

BOOKS

©1982 JIM KALETT



Paul Theroux at home on Cape Cod: "The most gifted, prodigal writer of his generation" has written his finest novel.

Theroux's Wonderful, Bottomless Novel

The Mosquito Coast

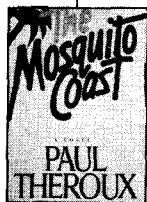
by Paul Theroux, Houghton Mifflin, 374 pp., \$13.95

Reviewed by Jonathan Raban

ONE NEEDS ENERGY to keep up with the extraordinary, productive restlessness of Paul Theroux. He is alarmingly like the perpetual motion machine described in his new novel ("natural magnets... a thousand of them on a pair of wheels... you could light a city with something like that"), except that Theroux doesn't go in circles and has never moved in a predictable direction.

He is as busy as a jackdaw in the way he scavenges for forms and styles. In earlier novels he has taken conventional popular molds, like the ghost story (*The Black House*), the thriller (*The Family Arsenal*), the celebrity memoir (*Picture Palace*), and made them over for his own thoroughly original purposes. The geographic locations of his tales now make an almost unbroken ring around the globe. His train journeys (*The Great Railway Bazaar*, *The Old Patagonian Express*) are best read as freewheeling, impromptu fictions—the adventures of a picaresque hero who happens to bear the same name

as his author and who shares his author's chronic cabin fever.



Theroux is 40 now—the most gifted, most prodigal writer of his generation. That statement begs a significant question. When, say, Malamud, Mailer, Updike, or Roth were 40, one could have spotted a stray paragraph from any of their books as "typically" Malamud, Mailer, Updike, or Roth. Can one do the same with Theroux? I couldn't. He has moved in skips and bounds, never staying long enough in one place for the moss of a mannered style to grow on his writing. Even in the most trivial ways, he ducks classification. For his jacket photographs, he favors sunglasses that give him a rather nasty resemblance to one of the inscrutable henchmen of Papa Doc. He looks as if being unknowable is an essential part of his profession. In the United States, I have actually heard him spoken of as a "British" writer. In England, he is the rogue American on our doorstep. Disguised behind his shades, following an eccentric private route at dizzying speed, he is not a man who is

easily nailed down.

Yet with *The Mosquito Coast* he has arrived at a temporary summation. This is not just his finest novel so far. It is—in a characteristically hooded way—a novelist's act of self-definition, a midterm appraisal of his own resources. It is a wonderful book, with so many levels to it that it feels bottomless.

In Allie Fox, Theroux has created his first epic hero. If one can imagine an American tradition that takes in Benjamin Franklin, Captain Ahab, Huey Long, and the Reverend Jim Jones, then Allie Fox is its latest, most complete incarnation. He is the King of Yankee know-how and know-all, an inventor of inspired gizmos—from a self-propelled, self-wringing mop to a machine that makes ice out of fire. He is a genius, clown, and monster, a commander of words, an angry demagogue. Listening to no one but himself, he leads his family out of the wilderness of modern America—its junk foods, imported plastics, and "hideola"—to create a new world in the bug-infested jungle of Honduras.

To his wife and children, and to a bedraggled cluster of starving sidekicks in both Americas, Allie Fox, devout atheist, is little short of God Himself. And *The Mosquito Coast* is the gospel according to his son, Charlie. The novel tells two perfectly interwoven stories. The first is of how Allie Fox leads his little flock up to the precipice of madness and beyond. The second is of how Charlie slowly emerges from the shadow of his father's divinity into the cold, frightening

light of skepticism and sorrow. Out of the twin stories, Theroux has made a novel that has the richness, simplicity, and power of myth.

Even in the barest outline, *The Mosquito Coast* sets up a whole series of suggestive ripples. Jonestown is there, of course: the foul clearing, the loudspeakers in the trees, the piled cadavers, the spools of recording tape. Beyond that, there is *the* original American story: the stale Old World, the sea crossing, the Indians, the "first Thanksgiving" as Allie Fox himself names it. Then there is a universal fable about the nature of godhead and belief. Finally, and much the most important, there is a tale here about the limits and possibilities of the creative imagination. Allie Fox is very like a novelist. He is an inventor. He makes and populates a world with an artist's totalitarian joy in his creation, bending everything and everyone in it to the requirements of his aesthetic design. At the end, it turns on him and he is literally consumed by it, as vultures tear out the very brains that set the world in motion. Fox's great imaginative enterprise both mirrors and mocks the creations of Theroux the novelist: The overreaching hero and the writer are one and the same man.

I mustn't mislead here. These big themes (and one could hardly imagine bigger ones) are never proclaimed in the novel. They run deep, like subterranean rivers, nourishing the life of the book's surface. For, reading *The Mosquito Coast*, one is engrossed in a marvelously told realistic story. It is a measure of the obsessive exactitude of Theroux's writing that there is not a page in the book in which one doesn't know the particular color of the sky, the texture of the earth underfoot, the cast of a face, the rhythm of a voice. In simile after simile, these physical details spring from the print, exuberantly real. Here are "strips of glue-colored cloud" ... "a tortoise-shell twilight"; pelicans go overhead "like a squadron of hedge-clippers"; a breaking sea looks "like whitewash hosed over black ice" ... and so one could go on. This is an invented world that one can live in, smell, see, touch, and a style of writing so easy and precise that one reads through it like a transparent pane of glass.

The same loving particularity is what makes Allie Fox such an enthralling creation. Geniuses are notoriously hard to depict, but Fox—a cursed genius if ever there was one—is so solidly done that you can catch the stink of his arm-pits. Flaubert once boasted that he had

gutted several hundred popular encyclopedias to write *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. Heaven knows what research Theroux has put into the construction of Allie Fox. For Fox knows *everything*: hydraulics...electronics...physics...navigation...chemistry...astronomy. Joking and hectoring by turns, he swaggers through the book, giving out what Hemingway called "the true gen" on every subject under the sun. One believes him, too. When he builds his ice machine, or rights a listing ship, his schemes always have the ring of authority and good sense. He is obstreperously plausible. He has a thing or two to teach every reader of this book. And so one finds oneself submitting, like Charlie Fox, to Allie's extraordinary capacity to spellbind and bludgeon.

That is part of Theroux's secret. He has rooted his story deep in the reasonable—in sense impressions that we can all share, in knowledge we can ascertain. All the nuts and bolts are secure. And from that stable platform, the novel is able to take off like a rocket into the empyrean. From the dingy familiarity of a hardware store in Northampton, Massachusetts, to a grotesque and tragic climax in the jungle, Theroux leads the reader cunningly on, step by reasonable step, reaching the exotic by means of the ordinary.

Here, too, the writer and his hero are in collusion. For that, of course, is just what Allie Fox does. Explaining his perpetual motion machine to the ship's captain, he says:

Strictly speaking there is no such thing as invention. It's not creation, I mean. It's just

magnifying what already exists. Making ends meet. They could teach it in school—Edison wanted to make invention a school subject, like civics or French. But the schools went for fingerpainting....

Magnifying what already exists. Making ends meet. It is a prescription for making ice, or perpetual motion, or living nightmares. The Honduran hell that is Allie Fox's last act of invention is only a modest magnification of the commonplace social world he leaves behind in Massachusetts. Allie Fox himself is a magnification, no more, of the inventor who made him, Paul Theroux. If one bass-line runs consistently through *The Mosquito Coast*, it warns that to possess an imagination is to have a very dangerous faculty indeed. It brings one uncomfortably close to being both a god and a madman.

There is another deep satiric irony in the book. In the early days of his colonial venture, Allie Fox is a worker of famous wonders. He makes miracles for the tribesmen—ice, water, fire, explosions, giant vegetables. The locals come to gaze and marvel, much as readers do. Fox gets good reviews. In the argot of the swampland, a name is coined to describe Allie's fabulous inventions. His "experiments" are described as "spearminths"; and the word returns them straight back to the junk and "hideola" from which they were intended to be a triumphant escape. That is a fate that's known as well by novelists as by inventors. Never, though, mistake *The Mosquito Coast* for a gum wrapper. You could light a city with it, and make ice too. ■

An Affectionate Portrait of Clare Luce

Clare Boothe Luce

by Wilfrid Sheed, E.P. Dutton, 189 pp., \$14.50

Reviewed by John Kenneth Galbraith

A YEAR OR so ago I served on the Pulitzer Prize jury to render judgment on the best in biography and autobiography. I was warned at the time that I should be reticent about this duty and honor lest I be subject to improper influence. In fact, I whispored it around a bit, for I was rather anxious to see what improper influence was like and how well I would resist it. Alas, there was none; doubtless if

there had been, I would have put the money away in an old office safe and forgotten about it.

I tell of this experience less to celebrate my exposure to risk than to qualify myself on this branch of literature. During that year I read, or in any case tolerated, some 70 or 80 volumes of first- or second-person study, introspection, and assorted denigration and enhancement. The art

