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Offers a personal look at the people, poverty, beauty, and passion of South America by an expatriate American who left his farm in Ecuador at the age of sixty-three to embark on a journey through Brazil on the Amazon River.

The Saddest Pleasure: A Journey on Two Rivers Details

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Gavin says

Moritz is a sad and eloquent geezer spending his twilight years trying to make sense of his mid-life crisis that at age 45 made him join the Peace Corps in its infancy in the 1960s and remain in Ecuador as a 'peasant' farmer in an effort to shed his bourgeois past, which ultimately proved futile. His insights are keen but his outlook is bleak and depressing as he travels along coastal Brazil and eventually up the Amazon, all the while contemplating that other river upon which he used to live and just try to 'be'. He is a pensive and decrepit old man near death.

Recommended before reading: experience traveling in South America and/or similar second- and third-world regions (so you can just begin to make sense of the time and place). Recommended *while* reading: heavy doses of natural sunlight and fresh air. Moritz will make you sad, make you daydream, and, beware, possibly make you change your mind about the character and purpose of the human race. I can't quite tell yet whether I'm refreshed, unchanged, or just downright scared.

Mark Walker says

After being thrown off his small farm on the Rioverde located in northern Ecuador after years of service as a Peace Corps Volunteer and then as a local farmer by his local partner Ramon, the 63-year-old author, embarks on a desperate journey on a second river—this one is in Brazil. The trek proves to be a time of reckoning, assessing and reflecting on his life, which he perceived was coming to an end.

This book would be the third of the author's four literary masterpieces. The author had chosen this title from a line from Paul Theroux's "Picture Palace," on a comment by a French traveler, but in an interview by John Coyne of the Peace Corps Worldwide the author went on to say, "Well, we have illusions about the new places that we visit; they are almost always false to the reality. And the places we know change so rapidly that to go back is many times quite wrenching. Maybe it is sad to travel and learn that life's a bitch in Nairobi and Manaus and Tokyo and Sydney..."

Acclaimed travel author Paul Theroux considered Moritz Thomsen a friend and wrote introductions to several of his books. In this introduction, he summed up why this book is so special, "A travel book may be many things, and Moritz Thomsen's, *The Saddest Pleasure*, seems to be most of them—not just a report of a journey, but a memoir, an autobiography, a confession, a foray into South American topography and history, a travel narrative, with observations of books, music, and life in general; in short, what the best travel books are, a summing up."

I appreciate Moritz's description of his book, revealed once again in the John Coyne interview, "A novel? On the inside cover of the last book about going to Brazil I told my editor I wanted to say, after the title: travel book as memoir, memoir as novel, novel as polemic." Moritz said the editor forgot, but on the title page of this book are those very words.

As with all his books, Moritz shares many dark, difficult experiences, "Unlike Paul Theroux, despair does not make me hungry", he states. "On the contrary, as the days pass, deciding to go out and eat becomes more and more complicated. The truth is that I am not especially seduced by Brazilian cooking, and my Portuguese is so crude that apparently everything I say sounds as though I were ordering potato salad..." I'm always amazed at Moritz's ability to be transparent, especially in his most vulnerable moments.

Throughout his journey, Moritz is plagued by health issues caused by malaria and his ongoing battle with emphysema. "Once again I fall asleep, but I am beginning to feel like hell. Beginning to sweat, I float away from time to time in a mild delirium; it is as though I am taking a trip in two dimensions, in two directions at the same time, and I have the interesting presentiment that I am going backwards in time to observe my own

death.” Throughout the journey, the author drops in and out of semi-consciousness from which he describes what he’s seeing out the bus window until entering a dream world of memories and regrets which he presents so starkly.

The author’s journey is a catharsis in which he’s able to describe in the most vivid, powerful ways. Of his father, he says, “For twenty years I had kissed that man’s ass for his money. He had a lot of it, including some of mine, if the rumors were true, and since the war, lacking the character to make a break with him, to make an independent gesture that would free me from his shadow...”. When his father learned he had joined the Peace Corps he disowned him as a “communist radical”. In one letter Moritz reports that his father offered to buy him, “a fucking one-way ticket to Russia. You make me sick. Your Loving Father.”

In all four books, Moritz describes and analyzes his partner from the Rioverde, Ramon, who initiated the journey with the revelation, “You are not of this place,” which shocks Moritz. “When he had said it I had been filled with a terror that so threatened to topple the foundations of my life that I had almost immediately pushed his words out of my mind. If I didn’t belong here, wherever “here” was, where did I belong?” As the journey continues, the author realizes that his only family is Ramon’s wife, Esther, and their two children. Despite all the sad memories and images, the author manages to insert some humor with such Latin American traditions as, “A well-organized despedida shares certain characteristics with an Irish wake; leaving is a little death - the pain of which can only be dulled by drunkenness. Mourning, friends and family gather for an all-night bash. Increasingly maudlin and portentous, they wish you a safe trip in hopeless voices and enthusiastically drink from the bottles you have provided...”

Many of his most interesting memories emerge during a long bus ride along the coast, which reminded me of one I made after my Peace Corps stint from Sao Paulo to Salvador Bahia, “On Tuesday morning after the long weekend, still coughing, still a little disoriented, I walk up Rio Branco to a tourist office and buy a ticket for Bahia. Twenty-eight dollars for a thirty-hour bus ride, almost a thousand miles along the Brazilian coast. The way I’m feeling, if that doesn’t kill me, nothing will.” This would prove to be an arduous trip filled with fascinating stories and delusions.

Like many Returned Peace Corps Volunteers, my introduction to Moritz was his first book “Living Poor,” which would focus on his Peace Corps experience and by so doing helped me better understand my own time in Guatemala, yet he reflects on its true meaning here as well.” I had been doing my little Peace Corps act—bringing in pigs and chickens, new kinds of seed corn, a little tractor, trying to start a co-op, and the presence of these exuberant Texans was extremely threatening. To me. Rioverde was my town; I wanted to change it my way. Now there was too much easy money coming in, too many beer drinking parties in the new saloons that were opening up. Pancho was forgetting to give water to his pig; the town was going crazy on gringo dreams...”

Although Moritz’s journey covers thousands of miles between two countries and introduces the reader to many unique cultural and culinary nuances, it’s his inner journey which makes this book so special and confirms Theroux’s observation that a great travel book is a “summing up.” This also confirms my belief and that of a growing number of authors, that he’s one of the best travel writers of the 20th Century.

neona says

there is so much beauty and sadness in this book. seeing the world through thomsen's eyes is a gift that i will never forget. the insight he provides into growing old, friendship, family, nature and community among many other things, is always spot-on, and at times illuminating. this is by far one of my favorite books.

John says

I must have bought this book secondhand in London years ago, and found it unread in a box of books. I was immediately interested because of the coincidence that I'm also 63 (like Thomsen when he wrote it) and I also own and live on a farm in Latin America. At first, however, I wasn't sure I was going to enjoy his very reflective journey through Brazil, but I found it more and more interesting as he reflected on his experiences in L America, his relationships with the community around his farm and his feelings about the destructive relationship the continent has with its northern neighbour. While my own experiences are far less dramatic, several incidents that he lived through had echos in my own life in Nicaragua. I would have loved to have met him. It feels odd reading such a vibrant book, knowing the author has been dead for many years.

Ryan Murdock says

Born in 1915 to great wealth in Seattle, Moritz Thomsen died miserably poor in the tropics, of cholera, in 1991. He served as a bombardier in WWII, farmed in California, and at age 44 gave it all up to join the recently-formed Peace Corps. His book about that experience, *Living Poor*, is ranked as one of the best Peace Corps memoirs ever written. When his service was over, he chose to remain. He started a farm with an Ecuadorian friend, but that too ended in defeat. By then Thomsen was 63, and his health was already in decline.

The Saddest Pleasure takes Thomsen from the tattered remains of his failed farm in Ecuador on a journey to Colombia and then Brazil, where he travels up the Amazon River. As he moves through scenes of desperate poverty, the author also journeys back through his own life and failures, reflecting on his struggles and emotional pain with brutal honesty. He spares the reader nothing—his most scathing observations on the places he journeys through, unapologetic assessments of his life, and beautifully rendered portraits of the land and people he has come to love. It's all in there: life stripped down to its essence, just as Thomsen lived it.

Like any great travel classic, the ground he covers is large: history, culture, human nature, autobiography, growing old, friendship, family, dreams and their dissolution. But what elevates his story to a classic of the genre is the beauty with which he tells it.

Karol K says

Sadly it took a monumental effort for me to get thru this book. I found it dark and depressing. Normally I would put it down, but I kept reading as it was a book club selection. I hope his other books are a little brighter and happier.

Mike says

He's somewhere between utterly realistic and cynical. My favorite thought was I hope we don't have free will otherwise, we're all nuts for the things we do. He believes the point of it all is doing something so well, no matter what it is, you lose yourself in it whether it's dancing, singing, or dropping bombs. A very good read on history, culture, and human nature.

Scott Munden says

Although he died in 1991, Moritz Thomsen is a new writer to me and I've swiftly devoured all of his books since being recommended to him. "The Saddest Pleasure" just might be my favourite. Like all good travel books, it's a mix of genres that include memoir, history, anthropology, a little bit of homespun philosophy and a wealth of references to other fine writers all presented through the prism of the writer's world view.

Thomsen is a misanthrope much like my other favourite travel writer, Paul Theroux. The two men were friends although they never saw much of each other (a perfect misanthropic friendship). Thomsen didn't see much of any one other than the impoverished families he encountered either through his 4 years in the Peace Corps or his years farming in Ecuador. He particularly disliked meeting other writers.

He was a lonely man - like most travel writers - and much of this book is dedicated to his thoughts on loneliness. He writes "in the sweetly sad and softly corroding anguish of loneliness I was less unhappy than before when I had been involved with people." It's a concept I immediately understood as I read it. Thomsen is a soul (he would hate that word) that drives towards being alone and experiences the painful bliss of the loneliness that follows. It doesn't scare him. Instead he, like myself, is the kind of person who strives to be alone and, paradoxically, almost embraces a loneliness that is sweet, sad, soft and anguishing. He was not a man who feared being alone - he sought it out.

This is no "uplifting" book. For me "The Saddest Pleasure" is Thomsen writing from a perspective of an honesty that at times is brutal and, like Conrad before him, sees beauty within pain and truth in the presence of a starving dog. Nor is it a sentimental book. Thomsen escapes the privileges of the West to pay witness to poverty leading to his own impoverishment. If he ever felt it, Thomsen deleted any thoughts of the "Noble Savage" very early during his time in Ecuador. He sees the same flaws and rapaciousness in the equatorial poor as he did in middle class America.

The Thomsen world view is neatly captured in the following quote: "The meaning of life is found in being alive enough to live it." In other words, life offers us just enough to carry on - no more and no less. In another book he describes a God whose teeth are covered in blood. It's a terrifying image that explains why Thomsen's hold on his life is deliberately tentative. Once again, I get it.

Janet Laminack says

This book was different from his other book, Living Poor. I liked it a lot better and thought it was written better than the other. I think it was especially timely for me to read since it was at the end of my time in Ecuador and the author is wrapping up his time in Ecuador. It is a very reflective work.

Bob Newman says

Stop it, I love it !

I had heard neither of book nor author when I unexpectedly received this book from a friend. She mentioned its being a book which presented a strong sense of place. It is indeed that, but rather more as well. Moritz Thomsen lived in Ecuador for a number of years, but then, for various reasons, launched on an extended voyage around Brazil, from Rio up the coast, around to Bélem, and then along the Amazon to Manaus. The

real voyage, however, was along the twisted, frazzled byways of his soul, a journey so painful that no physical hardship could rival it. Thomsen is no doubt a good writer, because the ultimate picture we get is exactly the one he saw---peering out at Brazil through the miasmic forests of his excruciating memories. We meet a few strange or pathetic characters---but very few, mostly other foreigners---we view Brazil through his jaded, pessimistic lens, and most of all we delve into his past. He takes us along two rivers---the Amazon in a boat, and a jungle river in western Ecuador in his mind---but there is no retrieving him from the tangled mess of an awful life. The book is excellently constructed, it is honest in the style of Tobias Wolff, it has riveting descriptions of nature and of a life among poor Ecuadorians that few outsiders, save Peace Corps Volunteers, might ever have known. Thomsen understands and describes very accurately the deep exploitation of millions of people in Latin America, an oppression that is nearly impossible to break, given the policies of rich countries. But ultimately, how you like this book is going to depend on your own personality, your own taste in tragedy. Thomsen starts with a quotation from Paul Theroux about travel being the saddest of pleasures. I felt that Thomsen did not prove the point. He is a man who spent most of his life rejecting everything that he could have been, everything that his arrogant, abusive father wanted him to be. He accomplished very little, made a total mess out of his life, had no (visible)lasting relationships, and at last came to a vague realization in his sixties that he was a 'writer'. I doubt if he can ever escape from the clutches of his long-dead father---will he ever be able to write anything beyond that endless battle ? Describing his life was no doubt the saddest of his pleasures and reading it, for some people, may be labelled a close second. In a way, I wish I had not read THE SADDEST PLEASURE. I prefer my pleasures separate from my tragedies and while such separation is not always possible, I do not savor the juxtaposition.

Kevin says

**** 2015 January 02 ****

Just finished this book for the second time. Still just as good nearly three years after I read it the first time. I can still echo the same review as before. Do I have anything to add? Maybe a touch about the need to have a depth of introspection in one's life. Travel can assist, especially when done as Moritz Thomsen did here, which is to say, alone. The need for solitude, for being out of one's comfort zone, in order to question that which has always been taken for granted. Viewing new perspectives to open up your own, which can then be used to re-evaluate one's past, present, and future decisions. Maybe this is why the stereotype about people traveling to Europe (assuming they live in the U.S.) is for the purpose of "finding oneself" exists. There are many ways to deep introspection and shattering of long-held maxims. Travel is just one method. Sometimes an easier way to achieve this than forcing yourself to think, and think, and think. The events that typically happen when you travel like the author does do not give one the luxury of avoiding these thoughts and falling back into your typical routines. And what a great value it showed to be.

**** 2012 March 11 ****

Supposedly, from the title, an account of the author's experiences on a "vacation" that crossed similar rivers in South America. But this is like entitling a book on the significance of Einstein as, "The Patent Office Worker."

From the beginning, it took a different path. The trip he took was merely a backdrop for his other stories about his life and experiences from childhood to the military to the peace corps to ... many other things.

Towards the end of the book, I kept forgetting that he was talking while on one of these rivers, a river that I've forgotten the name of already just hours after finishing the book. I don't care now, nor did I care when

reading it. The book isn't about that. It's a memoir of his life. Of people. Poor people. Rich people. Friendships. Right and wrong. Values and perspective. Growing. And acceptance.

The stories and events he speaks of in this book are all touching and feel very real. Partially because of the quality writing, maybe. Or because it touches something closer to me, personally. I related to his account of sad pleasures, idealistic good intentions, human nature.

This is a book I'll be thinking about for a quite some time to come. A book I won't have to put any effort into remembering because I'll not have forgotten it in the first place. If we talk about it, don't be surprised if I seem to search for words as if trying to recall his writing. The memory will be there, but the understanding may not come yet for many decades.

Pat says

I used to favor Farm on the River of Emeralds, but now I think this is the better book. Thomsen tends to fall in the love him or hate him category of writers, and I straddle that line. I'm one of those people who feel he could have use some heavy editing. Still, at his best, he's fantastic. And this book -- an old expat's memoir/travel narrative -- starts and finishes strong. Also his best title, I think.

I met Moritz in Ecuador a year before he died. This book had just come out and he asked me what I thought. I told him the last 40 pages were masterful. He said, gee, thanks. He said it reminded him of a story involving his sister, who was a painter. She showed her mentor a painting and asked his opinion. The older painter pointed to one spot on the canvas and said, "I like that." That was Moritz.

Cherie says

A This book is really excellent; about Thomsen's journeys around Brazil late in his life, including river trips. At times, the flashbacks can get a bit confusing, but very similar to Theroux. I love him and wish the libraries had his other titles!

Joselito Honestly and Brilliantly says

Travelling. Travelling is the saddest pleasure.

This is one of the joys of reading: that one day, after reading a lot of stuff of similar genre, you'll have the luck of stumbling upon one which presents views you agree with, or those which had been at the back of your mind for a long time but which you've failed to articulate with the clarity and color you feel it needs to be presented to be truly appreciated.

The author was an American, born to a rich family, his father having inherited what was left of a very great wealth amassed by his grandfather during his lifetime. All throughout his life, however, he was at odds with his father who had a lifelong disapproval over his chosen career path (fighter pilot during world war two, member of the Peace Corps, then a farmer in Ecuador) and what his choices had made of him.

His father had long been dead but he haunts him still. He is constantly aware that at sixty-three he, too, had become old, ugly and moving closer and closer to the common faith of all men. Even this, however, he writes about beautifully—

“At six a.m. I come awake in Rio, brought back to the present by the local pigeons who are hurling themselves off the edges of buildings and clapping their wings together as they soar heavily away to cadge breakfast: they sound like dish towels drying on a line and whipping in a strong wind. The pink and orange brick walls of yesterday are purple in the shadows, and yellow where the sun is gaining its first foothold on the walls. The encircling skyscrapers of light on the horizon have gone away.

“I lie naked under the flow of morning air and look at myself reflected in a six-foot mirror at the foot of the bed. It has been a long time since I have studied myself so carefully and with such horror. It is all there, the things I had suspected but not thought much about—the sagging stomach, my ass flabby with grossness, my shrivelled sex, a timid rosebud peeking out through tired pubic hair. How cruel my mouth looks with most of my teeth sitting over there in a glass of water. It has been a year since I left the farm where I didn’t even own a mirror; in Quito under a dim light I could make out that face that needed shaving; I am looking at myself for almost the first time in ten years, and can see at last that I had been truly broken by that time in the jungle and that old age, when it came, came as swiftly as a street bully who with blows and blunt instruments shatters a man in a moment. This is what Ramon had seen when he told me that I must leave the farm. Well, well, no wonder. I have been betrayed by my gross body, this aging stranger who lies staring at me so resentfully and which in no way is a reflection of how I see myself. ‘There he is, your double; why can’t you be friends with him?’ It is an idea instantly repudiated.

“It is only that wrinkled and exhausted-looking rosebud, hinting at impotence and withdrawal, that I accept as truly indicative of the psychic blows that I have suffered since leaving Quito two days ago. I have been wounded, perhaps permanently by moving too quickly from the primitive corruptions of feudal Ecuador to the monumental corruptions of the more modern world. Still inside that old man’s body, which is hardly mine and which I must reject, I feel a little teen-age glow of curiosity and anticipation; it is too dimly felt to have a center or an object yet. How stupid of my partner to have seen only the white patchy hair. I will not be destroyed by a fucked-up world; it is the pigeons who send me this message. Their clapping, which sounds now like a bunch of trained circus seals slapping their flippers together as they honk with delight, sounds like applause, sounds as though they were applauding ME. As well they might. I have survived another day.”

He is travelling again after having left the farm he bought in Ecuador and after realizing that he could not really become a farmer. He begins this book with what often precedes travels, not only in Ecuador, but also in my country the Philippines: the quaint practice of the *DESPEDIDA* bequeathed by the countries’ common Spanish colonizers—

“Among a long list of bizarre social customs that enchant and irritate a North American who has come to live in South America, one of the most revealing about national differences is the *Despedida*. The *despedida* is a highly ritualized leave-taking arranged by friends and family when you prepare to set out on a journey. Because Latins, or at least Ecuadorians, whose Latins I know best, are family oriented in a most morbid way and because they have strangely mixed perceptions about time and history, they do not take lightly the announcement that a friend or a relation has decided to leave them for a time. Wandering in a foreign country, or for that matter, even moving to the next town strikes them as highly hazardous, as intemperate as Russian roulette.

“Decently educated Ecuadorians after centuries of colonial exploitation seem unaware that conditions have changed somewhat since that first cursed rabble of Spanish scum invaded the continent confronting gushing

volcanoes, a trembling earth, the sly perfidy of rascally Indians, cloudbursts of rain, swollen rivers, terrible disfiguring diseases. It is as though they still studied the old maps whose borders are adorned with medieval mermaids and sea monsters, frightful creatures with faces of dogs, and great swishing flukes capable of shattering the timbers of the stoutest caravel. The news that you have chosen for whatever reason to take a trip hits the Latin nuclear family with the force of 8.5 on the Richter scale.

“A well-organized despedida shares certain characteristics with an Irish wake: leaving is a little death the pain of which can only be dulled by drunkenness. Mourning, friends and family gather for an all-night bash. Increasingly maudlin and portentous, they wish you a safe trip in hopeless voices and enthusiastically drink from the bottles you have provided. As the night wears on some of the guests will predict your death by gun, blackjack, poisoned clams, or overturned canoe, and some will accuse you of coldheartedness in leaving friends who so cherish you. ‘Bring me back a keepsake,’ they will say. ‘You who are rich enough to travel; some little something to remember you by—if, that is, you esteem us enough to ever come back to this poor land.’ Grandfather has been brought down and put in the center of the old black leather sofa; this is his chance to be listened to, to be believed. He recalls the campaign of 1913—the wild Indians who puffed out silent curare-tipped darts of chontaduro, the thirty-foot snake who ate both horse and rider after crushing them together into one great ghastly aspic. Sores as big as butter plates on arms and legs, spreading and incurable cancers from the bite of the dreaded Conga. ‘And who is leaving us this time? Luis Umberto? Bring me the child that I may bless him.’

“A traditional middle-class despedida climaxes the following day at the airport when, as the moment of departure approaches, the traveler is surrounded by a dozen close family members; they begin to shriek with foreboding. Mama is always there, the star, dressed in the mourning black that anticipates the crash of your airliner and the deaths of all aboard. She jealously fights off aunts and cousins and jabs viciously at the traveler’s fiancé. Everyone mills about making the sign of the cross and calling on the Virgin Mary for her intercession in this foolhardy move from which no good can be expected to come. Dripping handkerchiefs mop at wild, swollen eyes, and sobbing matrons push back through again for one more embrace, an embrace so sensual and clinging as to raise the specter of incest. The male members of this tragic group, the uncles, the brothers, the godfathers, stand at the fringes. They stare at the floor, take deep drags on their cigarettes, and clench and unclench the muscles in their jaws. They are just a few seconds away from a total breakdown that would destroy forever the macho image they have spent a lifetime cultivating. These black-eyed Latins, hawk-nosed, inscrutably proud, caught up in the drama of the moment, are feeling an almost uncontrollable impulse to sob like children.

“No matter that Luis Umberto is going only to Miami or New York, no matter that the trip is for only five days and that on Friday of that same week he will be back with his cargo of electric hair dryers, tape recorders, and color television sets.”

Up in the air in the evening, flying over the Amazon and peering outside the plane window, he sees the darkness enveloping the vast rainforest and remembers his childhood:

“And I am stuck there at the window rushing back into my childhood, a little boy again, searching downward for a lit candle or the glimmer of starlight on a river or even a darker blackness below the clouds and amazed at how the past has come surging back out of that illuminated blackness. Blind, I know exactly what we are passing—the slow curling rivers looping back upon themselves; the green of the land spotted with crimson and yellow blossomed trees and as tightly textured as my grandmother’s petit point; the mile-high granite upthrusts of bare, black rock pushing up through the trees; and scattered through the endless spaces small hidden gatherings of open-sided, palm-thatched huts. For many hours, since the courtesans of Bogota had enflamed my imagination with their long, slim legs my thoughts have crept around the edges of sexual and moral concepts. Now once more I begin to seethe invisible land below me as I had imagined it many years ago. At thirteen, bursting with the lusts of puberty, my sexual fantasies had transported me to South America.

It was on the Amazon where I had imagined that one would find the ultimate barbarity, some utter shamelessness, some wild and wonderful freedom where, if I ever went there, I would be able to test the extents of my cowardice and the extreme limits of my capacity to live at the edges of perverse behaviour. What these limits were I couldn't imagine, but believing my parents, who characterized me as a despicable lad (I was continually being caught in drain pipes and broom closets playing doctor with friends and cousins of either sex). I suspected that my potential might lie out there a thousand miles in the heart of unspeakable territory.”

Landing at the international airport in Rio de Janeiro, while waiting for a ride, he feels the air, smells the sea and sees the sky—

“Ah, Rio at dawn. The air is as soft and as caressing as in Manaus; it seems to hold a profound and dreamlike quiet. Smells of the sea and tropical flowers hang in the air, and across an empty space hidden by elevated highways I invent the salt marshes and the deserted tidelands of the inner bay. In the distance swelling black walls of solid granite push out of the sea. The sky is the most important thing: it is immense and glows with an incredible soft pinkness, and across it little naive pink clouds as harmless as newborn lambs wander, waiting for the sun. These are the sea-clouds that rise like mist out of very tranquil and sun-dazzled oceans. Why is the sky so beautiful, why this little pang of anguish? Of course; this is the sky of Esmeraldas, the sky above the farm, that sky of doldrums with its promise that nothing will ever change—that lying sky that promised me that I would not grow old. What lovely pain in the purity of tropical dawns, in the softness and languor that wipes out the past.”

He roams the city but often ends up only watching himself:

“Sitting in a restaurant or on a park bench or in a movie house before the lights have dimmed, or standing, yawning, before some monument, suddenly for no reason a spotlight will snap on and illuminate me. Standing apart one side I find myself watching as though I am a stranger—an ageing man without purpose, moving through a strange city of millions, knowing no one and superfluous to the city's life, an old gent who has moved of his own free will into a situation that is pushing him to the edge of panic. He is comical, distasteful, ridiculous, and I feel exactly the kind of pity for him that I would feel for some actor in a play who has stupidly messed up his life and for whom I don't have much sympathy. What is more real than my situation is the cool detachment with which I watch myself. I am the most interesting thing going on in Rio, and even my boredom when observed clinically has a strange fascination. Still, while the whole thing swings between melodrama and comedy, I feel impelled to honour my emotions if I can honestly identify them.”

Like an ordinary tourist, he visits cathedrals and gape at monuments but these only inspire him to launch into energetic, polemical outbursts:

“At midnight on another trip I had come to Peru and had driven in a taxi through the Plaza de las Armas looking for a hotel. And seen just off the plaza, Pizarro, looming out of the night. He was in full armor, his sword swung out, charging ahead—an enormous bronze statue three stories high, an incredibly cruel figure mounted on the cruelest looking horse. It was the first public monument that had gripped me in South America. Seen at midnight, dimly lit and half-hidden between buildings, but ready to burst out into the plaza, it was doubly stunning, actually terrifying. ‘Pizarro,’ said the taxi driver, ‘the richest man in the world,’ and as we passed him I looked avidly, feeling contempt and anger.

“Waiting for a restaurant to open six hours later I had come back to stand beneath that statue in the early morning. It was cold under Lima’s overcast. I drank coffee and went out and walked around Pizarro again trying to study that sadistic and arrogant face hidden beneath a helmet. I was choked with a disgust that gave me pleasure. You bastard. You bastard. When the cathedral across the plaza opened its doors I rushed across to it and searched out the corpse where it lay in its own chapel. Pizarro in a cheap, glass casket like an aquarium. Skull, naked bones, dried skin the color of a roasted chicken, bony fingers and the arms crossed above a caved-in chest. I had lived for years in a country shattered to its foundations by the corruptions of the conquistadores’ legacies, a country where half the population lived outside the economy and enslaved by the hacendados—Indians, clinging to an ancient culture that aroused contempt among the masters or feelings of sentimental quaintness among the tourists. Indians, an invisible presence in the country. Stinking, lice-ridden, as human as dogs. ‘If we had only shot them like you did,’ an engineer had told me once. ‘How can any government integrate these people into a nation that lusts to embrace Western technology?’

“It was early, and I was the only one in the chapel. I looked around, not wanting to be caught, and spit a nice gob on the floor at the head of the casket. Feeling better and thinking of an epitaph that I had read recently, I went back out into the main cathedral.

‘Beneath these stones lies Theophilus Macguire,
Stop, traveler, and piss.’

“A Peruvian with the face of an Indian but wearing a dark suit stood just inside the main door of the church; I had just paid him seventy-five cents for the pleasure of spitting at Pizarro. Now I went out and talked to him. ‘How do the people of Lima feel about having this guy lying in your cathedral? He’s really the star of this place, isn’t he?’

“‘We honour him as the founder of Lima, nothing more,’ the man said. ‘We don’t honour him for the destruction of our culture or for killing off our poor Indians.’

“I looked at him in surprise, my mouth gaping. He had been corrupted too, this Indian who denied his blood, and who, because he was wearing a suit and tie, would have been insulted had you called him what he was. My look must have disturbed him for he rushed on. ‘It was his daughter who built the cathedral: how could they refuse the man a chapel when his daughter was paying—and when she begged?’

“‘He is a dishonor to your pendejo church,’ I said.

“‘That body in there isn’t Pizarro,’ the Indian said. ‘Nor is the Catholic Church my church.’

“Over a continent whose culture had been shattered by the Spanish and the Portuguese was now laid a double curse. Over a continent still dazed and that in four hundred years had never been able to absorb and live decently with an imported European culture, a continent broken into sad principalities and dominated by a few landowners and their lambon dictators or their pet military mediocrities was now laid the unfathomable confusions of Western technology. The new rulers of the earth, the masters of technology, have come and they will throw down the old kings, the old rulers, the old landowning classes; the new order is at hand. When I walked in Rio afraid to cross a street for the rush of traffic or watched the early morning buses taking a million people to the factories at the edge of the city (and bringing them back twelve hours later), or peered into a hundred different holes in the main streets where broken pipes discharged tons of water into the already overloaded drains, or walked sullenly past ten thousand cops and soldiers who had set up enclaves in every part of the city, wasn’t I seeing that first wave of Western progress that was about to break over a people who were too human to handle the complications of a mechanized society? Their qualities, these earthy people who had a feeling for the soil and the sun—an inherent innocence, a wild individualism, a

respect and delight in their sensuality, a sentimentality mixed with an irrational mysticism that ran deep beneath their incredible pragmatism, all these were about to be transformed into more passive traits. Brazil would be the first industrialized country in South America. Football, television, Carnival: how easy it had been to pacify a nation; how willingly people who considered it a privilege to eat had swarmed into the cities to overrun the slums and to seek out factory jobs. God's face now takes on the form of a time clock, and a hundred million people will now dedicate themselves to the production of a mountain of products all skilfully designed to wear out in three years—cars, radios, tv sets, and tape decks, outboard motors and pocket calculators, hoola-hoops and little plastic dolls that when you squeeze them make wee-wee in their plastic panties. How incredible that we have come so far that we can stamp out a peeing doll from a nickel's worth of plastic and never wonder if the girl at the machine who stamps them out for eight hours a day year after year is living a life that gives her satisfaction. 'And what did you do with your life, my child?' Gods asks at the gates of paradise. 'I stamp out peeing dolls, Lord.' 'And are you happy with the life you've had, my pet?' 'I ate, Lord.'"

Richard says

Probably my most favorite book from a few years ago. Thomsen writes this one looking back on his years in South America. I can't capture it here, but his honesty and insights and ability to write are as good as any I've read. His three other books, "Living Poor," about his Peace Corps years, "Farm on the River Emerald," his attempt to live in Ecuador after his Peace Corps years, and "My Two Wars," his struggles with his father and WWII are all favorites of mine too.
