

A Bigger Camera

BY DARIN BOVILLE

Books On My Desk: Kodachrome Himalayas

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The stack grows a little shorter.

Travels Across the Roof of the World: A Himalayan Memoir by William and Anne Frej.

Additional texts by Edwin Bernbaum, Michael Tobias, and Jane Gray Morrison.

Published in 2022 by George F. Thompson Publishing in Association with the Center for Places.

You may remember The Center for *American* Places—this is a later incarnation.

Part travel picture book, part memoir, Willam and Anne Frey's *Travels Across the Roof of the World* (photos by Bill, memoir text by Anne) is a luxuriously printed book. It is heavy in the hand, its pages are thick, and the printing, the design, and the maps are superlatively done.

Reading through it, flipping its pages one of the words that come to mind—I'll be painfully honest here—is "jealousy." Bill and his wife Anne made, if I'm counting correctly, twenty trips into the Himalayas over a forty-year period with one lasting twenty months. This isn't unachievable-for-mere-mortals mountain-climbing, big-swinging ya yas stuff, but trekking, which sounds at first like mere hiking. It's a bit more than that. You can take an organized tour or, when you are more confident, make your own arrangements. Those arrangements turn out to include severe altitude sickness, all manner of sharing beds with strangers, and you can just imagine the rest in terms of comfort. There is a surprising amount of "infrastructure"—the local economies turn out to be highly aware and in some cases dependent on travelers—but that infrastructure does not (yet) include any Holidays Inns in those mountain passes. The jealousy here is a tempered one.

Another word that echoed in my head as I read the texts and scanned the images was "life." Jared Diamond—I think it was in *Guns, Germs, and Steel*?—talked about the sense of sophistication we have about ourselves (and thus the unsophisticated nature of other people) but put us in their environment and we would be as lost as (I paraphrase here) a Tibetan porter in Manhattan. How much of what goes in our heads that we think of as so important is just us navigating our particular environment? How much of it means all that much? Looking at the faces of the portraits in the book—portraits of the various people the Frej's encountered on their travels—I was hit with the realization that that man in Mongolian clothing doesn't want to be me and would not trade places if given a chance, that his life is not less fulfilled because he isn't writing little book reviews on a five thousand dollar laptop, that maybe there is a different way to live.

All of that, of course, is what travel is all about, and perhaps the past few years have heightened my need for it. I'll admit, while writing this short post I've already taken two breaks to google trekking trips. I want a change and I need a change, but what that change needs to be I do not yet know.

A third word that I hear in my ears—or, if it makes any sense at all, in my eyes—is the word "Kodachrome." We're taking a kind of religion here so let me explain to the uninitiated.

In the film days, there was black and white film and color film, and in color film there was negative film (which most people used, the orange-colored stuff that made prints) and there was slide film (also called reversal film or just transparency film). Slide film came in two types: Kodachrome and then all the rest. For many photographers of the color film era Kodachrome was less choice and more sacrament.

There is sad news here. They no longer make Kodachrome nor process it. It is gone.

But not entirely gone. Bill Frej knows Kodachrome, knows its special color palette, feels its warm presence, and he has had his Kodachrome slides lovingly scanned and then sequenced along with his digital files (apparently set to mimic Kodachrome colors the best that they can), printed in ink with much of the glory of the slide film right there on the page. The mountains reflect more color than seems possible, the faces of people are radiant, the skies too blue to be any real skies of this Earth. Some of the images hint at a brightness and a richness last seen on a glass-beaded screen in a dimly lit room.

Books are funny things. You open them thinking you are going to see one thing and then you feel something else quite altogether unexpected. Bill and Anne chronicle their many wanderings in the highest mountains, decades of adventures, and I'm looking at those Tibetan faces and those mountains and I'm casting about for what is missing, not inside the book but outside of it.