

*Accelerated Paces:*  
*Travels Across Borders and Other Imaginary Boundaries*  
**by Jim Oaten**  
Anvil Press, 2008; 168 pp. \$18

The “jet set” was an elite just a generation or two ago. Now its membership numbers in the billions. Cheap air travel means unprecedented global mobility, and is perhaps the most important historical development of our era.

Passenger jets and porous borders have, certainly, shaped the life of the 50-ish Vancouver essayist Jim Oaten. In his slim debut paperback, the well-built non-fiction hodge-podge *Accelerated Paces*, Oaten recollects a very modern autobiography, one of endless departure and non-stop arrival.

He does so with a satisfying unity of style, across a surprising range of non-fiction modes. Some of the 14 pieces collected here are anecdotes. Others are straight-up essays. Some of *Paces* is confessional or memoiristic in nature, like the poignant opener, “Stardust”. Then, too, much of Oaten’s writing qualifies, simply, as journalism. (Stylish journalism — much of *Paces* first appeared in this magazine’s very pages, after all.)

Given the diffuse nature of his material, Oaten’s promiscuity of method in approaching it seems, initially, an odd strategy. In lesser hands, it might make for a disjointed book, a choppy read. But the writer’s dry, conscientious authorial voice helps us connect, for example, a mutilated Beirut suburb with a Lower Mainland puzzle factory. Oaten sews his disparate fabrics together well. It doesn’t hurt that all these pieces are readable on their own, and a couple are terrific.

The core of the book is Oaten’s recounting of his many journeys through New York, Africa, the Middle East and beyond. He has collected wacky and/or unnerving incidents, as travelers do, and travel writers must. The writing in these sections is insightful on occasion — Oaten locates a fatalism at the core of Islamic culture, for example, which perhaps inures drivers in cities like Mombasa to the gory and inevitable consequences of driving like a maniac.

*Accelerated Paces* is also seriously funny when it needs to be. In “We Will Be Landing”, a typically hybrid section — half meditation on airborne culture, half comic story about a drunken Scots flightmate — Oaten writes of landing in the Third World “with a roiling stomach and a desperate head” only to be told at Customs, “You must pee first”:

*“Umm... but I went on the plane... a bunch of times.”*

*“What? “On the plane. I peed. Lots of times.”*

*“No, pee here, not on plane. Pee first to get stamp.”*

*“Oh, pay! Pay for the visa stamp!*

*Ha! Do I pay you?”*

*“No. Pee other line.”*

In this book, even the stories set in Canada can seem like helter-skelter journeys into the exotic unknown. The booze-fuelled Marxian antics of “A Day at the Races”, a recollection of roaring chaos set in and around a downtown Molson Indy event, are made funnier and more depressing by the author’s slangy, I’m-game-for-this tone, for example. The narrator – raconteur, really – has been tagging along with his coke-fiend auto-sport pal out of curiosity, mostly. When he ends his tale with “Well, fuck did we laugh”, it reads like the statement of a sardonic anthropologist. The prototypical modern jet-setter (perhaps?), who has departed his or her home zone, and arrived in a foreign experience; who cannot, afterwards, find ease There, or Here, or anywhere.

—Lyle Neff