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Volume 46, Issue 2

## ISSUES

---

### ☐ VOLUME 53 (2018)

---

Issue 1 (Jun 2018) , pp. 1-199

### ☐ VOLUME 52 (2017)

---

Issue 2 (Nov 2017) , pp. 271-463

Issue 1 (May 2017) , pp. 1-269

Special Issue: Schiff ...

### ☐ VOLUME 51 (2016)

---

Issue 2 (Nov 2016) , pp. 241-459

Special Issue: Schiff ...

Issue 1 (Jun 2016) , pp. 1-239

### ☐ VOLUME 50 (2015)

---

Issue 2 (Nov 2015) , pp. 245-502

Issue 1 (Jun 2015) , pp. 1-244

### ☐ VOLUME 49 (2014)

---

[< Previous Article](#)   [Next Article >](#)

# Chatwinesque, or Travel Writing as a Narrative Genre

**Luigi Marfè**

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LUIGI MARFÈ

## Chatwinesque, or Travel Writing as a Narrative Genre

*What has changed in travel writing since Bruce Chatwin? Why have his books become the universal pass in the bag of each young traveler with literary aspirations? And, why do so many critics still look down their noses when reading his works? Focusing on *In Patagonia* (1977) and *The Songlines* (1987), this article investigates Chatwin's role in changing the idea of what a travelogue should (or could) be. Ambiguously juggling between documentary honesty and literary invention, Chatwin proposed a concept of travel writing as an autonomous narrative genre. In a world where travel writing had to redefine its meaning and face the new dynamics of globalization, he discovered a way to give back a voice to places and render them "cloths woven with stories."*

The first editor of *In Patagonia*, Susannah Clapp, coined the term "Chatwinesque" in response to the *narrative turn* Bruce Chatwin imposed on contemporary travel writing with this book. Though Chatwin did not like the definition of "travel writer" and simply referred to his texts as "searches", he contributed to revolutionizing travel theory by the means of an original meta-literary approach that investigated the reciprocal inferences between spatial movements and poetic ones. This innovative pattern invoked differing opinions to his texts – such as the above-mentioned *In Patagonia* or later *The Songlines* (1987). While some critics considered these books as the holy bible of contemporary travelers, others perceived them to be a collection of lies. The following article outlines the causes of this contradiction and describes the role Chatwin played in the contemporary debate on travel theory. If travel writing, as Bill Buford once stated, has always showed a "wonderful ambiguity between fact and fiction", Chatwin's books turned this dialectics, which for centuries has been the unsolved weak point of this literary genre, into a conceptual key to redefine it as a narrative type.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Susannah Clapp, *With Chatwin. Portrait of a Writer*, London: Cape, 1997, p. 3 and passim. The two mentioned travelogues are Bruce Chatwin, *In Patagonia*, London: Cape, 1977, and Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines*, London: Cape, 1987. Buford's definition is taken from his Editorial, in: *Granta* 13, 1984, p. 5. On Chatwin's "searches", see Nicholas Murray, *Bruce Chatwin*, Bridgend: Seren Books, 1993, p. 12. I broadly analyzed the theoretical questions raised in the next pages also in: Luigi Marfè, *Oltre la fine dei viaggi*, Firenze: Olschki, 2009.

## 📄 About the article

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