A.A. Gill, *Here & There: Collected Travel Writing* (Hardie Grant Books, 2011)

A A (Adrian Anthony) Gill is the television and restaurant critic for *The Sunday Times* and restaurant reviewer for *Vanity Fair*. His books include two forgettable novels and some superb collections of travel writing, including my favourite, *Previous Convictions* (2006), and reflections on food and dining, *Table Talk* (2007). He was in Sydney earlier this year as a guest of the Sydney Writers’ Festival, and to get the flavour of the man I recommend you listen to the podcast (still downloadable from Radio National) of his session ‘Food Fighters’ with Anthony Bourdain. It was chaired by ‘legendary chef and gastronomer’ Tony Bilson, and Gill zooms in for the attack before Bilson’s hapless introduction is half-over. He is, of course, a seasoned provocateur: watch him (on *The Monthly*’s Slow TV site) attack the audience during the opening minutes of an interview with Caroline Baum.

Gill’s entry in Wikipedia notes that his essays have given offence to various groups, ‘including the County of Norfolk, Welsh, Manx, Albanians, Germans, and the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities’. That can’t be bad: you’d want to read a writer who had scored so many hits. Gordon Ramsey has also thrown him out of one of his restaurants. His dining companion was Joan Collins, which is probably why the incident has become infamous. Ramsey claimed that Gill’s previous review concentrated on his personal life rather than his cuisine, including calling him a ‘wonderful chef, but a second-rate human being’.

Like all good critics, Gill is nothing if not opinionated. His strongest, funniest opinions are inspired by dislike and, even better, utter loathing. These tend to be found more in his writings about food, where he is a great one for puncturing pretensions and excoriating food snobs, than in his travel pieces. He stuck a fork into a venerable Paris bistro, L’Ami Louis, in the April edition of *Vanity Fair* in which he lambasted everything: the waiters (paunchy, combative, surly ... like extras for a Gallic version of *The Sopranos*), the cramped tables (‘set with labially pink cloths, which give [the place] a colonic appeal and the awkward sense that you might be a suppository’), the famed foie gras (‘like plumber’s putty’), snails (‘like dinosaur boogers’), veal kidneys en brochette (‘a gray, suppurating renal brick’), and dessert (‘four balls of gray ice cream and something that had once been chocolate’). The bill for two was $403 and Gill called it ‘the worst restaurant in the world’. It was a gloriously funny read and was instantly circulated through cyberspace.

There is nothing in his latest collection *Here & There* in which his passions are raised to quite such a venomous pitch, mainly, I suspect, because he enjoys travelling more than he does eating in fine restaurants; even in the worst of places and under the most trying of circumstances, he can usually find something to make the trip worthwhile. And even if he can’t (Greece seems to be one such destination; Albania is another), he can write about it in colourful, vivid, witty prose that makes most travel writing seem as bland and gray as that ice cream at L’Ami Louis.

He loves Africa but not the ‘murderous taxidermically challenged Americans, looking for big and rare things to decapitate in the name of interior decoration’; the travel industry (‘all that wishful photography, the mahogany prose written in coconut oil’); Manhattan (‘a rich middle-class island with bankers’ concerns and shopkeepers’ worries’). He offers a ‘Top Nine’ list of the biggest travel disappointments, which
include The Silk Route (‘a catastrophe of soil erosion, pollution, autocratic totalitarianism, police states, poverty, disease, growing Islamic militancy, and some of the most mistrustful, taciturn people you could hope to meet’); gondola rides (‘up the narrow ditches of Venice’s effluent’) and gondoliers (‘a cross between a pork butcher and a French mime’); Swedish massage in Sweden (‘done by the woman from the kitchen appliance department at Ikea’); whales (‘immensely boring fish that look like badly folded mattresses’) and the tourists who watch them (‘a pitiful collection of homespun hobbits’); and very long railway journeys (‘like being trapped in a horizontal lift with 15 consumptives and an open sewer’).

He likes Bombay (‘riveting and enthusing just to be stuck in its traffic jams for a few days’) and Calcutta (‘one of the most entertaining and beguiling places you can see that no one you know who doesn’t wear a wimple has ever been to’), but doesn’t like and rarely goes on holidays (‘the most thoughtless expectation of a holiday is to relax. If you want to relax, go to bed’). On the other hand, he wouldn’t dream of foregoing his annual week in the Scottish Highlands, and if that’s not a holiday, what is it?

He’s not much for cappuccinos (‘cold coffee with scum’) and pizza (‘away from Naples it has become a bloated painted whore’), and ‘luxury’ is a word he associates with ‘tastelessness, snobbery, waste, boredom, blandness and insincerity’. There are four great smells ‘everyone should get up their noses before they die’: a North African souk; an Asian fish market at dawn; a durian fruit; an Ethiopian church. The finest smell in the world, he maintains, is of black Africa: ‘Sweat, goat fat, charcoal smoke and red dust.’

‘Plenty of featured journalists fancy themselves as possessing an individual voice,’ says Clive James on the cover puff, ‘but Gill really has one.’ I wonder whether this is helped by the fact that, as a severe dyslexic, Gill’s spelling is so bad that he dictates his reviews over the phone to copytakers. Nothing makes you so conscious of your writing voice than reading your work aloud.

All these pieces have previously appeared in his monthly column in Australian Gourmet Traveller, which might be something to consider before spending $30, and none of them is dated. In many ways, good travel writing transcends time, but it would be helpful for readers to know whether, for instance, when Gill writes that he has ‘just returned from East Greenland’ or that he has ‘just been travelling through Maryland’, it was this year or six years ago.

Ruth Starke