



I See by My Outfit

Peter S. Beagle

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In 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. articulated his dream, JFK was assassinated, and zip codes were first introduced to the US. The world was monumentally changing and changing fast. But in the eyes of future fantasy author Peter Beagle and his best friend Phil, it wasn't changing fast enough. For these two twenty-something beatnik Jews from the Bronx, change was something you chased after night and day across the country on the trembling seat of a motor scooter.

I See by My Outfit Details

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Ryan says

Beagle rides on a motor *scooter* with his buddy across the USA. The cops are always nagging them. The world has changed since the 1960s, and I think the watershed in this instance was a scene in *Dumb and Dumber*.

3.5.

Lafcadio says

A road trip of two best friends, to see about a girl. My favorite parts were when they took on the personas of something ridiculous to discuss something. The lone ranger and tonto, a general and his collective men...

Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says

This is really such a delightful romp!

In the Afterword of the 2001 printing of the book, the author summarizes the book thus:

"...a road book, an account of a cross-country journey on two small motor scooters by two New Yorkers in their early twenties; wise-ass Jewish artists both, utterly urban and Eastern, with absolutely no idea that the Rocky Mountains were *that* big, the Mojave Desert *that* wide. They camp out, they freeze, they get rained on, they have mechanical crises; they look up old friends and the friends of friends, they encounter remarkable strangers---they have *adventures*, as happens in all proper road books."

A fitting summary, but what makes it fun to read is the lighthearted youthfulness that comes through in the telling. The author was in his mid-twenties when the book was published. I was impressed by the quality of writing in one so young. There's a youthful freshness in his outlook on their experiences, and some insightful observations about himself and life in general.

Books like this make me a little wistful, as they remind me that I was born about twenty or thirty years too late.

Becky says

Peter Beagle? Are you one of the most underrated stylists of the twentieth century? I don't know, I just know your prose is pitch perfect and sweetly honest and I could read it forever.

This is billed as a travel memoir, and indeed, if you want to read a book about the author of *The Last Unicorn* riding cross-country with his best friend on scooters in 1963, here you are. But this book is really the story of a friendship, of growing up and, of course, apart. It reads like a novel, and perhaps for this reason I felt like I got to know Peter and Phil like they were my own friends. Most memoirs are like funhouse

mirrors, but this one felt like a window.

I know I'll be reading this book again.

Stuart says

Peter S. Beagle's autobiographical account of his cross-country scooter trip with an artist friend is very much a slice of Americana- quintessentially 60s, a kind of low-key ON THE ROAD for a more literary, clean-cut American type with a softer, sentimental core, indicative of Beagle's usual bittersweet style. Those looking for a fantasy novel will be disappointed, but those searching for something gentle and unique will be pleased they took the time to read this subtle little volume about being young and having no where in particular to be any time soon.

Scott says

What a blast from the past! I'd forgotten a time when you had to explain why you were growing a beard, and called people "dad" instead of "man." The best line in this book is still "Only dogs and escaped criminals walk in California." A lovely evocation of friendship, people met on the road, and the hopes of the vanished sixties.

Mimi says

a lovely road memoir written by this author in his youth. a 3.5

Susan Biel says

Ever since I read Steinbeck's "Travels With Charlie" when I was in grade school, I have sought out travel books, and especially Road Trip books. This book starts out in April of 1960 when the author and his childhood friend Phil, who from what I can discern are in their mid to late 20's, plan a trip to cross the U.S. on Heinkel scooters [note: as they correct someone, scooters, not motorcycles], which they have named Jenny and Couchette. They at times describe themselves as bearded Beatniks and their conversations are riddled with esoteric, referential, shared experience stream of consciousness ramblings that I find I skim over; although I can relate to having had a similar "insiders language" with high school friends, I found it distracting. Peter has a goal in the trip of reaching his girlfriend Enid's house in California by a certain time, which Phil understands but they both find restraining and which keeps them from fully immersing themselves in the adventure of their trip. Their experiences are both funny and poignant, and great glimpses of Americana not typically encountered, but their meager funds, hunt for pawnshop guitars and quirky personalities put them places with a unique group of "characters".

I understand that Beagle's other writings are all science fiction, which is too bad, as I found his descriptive language quiet unique and very evocative.

Karl says

First, thanks to my father-in-law Dan for gifting me this book!

I've never read "The Last Unicorn," so I don't have any associations with Beagle's best known work, but I have traveled across the country (by car, not scooter) a bunch of times - it's one of my absolute favorite things to do. This travelogue made me pine - hard - for one of those trips, and to think of all of my past road-trip companions: my mother and father and brother, Jen, Maggie, Evan, Mike, Bill, and Annie. There's something about traveling together that way that syncs you up to a person that nothing else can. Even other travel, with planes and trains, or even hiking, with the trails pre-blazed, isn't the same as spending day after day in the car, making individual decisions about where to stop and where to go. Particularly in this vast country where, by language and historical accident, you can go pretty much anywhere without permission or difficulty. I can't wait for the day when I get to this my wife and sons - and equally but separately, just my wife.

If you've traveled this country by road and loved the small misadventures and quirky people met on the way, read this one.

Alice says

I'm always on the lookout for books about scooters, so following a recommendation on the Modern Vespa forum I tracked down a copy of I See By My Outfit by Peter S. Beagle (later to achieve fame for The Last Unicorn and other fantasy novels). It's out of print in the UK at the moment but my lovely local library had it in the stacks, stamped 'SPECIAL INTEREST DO NOT DISCARD'.

It's the story of a journey made by two friends from New York to San Francisco, on Heinkel scooters, in 1963. Peter is travelling to be with his girlfriend; Phil, his buddy, comes along for the ride hoping to find inspiration for some paintings along the way.

That's nearly 3000 miles by the most direct route - and these guys make frequent detours, or just plain get lost - on 175cc machines laden with camping gear and art supplies. There are deserts and mountains, rainstorms and freezing April nights, mechanical failures and bitter rows. They travel through an America of beatniks, Happenings and motels, in an age when references to The Lord of the Rings have to be explained because only geeks have read it.

It's an epic journey. You can imagine Ewan McGregor and Charley Boorman blubbing as they describe the hardships and the loneliness. But this is a very funny book, full of language and descriptions and snippets of dialogue that crease me up and occasionally sneaking in a philosophical or poetic gem that's all the more effective for its lighthearted surroundings.

My one complaint is that even though it's a book about scooters, Penguin saw fit to put a photo of a motorcycle on the cover...

Cathy says

I read this for the first time, many years ago (late 70s-early 80s). When I searched for other books by this

author I could only find A Fine and Private Place and The Last Unicorn, but I had limited resources for searching then, no internet!

As a native of northwestern Ohio. My favorite line (forgive me for misquoting this, it really was a long time ago) was all the streets in Toledo/Maumee being named after Mad Anthony Wayne. There is only 1 street but it's a long one ;)

Sutter Lee says

A total pleasure. My generation, Beagle's just a few years older than I am, so I can relate to the time period, the Zeitgeist.

I'm also an amateur musician, an old "folkie," so of course loved the music they played on borrowed guitars, or in the music stores, or referenced.

Their camping experiences a crack up. I'm a fairly experienced camper, so was appalled at their ignorance but admired their bravado.

Was a terrific tour of the USA, seeing areas I've either been to myself or haven't been to, thru their eyes.

They met some fascinating people, many warm hearted, generous, making them feel at home, like family.

I once had a little motorscooter, a Vespa, back in the pre-helmet days, 1970, with my little girl, age 3, on the back.

Found some You Tubes of Beagle and his partner Phil Sigunick playing guitar and also found a lot of Sigunick's art work on line; as good as I expected, and his work widely admired, still in galleries.. They did a reunion gig for I See By My Outfit in 2008.

I lent the book to an old folkie, in his 80s, who has ridden motorcycles, and is also an artist and has a variety of stringed instruments. I know he will love it.

Willa Grant says

A bit out-dated in 2008 but I had this book MEMORIZED I read it so often in 1971. No matter how often I read it, it made me laugh!

Simone Subliminalpop says

Un viaggio coast to coast nei primi anni '60 con i suoi imprevedibili contrattamenti e incontri, ma non solo, anzi... perché dentro questo libro atipico di Beagle, famoso autore di romanzi fantasy, c'è anche il senso dell'amicizia e la sua fragilità inerme davanti allo scorrere del tempo, c'è il mutare dei ruoli nella vita, c'è la scoperta del mondo successivo che ci aspetta. Fin dall'inizio, io ero lo scrittore e Phil il pittore. [...] Ho un ricordo preciso di lui che mi indica un albero, mentre camminiamo nel Van Cortlandt Park – un posto incantato della nostra infanzia – e dice: "Rosa. Guardo quel maledetto albero che tutti dipingono nero, marrone o in qualunque altro modo, e non posso farci niente: vedo del rosa nella corteccia, laggiù. Credi che sia io a volerci vedere del rosa? Non credi che mi farebbe piacere percepire gli stessi colori che vedono le altre persone? Come posso dirtelo?" – dalla postfazione dell'autore.

Kathy says

Yes, I'm falling for Peter S Beagle. This nonfiction road trip recount is the best kind of travel story. I'm ready to be off on the road to see what I can see and who I can meet.
