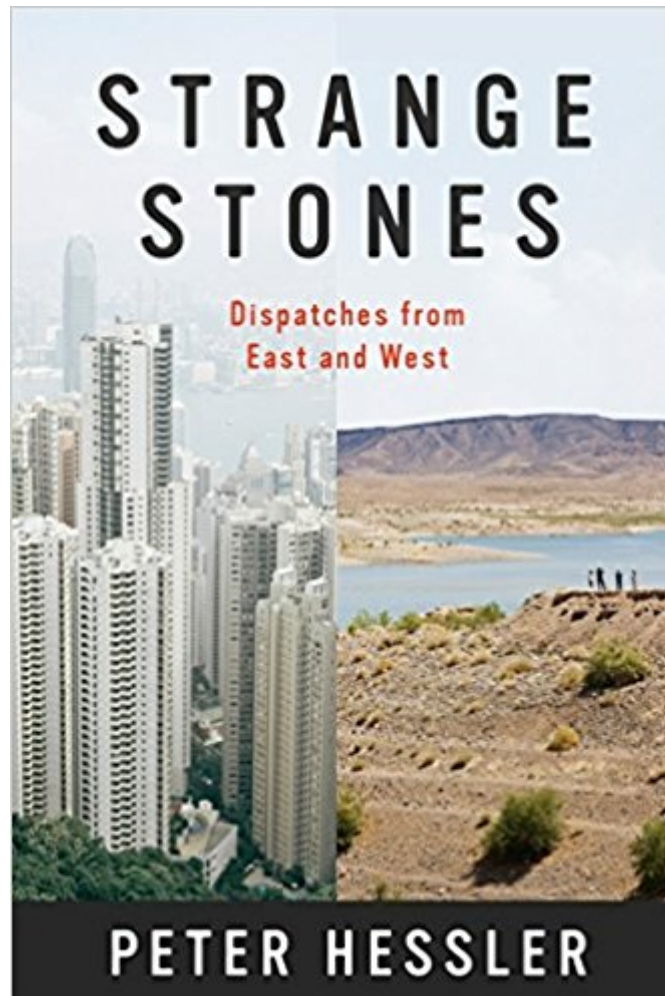




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Strange Stones: Dispatches From East And West



Synopsis

Full of unforgettable figures and an unrelenting spirit of adventure, *Strange Stones* is a far-ranging, thought-provoking collection of Peter Hessler's best reportage—a dazzling display of the powerful storytelling, shrewd cultural insight, and warm sense of humor that are the trademarks of his work. Over the last decade, as a staff writer for *The New Yorker* and the author of three books, Peter Hessler has lived in Asia and the United States, writing as both native and knowledgeable outsider in these two very different regions. This unusual perspective distinguishes *Strange Stones*, which showcases Hessler's unmatched range as a storyteller.

“Wild Flavor” invites readers along on a taste test between two rat restaurants in South China. One story profiles Yao Ming, basketball star and China's most beloved export, another David Spindler, an obsessive and passionate historian of the Great Wall. In “Dr. Don,” Hessler writes movingly about a small-town pharmacist and his relationship with the people he serves. While Hessler's subjects and locations vary, subtle but deeply important thematic links bind these pieces—the strength of local traditions, the surprising overlap between apparently opposing cultures, and the powerful lessons drawn from individuals who straddle different worlds.

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Customer Reviews

Hessler started out wanting to be a novelist, then drifted into journalism, taking with him a deep appreciation for storytelling and a love for the details of life. As Beijing correspondent for the *New Yorker* for seven years, he got a firsthand look at the travails of its modernization. In this collection

of stories from China, Japan, Nepal, and the U.S., he offers an engaged outsider's perspective, as absorbed with meeting people—including migrants and transplants—as with detailing geography and politics. The collection rambles, with no chronological order, as Hessler relays visits to competing restaurants in Guangdong Province famous for their rat dishes; the closing of the Three Gorges Dam; how the Olympics brought even more radical change to Beijing, a city already grappling with sudden modernity; hiking the Great Wall of China with an American expatriate; the peaceful transition of Chinese leadership; and visiting a Peace Corps enthusiast in Nepal pushing for a higher profile for the overseas service agency. Hessler also profiles basketball player Yao Ming, the pride of China. --Vanessa Bush

While the pivots can seem jarring, these articles, which originally appeared in *The New Yorker* between 2002 and 2012, hang together like tracks on a well-done mixtape. *Strange Stones* refers to Chinese rocks, some natural, some carved, that look like other things—a head of cabbage, a rhinoceros. Hessler's subjects share that quality: Look once, and the rise of the Yangtze is an ecological and humanitarian disaster. Look again, and it doesn't seem so bad compared with the political and economic tragedies many adults across China have lived through. —Christopher Beam

Peter Hessler writes in the same vein-- essay-wise-- as John McPhee. (McPhee actually was his professor and mentor.) But, Hessler may inject more humor and heart into his pieces--not that they're ever saccharine. This is quite a collection, mostly essays about China and few about other places. The China essays, in some cases, feel a bit dated--only because China is still changing so quickly. The "driving" essays are probably not as true today as they were ten years ago, but the characteristics of the people probably haven't changed much. (We always get a feel for the people. Read the title essay "Strange Stones" for this.) Some of the essays that involve Hessler's Peace Corps buddies are really good and make you wonder why the Peace Corps isn't doing as well as it used to. (Hessler has some answers for this.) His profiled friends in these Peace Corps pieces are remarkable people. One of the best essays is the final piece titled " Dr. Don" about a pharmacist in a remote town in the American West. (I read this previously in " The New Yorker ", but it was just as good this time around.) We get to know the pharmacist, and we get a wonderful picture not only of him but of the town, the town's "characters" and the town's way of life. If you read this essay first, you will be impelled to read more of Hessler's work, which he infuses with kindness and gentle humor and no hubris.

The stories in this book were written between 2000 (when the author was 30) and 2012. Many are from China, where he lived for over a decade, but also a few from the U.S., Japan and Nepal. The first story opens in a small village in southern China. A waitress is asking if he wants a big rat or a small rat. Virtually everyone in the village is named Zhong. Hessler selects a small rat. Other options include turtledove, fox, cat, python, and other local animals. One does not eat cat simply to eat cat - you eat cat because they have spirit and thus you will improve your spirits. Eating a snake makes you stronger, deep penis to improve virility. Eating rats supposedly keeps you from going bald; eat rats regularly and white hair will turn black. One of the two rat restaurants cost \$42,000, and the other \$54,000; they opened within six days of each other. A third will open soon, costing \$72,000 and having air-conditioning, and a fourth is in the planning stages. They're all located within a half-hour of much larger Guangzhou, population 8+ million. The rats are from the mountains - they're clean - mostly eating fruit, not like city rats. The government checks the rats to see if they have diseases. Farmers on mopeds, bicycles, and on foot bring in rats trapped on their farms. A pound of rat costs nearly double that of a pound of beef. The meat is lean and white. Hessler is quite a venturesome writer - he's not only game for trying rat as a meal, he also ignores the regulation requiring registering with the government before traveling. (Too much trouble, and then I'd have to take all the officials out to lunch.) The restaurant owner suspects Hessler is really there to write about human rights, and doesn't want his name used - even though it's the same as everyone else's. Hessler then goes next door to a competing rat restaurant. They're disappointed he doesn't bring a TV crew with him. This time he chooses a big rat, and is taken out back to choose his rat. Fifteen minutes later, it arrives at his table. Hessler's normal Chinese abode is in a three-story apartment off a tiny alley without a name in a section of old Beijing. His alley is visible on the first detailed map of Beijing - completed in 1750. A local archaeologist believes the street may date back to the 14th century. The apartment is surrounded by single-story homes behind walls of gray brick. Dozens of households might share a single entrance, and though the old residences have running water, few have private bathrooms. Much is communal - even in winter residents sit outside chatting. Street vendors on three-wheel carts pedal through regularly - the group of houses is too small for a supermarket. The beer woman is the loudest. There's also a rice man, a vinegar dealer, a toilet-paper vendor, a knife-sharpener, etc. On an average day, a recycler passes through every half hour - buying cardboard, paper, Styrofoam, broken appliances, books. Everything has value - even a burned-out computer cord (5 cents), worn-out shoes (12 cents), two broken Palm Pilots (37 cents). One day a wig vendor came through - he'd just bought a long black ponytail for \$10. Most is

exported to the U.S. or Japan. Long hair was what he wanted - nothing short. It wasn't long before the 2008 Olympic Games would arrive, and Beijing constructed hundreds of outdoor exercise stations to boost the athleticism and health of average residents. In Hessler's area, they are especially busy at dawn and dusk - older people meet in groups to chat, briefly exercise, and smoke cigarettes. His alley is too narrow for auto traffic. The public toilet is next to his building - residents bring their chamber pots and chat to/from. The government also rebuilt the public toilet at the head of a major street near Hessler's apartment. The building had running water, infrared-automated flush toilets, and a list of detailed rules printed onto stainless steel: "Number 3: Each user is entitled to one free piece of common toilet paper (80X10 centimeters). Full-time attendants were housed in a small room, imported mostly from the poor province of Anhui as no self-respecting Beijing resident would take such a job. The local bicycle repairman shored his tools and extra bikes in the public space fronting the new toilet, cabbage vendors slept on the bordering grass strip, and some ripped-up couches, folding chairs, a wooden cabinet stocked with beer glasses, and a chessboard were contributed. It was called the W.C. Club, with membership open to all. Weekend nights brought barbecues in front of the toilet, a driver for a news service discussed what was in the papers. In 2002 the W.C. Club acquired a T.V., plugged it into the bathroom, and mocked the national team as it failed to score throughout the World Cup. Beijing had once been home to over 1,000 temples and monasteries, but nearly all were converted to other uses by the Communists. Other members of the proletariat were encouraged to occupy the homes of the wealthy. The former compound of a single clan might become home to two dozen families. By the time Mao died in 1976, about a fifth of old Beijing had been destroyed - including sections of the Ming dynasty city wall 40' high, and formal gates to the city. Wang Zhaoxin and his brother sold cigarettes next to the public toilet. Their parents had moved to the area in 1951. Wang was offered the title of Chairman, W.C. Club, but refused. Hessler, being a foreigner, was ranked as a Young Pioneer. Wang always contributed more than his share to a W.C. Club barbecue. Old Yang, the bicycle-repairman, also passed messages among people in the neighborhood, including one from a local matchmaker named Teacher Peng (not an actual teacher). The fee for meeting someone was usually 200 yuan, for more for a foreigner - 500, even 2,000 (\$240). (It was illegal to work with foreigners - they might corrupt/trick Chinese women. Hessler, out of curiosity and to avoid causing Old Yang to lose face, agreed to meet - at the McDonald's. Many meet there without ordering - reading, children doing homework, balancing account books, sleeping. His 'date' was a middle school music teacher. The next time he walked past the matchmaker's office she asked if he wanted to invest in a karaoke parlor. By 2005, 75% of old Beijing had been torn down. The remaining quarter consisted mostly of public parks and the

Forbidden City. Pedicab men joined the vendors and recyclers - giving tours to mostly Chinese tourists. Nearby was a boulevard with streetcars and busses, two supermarkets, and a McDonald's. Sometimes he drives north from Beijing for about 90 minutes to reach Sancha, a quiet village where he rents a farmhouse. The road dead-ends at the village, but a footpath continues up to the Great Wall. The first known historical reference to the Great Wall dates to 656 B.C. - the defensive barriers then were made of packed earth. Hessler once walked eastward along the wall for two days without seeing another person. In 221 B.C. the wall was extended to about 3,000 miles - to keep out the Mongols. It wasn't until the Ming Dynasty that durable materials were used. Guard towers rise every hundred yards or so over 20 feet. An inscribed marble tablet notes that in 1615 A.D., 2,400 soldiers built a section of wall that is around 650 feet long. The Mongols liked to attack in the night, during Fall - too hot in the summer, too cold in the winter, horses were too thin in the spring - lacked energy.

See life as it is Like many of the reviewers here I have read everything he has written, his books, his articles in the New Yorker and the New York Times and if I have missed any it was not for cause. I would not go seeking a Hessler but delighted to see his name again. This work has some pieces published before and so a little disappointing in that all are not a new experiences but read them anyway. What is the appeal? Well he is a genius in taking the most mundane people and settings and bringing them to a level where you are nodding you head or dabbing at you eyes because he has sucked the universal human pathos or the pleasure or both and more in telling the tale. It is not a gimmick it is a gift; the ability to see life as it is in what may be an endless number of settings. He now has wandered off to Egypt to do it again and his first tale, that I saw, was about a Chinese couple selling Victoria's Secrets to Egyptian ladies dressed in their traditional black robes. Smile of course!

I've been a huge fan of McPhee, starting in the '50s. In many ways Hessler's writing is similar. However instead of seeking out topics that he finds interesting, the way McPhee does, he writes about his life experiences. Mostly as a Peace Corps volunteer in China and after completing the Peace Corps and most of the chapters are about China. A couple are about Japan and the last, and terrific one, about a town in Colorado where he and his Wife spend a year after leaving China. I learned a lot about China, Japan and some very interesting characters. I look forward to reading more of his works but hesitate to get his earlier books because I fear his experiences, again in China, would be redundant.

I never miss any writings by Peter Hessler. This one is another great Hessler book. He is a keen observer with true interest in the people and the place he observes. As a first rate journalist, he has ingenious and diligent ways of getting to the heart of his subjects. His writing has a nice flow with wonderful understated humor. I have read some of the articles in this book on New Yorker and enjoyed them again. Anyone who is interested in other places and other times will be greatly rewarded by reading this book.

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