

DAVID BROOKS

Riding to Wisdom

Barbara Noske *Thumbing It: a hitchhiker's ride to wisdom*

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“Books about hitchhiking,” reads the back-cover blurb of this intriguing anthropology-cum-memoir, “are a rarity and those written by a woman are rarer still”—the *real* hitchhiking, it tells us, “as it was practised in the twentieth century, in an age with no smartphones, apps or Airbnb. When hitchhiking was still a step into the uncertain and everything was a matter of chance.”

For a while in the earliest 1970s I hitched regularly. I can't say I loved it. I had no car, no money, and most of it was out of necessity. There were good moments but there were also horrid ones. I didn't like the long waits on the edge of town or on deserted country roads in pouring rain or baking heat, or the endless dark nights without a lift in sight, and although I enjoyed occasional long and intense conversations with total strangers, about their life, my own life, or the meaning of things—the way, in the closed space of a car or cabin of a truck, with a person you could be pretty sure you'd never meet again, the rest of the world and its proscriptions seemed temporarily suspended—I don't think it ever occurred to me one might hitch for the sake of it, that it could be a thing-in-itself.

Not so Noske, for whom it's been a calling, an avocation. From her native Netherlands—she still lives there, with a bicycle and a couple of horses (one of them an Australian quarter-horse), no driving licence, no smartphone—she has hitchhiked through much of Europe, North Africa, North America, and (especially) Australia. I am in my sixties and I suspect she is too. My hitching days are forty-five years gone. She's probably still at it.

It's not all she does. She's an anthropologist and philosopher, with a particular strength in the relationship between human and non-human animals—her pioneering book *Beyond Boundaries* (1997) was useful to me when I first embarked upon that same path—and those interests shape and enrich the stories she tells in *Thumbing It*, her memoir of a lifetime on the road, at once a collection of hitchhiking memories and

encounters ordered more by association than continent or chronology, and a meandering (“vagarious”!) sociology of hitchhiking itself, its character-types, its tricks, its secrets, its mind-sets—a might-have-been how-to for hitchhiking women especially, had not hitchhiking changed as much as one suspects it has.

Why would one hitch, life-long, for the sake of it? An addiction to uncertainty? A need to test, repeatedly, oneself and one’s resourcefulness? A compulsion to court and challenge danger? The desire to test one’s faith in human goodness and generosity? A mistrust of the social construct? A need to turn one’s back on one’s “normal,” “settled” identity, make one’s self a cipher, remind oneself of one’s essential, unelaborated being? An addiction to that suspended world? “Status,” she tells us early in the book,

counts for little in the unorganised practice of hitchhiking. As a long-distance hitchhiker (though less so as a ride-giver), you are inclined simply to forget your official position, profession, titles and achievements. ... Such things are completely irrelevant to the reason you’re on the road, to what you do there and to how others regard you. It isn’t a name or a profession standing there with its thumb stuck out, but a flesh and blood person. On the road, you bask in the luxury of anonymity and insignificance.

It is something *existential* then? Perhaps even—against all Noske’s emphatic atheism—something *religious*? The hitchhiker’s life, as she describes it, can seem almost that of a mendicant. She meets, in the Sahara (“the stretch from In Salah to Tamanrasset is the hardest journey I have ever taken”), a Tuareg family who amongst other things offer her a tiny cup of goat’s milk (“90% of the livestock have TB. But how can you refuse such a precious drink, offered in your honour?”). As she leaves, a very old woman approaches her:

She drew me to her, a mother and friend both, and blessed me. I didn’t understand a word she said, but I am sure that is what she did. ... The man spoke a little Arabic. Together with the drivers he calculated that the woman must be 102 years old. Her skin was coal black, her hair yellow, her face like parchment: the past, indeed the whole Sahara, was

engraved in it. ... Now that she lies somewhere in the desert—for she must have died long ago—I still get tears in my eyes when I think of her. A meeting like that only happens once.

“Nomads,” that paragraph finishes, in a line one feels might apply as much to Noske herself, or at least the self she is seeking, as to the old Tuareg woman, “have no address, they travel guided by the stars.”

Although Noske declares more than once that the excitement of the unpredictable and unknown are a kind of drug to her, a yearning drawing her back to the road again and again, and although the book offers ample material in support of any and all of the possibilities I’ve just suggested, I’m not sure it provides a clear and overriding answer. But then I’m not sure it needs to. If it’s a kind of wisdom literature, and I think it is, it’s a kind of wisdom-as-byproduct rather than a search-in-itself, without any of the cloying self-righteousness that can sometimes taint the latter.

Which isn’t to say that there isn’t something developing here, through all the book’s vagaries. Its depth psychology would be something to study. It has some preoccupations, or rather preoccupations *with* preoccupations. With one’s being a woman, or rather with one’s being a woman in a place or situation into which one, *as* a woman, is told not to venture. And with trucks and truckers. To the point, it sometimes seems, of a deliberate taking-on of the male gaze, almost a staring it down.

Two incidents come to mind as indicative, maybe even pivotal in this regard. In the first, a comic touch, she’s in Canada, in a truckers’ diner of the “Husky” chain, fifty miles out of Toronto, with a couple of truckers who ask, embarrassedly, if, as a hitchhiker, she’s ever been propositioned:

other truckers had drawn up their chairs. It looked exactly as if I was giving a lecture, so breathlessly did they sit listening. Had I ever experienced attempts to chat me up?

“Yes,” I replied. “But not nearly so often as you’d think. In Australia, for example, I hitchhiked forty thousand kilometres—the distance round the earth—and it only happened to me three or four times, although the Aussies are much blunter than you are here.”

And I told them how blunt. “D’you wanna screw?” “No, I’m not interested.” “Oh, fair enough, mate.”

To my great pleasure a vehement discussion broke out at once.

“A little lesson in feminist ethics,” she writes, rounding off the section. “In a Husky truck stop. On a Sunday morning. Maybe ethicists should get out of their universities sometimes.”

In the second she’s in Australia, in a truck broken down somewhere outside Broken Hill. The trucker gets a lift back to town to look for an auto-electrician and Noske’s left, for several hours late at night, in charge of his rig. He comes back empty handed but the next morning manages, with her help at the steering wheel, to get them on the road again. “You’ve just started your first truck,” he tells her, and she beams.

These passages give something of the book’s flavour, but I think there’s more to them. Key moments, if you like, on a trajectory that leads us, “intently haphazard” as in the Denise Levertov poem (“Overland to the Islands”), to the book’s shocking and perplexing climax, and Noske’s probing coming-to-terms (has this whole book been a coming-to-terms?).

I won’t go into details—reviewers shouldn’t be spoilers—except to say that it occurs in the far north of Western Australia, that it involves an awkward and confronting ethical crux, and that, in her coming to terms, Noske reaches a point analogous to that at which, in *The Chapel Perilous* (1971), her feminist anthem, Dorothy Hewett once arrived, and expressed as *answering to one’s own blood direct*—learning, in a time when one can’t trust the social messages, to listen to one’s own gut feeling, and to follow the advice of one’s body.

The book is independently published, as a lot of very good books have to be these days. You can order it at any good bookshop, or from Gleebooks at www.gleebooks.com.au/home

About the Author

David Brooks recently retired after almost twenty years as co-editor of *Southerly*. Currently Honorary Associate Professor of Australian Literature at the University of Sydney, he was

the 2015/16 Australia Council Fellow in Fiction. His latest book, *The Grass Library* (Brandl & Schlesinger), a memoir-cum-meditation on animal rights, will be released in August 2019.