideful point of not taking advantage of his Indian masseuse, only to find that he's being taken advantage of on every side. A backpacker pays for her room in a Bangalore ashram by teaching call-center workers to sound like Westerners—only to find that she has turned shy and well-mannered Indians into grasping and much too intimate mock-Americans.

For many wanderers, travel is about transport, and a journey through a world of wonders; for Paul Theroux, as for his model in these stories, Paul Bowles, travel can often be about dissolution, a slow and irresistible unraveling. In *The Elephanta Suite*, a set of brilliantly evocative and propulsive novellas, he shows us how India, with its furious intensities, its gift for confrontation and its quirky mix of dusty British terms ("jocundity") and the latest American ambitions, might be made for him and his ironic pen. He also reminds us that few travelers can pick up a place with such casual vividness, see Indian script "like washing hanging on a clothesline", or hear both the innocence and threat in "Let we go inside, sir?" or "Having chit, madam?" India is a challenge for many visitors, and no one loves a challenge more than Paul Theroux.

The three long stories that make up *The Elephanta Suite* all deal with New Englanders who settle into the lulling comfort of an Indian sanctuary—a spa, a luxury hotel, an ashram—only to be drawn out of it by their conflicting desires. All three of them start slipping away from their cozy images of themselves, and begin going native on the dark side of town, even as the Indians around them are becoming more like Americans. The fact that the title refers both to a room in a fancy hotel and to a set of movements in a musical sequence gives you some sense of how Theroux can charge his compulsive stories with the resonance and craft of darkly moral fables.

Those who have been following the prolific novelist's inspired fictions in recent years, from *My Other Life* to *Blinding Light*, know that they are usually fired by sexual tension and hunger, which speak for the ways our secret lives turn on our regular lives until they seem the realest lives of all. In India, inevitably, this dance of mutual need grows ever more serpentine as pleasure-seeking Westerner and improvident local circle one another. Beautiful young men teach foreign guests the "scorpion pose" in yoga pavilions, and then the "crocodile posture" and the "corpse pose." Americans diligently pave the road to their own destruction with almost-good intentions. In what might be a metaphor for the ambiguity of the paradises that undo them, Theroux writes, "So often in India you could not tell whether a building was going up or falling down."

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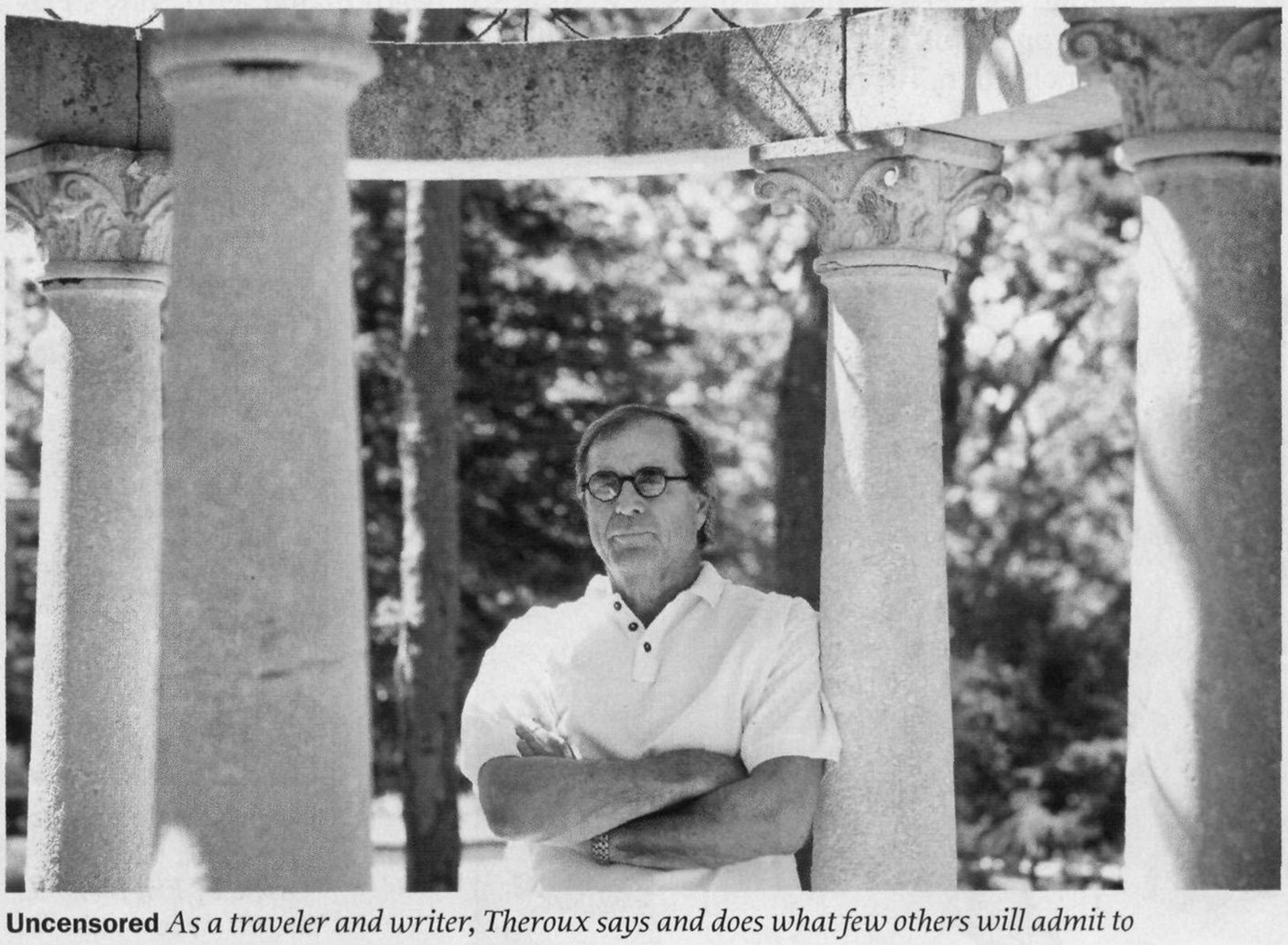
Theroux's strength as a writer and a traveler has always come from his readiness to say and do what few of us would admit to, and it's a safe bet that these gleefully impenitent stories will not be promoted by the American Chamber of Commerce or the Indian Ministry of Tourism. Monkeys are likened to humans in the first sentence of the book, and in one story the only sympathetic creature is a murderous elephant. Pieties old and new are shot down with every politically incorrect maneuver. "If you succumbed to India's vivid temptation to generalize," Theroux notes early on, "all you could do was utter a platitude so obvious it looked like a lie." Undeterred, two pages later he is pronouncing, "India was as near to life and death as it was possible to be on earth. But it was not one or the other: here was life in death and death in life."

It is, in short, the very darkness, the possibility of degradation, that makes his people (and perhaps their creator) feel alive. Most modern visitors are content to portray the contemporary subcontinent as a bright and shining Silicon Valley East. Many Indian novelists sit within the cozy traditions laid down by Charles Dickens and even Jane Austen. Theroux is the rare writer to see that the fascination, the power of India today, lies in the commute between the two. His characters begin in manicured, air-conditioned places, but it is the clammy grasp of desire, the smells and the slippery deals of the back alleyways, that really bring them out. The human bestiary has rarely found a more spirited observer. ■



SHAWN HENRY—WRITER PICTURES

Uncensored *As a traveler and writer, Theroux says and does what few others will admit to*