
Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers’ Radio, Radio Adelaide

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‘It was a pigpen of a place but the people were friendly.’ This is Lydia Laube’s description of a Bolivian eating place in her new book *Llama for Lunch*, but it could stand for her attitude to the whole of South America. She occasionally describes an attractive or striking landscape, but her main focus is on herself as a traveller on this continent which she finds so dirty, backward and personally challenging.

Who is Lydia Laube? The author’s note tells of four previous books – presumably successful, given that a fifth is now being published - and informs us that she lives in Adelaide and Darwin. The book itself, a memoir of several months spent travelling alone, reveals a strong personality but little else about herself. From the scatty narration and hackneyed language, full of debased advertising jargon like ‘scrumptious’ and ‘yummy’, and childish slang like ‘ginormous’, I was led to believe that this was a young woman who had sadly missed the good education provided for the baby boomer generation, who were at least taught to write – who at least know the difference between ‘disinterested’ and ‘uninterested’ – but external research enlightened me. I’m sorry if this is a secret which she would prefer wasn’t known, but Lydia Laube was born in 1948.

As has become apparent, I found little to like in *Llama for Lunch*. The following is an Amazon.com reader’s comment on one of her earlier books:

‘Having … visited and lived in Egypt myself, I found this book to be a very
degrading view of the Egyptians and Sudanese. … I was rather embarrassed that a fellow Aussie would have so little heart.’ I have not been to South America, but I still feel for some of the people she dismisses so glibly. No doubt she expects that her readership will not include the Peruvian women of whom she says, ‘Studying a woman of the Andes standing alongside her llama, I concluded that the llama was the better-looking of the two.’

Laube makes her journey as difficult as possible, in order to demonstrate some rather cheap bravado. She refuses to travel by plane. She has set herself the task of travelling across the continent overland, and she persists in this self-imposed heroism at no matter what cost to her safety and, it might be added, the safety of others, for example, the taxi driver she engaged to drive her across the Andes on what she knew was the most dangerous road in the Americas. Later, in Rio, she travels on the cable car on Sugar Loaf Mountain, apparently for the sole purpose of relating her terror and impressing us with her daring, although she does mention in passing that the view was spectacular.

*Llama for Lunch* is obviously intended to be a funny, lighthearted look at foreign travel. I searched hard for some positives, but amusement was not one. She conveys quite well the obsessions which all tourists are prey to: with food, with toilet arrangements, and with getting clothes washed and dried. But although these problems are inevitably engrossing at the time, they are not the most interesting and memorable features of a journey. Sometimes she describes scenery quite nicely, like this sunset on the Amazon: ‘the sinking sun hitting the water turned all the wavelets into flickers of light that danced toward me like tiny stars shimmering across the river in constantly changing formations. Then a small boy, cleaving the water like a dolphin, dived into the middle of that
sheet of glittering light and scattered its hypnotic illusion.’ But when it comes to people, she seems to have no curiosity at all. She’ll say that they were friendly, or treated her well or badly, but there’s no sense of a common human interest, or of trying to understand a different culture and its values. She writes off the decorations in Peruvian Catholic churches as ‘in crappy taste’. She sometimes devotes a dutiful paragraph to the history of a place she visits, but she’s not particularly interested herself, and she will comment on something she finds odd without taking the trouble to find an explanation: we have to be satisfied with her fleeting puzzlement. And some of her priorities are decidedly strange. She visited San Miguel de Allende in Mexico, where people were unfailingly friendly and seemed happy to help her. On her return to Australia, she mentions briefly, she heard that an earthquake had killed many of these friendly, happy people. So much for them. On the very next page, she devotes a long sentimental paragraph to the caged budgies in her hotel – as if keeping birds in cages were some peculiarly Mexican form of cruelty.

*Llama for Lunch* is a work of breathtaking solipsism with few beauties of style or wit to recommend it and I, along with the anonymous Amazon.com reader, feel a little embarrassed that a fellow Australian could expect, apparently with confidence, to entertain us with such facile rubbish.