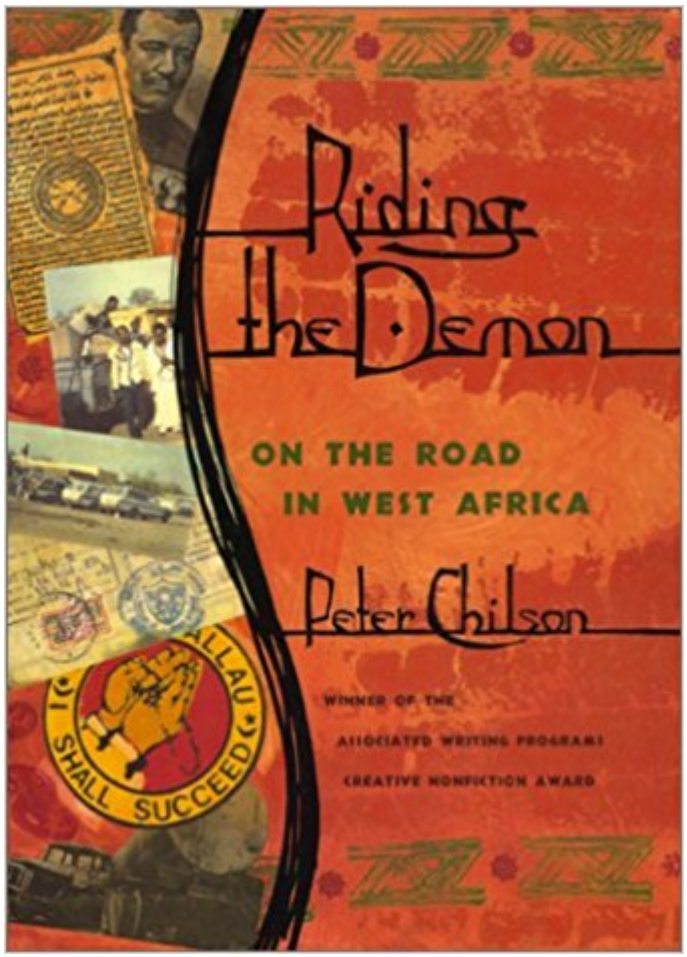
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Riding The Demon: On The Road In West Africa (Association Of Writers And Writing Programs Award For Creative Nonfiction)



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Synopsis

In Niger, where access to rail and air travel requires overcoming many obstacles, roads are the nationÃ¢â ¬â„¢s lifeline. For a year in the early 1990s, Peter Chilson traveled this desert country by automobile to experience West African road culture. He crisscrossed the same roads again and again with bush taxi driver Issoufou Garba in order to learn one driver's story inside and out. He hitchhiked, riding in cotton trucks, and traveled with other bush taxi drivers, truckers, road engineers, an anthropologist, Niger's only licensed woman commercial driver, and a customs officer. The road in Africa, says Chilson, is more than a direction or a path to take. Once you've booked passage and taken your seat, the road becomes the center of your life. Hurtling along at eighty miles an hour in a bush taxi equipped with bald tires, no windows, and sometimes no doors, travelers realize that they've surrendered everything. Chilson uses the road not to reinforce Africa's worn image of decay and corruption but to reveal how people endure political and economic chaos, poverty, and disease. The road has reflected the struggle for survival in Niger since the first automobile arrived there, and it remains a useful metaphor for the fight for stability and prosperity across Africa.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In this vivid exploration of road culture in the West African nation of Niger, Chilson describes a crucial aspect of African culture as a whole: the bush taxi, or "taxi brousse." A year spent taking journeys in this most common form of transportation in Africa leads Chilson further inside modern

Africa than an earnest anthropologist would get, not least because of the danger involved. The people of West Africa abhor an empty Peugeot 504. The rickety old station wagons with balding tires, no windows and engines held together by a wing and a prayer gather at chaotic motor parks where they wait until at least 10 passengers are crammed aboard before taking off. These bush taxis are the great social leveler, since people from all walks of life use them. Auto accidents, horrendous and frequent, are a leading cause of death in Africa. Stationed along all routes are "checkpoints" manned by aggressive soldiers who expect bribes, the cost of which is factored in to the passengers' fare. Little wonder that a fatalistic belief in the "demons" of the road dominates the driversAa set of beliefs that also draws in the author, whose own fear is assuaged by amulets and, on occasion, numb withdrawal. There is an unrelenting quality to the excellent descriptive writing, appropriate perhaps because of the unrelenting life, but readers will hunger for more humor and better characterizations of the people the author met. (Mar.) FYI: Riding the Demon received the Associated Writing Programs award for creative nonfiction.Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.

For many travelers in Africa, the experiences most often remembered are those had on the highways and back roads. Africa has always been a continent with a mobile population where transportation routes are important. As a result, many unique aspects of African culture are connected to travel. Chilson, a young writer, has written an engaging and fascinating account of his road experiences in the French West African country of Niger, north of Nigeria. This well-written book is much more than a description of Chilson's trip, also explaining the history, culture, and personality of this part of Africa. Recommended for libraries with African studies and anthropology collections.AMark L. Grover, Brigham Young Univ. Lib., Provo, UTCopyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.

I read this mostly out of interest in Niger. It does offer some remarkable perspectives on Nigerien bush transport and life in general, but the verbiage is sometimes overwrought

This is a terrific book, a marvelously detailed, nonfiction narrative of travel on the spirit-rich roads of West Africa. Chilson chronicles his journeys by "bush taxi," or freelance transport, typically manifested as a decades-old Peugeot station wagon or minibus, and takes the reader along through maddeningly frequent police checkpoints, past a seemingly unbroken line of wrecked vehicles (many of them, no doubt, bush taxis like those in which he rides), and into a number of fascinating

meetings and conversations with people who call the desert regions of Niger home. Those he meets include bush taxi drivers, the commandant of Niger's highway patrol (who, like Claude Raines in "Casablanca," is just shocked at Chilson's suggestion that his troopers are corrupt and abusive of travelers), a revered holy man who provides the writer with talismans to ward off harm on the road, and Niger's only (as far as anyone seems to know) female commercial driver, who aspires to owning her own bush taxi service, with men working for her. As he travels, Chilson reflects on his own responses to the landscape, and to the harshness of life in the impoverished country. He returns often to the century-old story of Captain Paul Voulet, the French officer who led a surveying expedition along the route of what would one day be Route Nationale 1, the main highway that Chilson travels with his guide and mentor, bush taxi driver Issoufou Garba. Voulet ordered the 450 African troops under his command to slaughter thousands as he crossed the land, destroying whole villages without provocation. The highway, Chilson realizes, was born of Voulet's madness, of murder and an insane greed for power. The brutality of Voulet is incomprehensible to Chilson, a former Peace Corps worker in West Africa, yet it seems to suffuse the very atmosphere of the road, where death is always very possible and reaching your destination never guaranteed. This is, ultimately, a book about a place; as such, it succeeds admirably, offering insights into a land of which most non-Africans know nothing at all. But it is also a book about what it means to be a human being, about the web of moral, emotional and spiritual connections we each must navigate as we travel through our lives. To his credit, Chilson does not paint himself as a paragon; he has moments of true bitterness and despair, sometimes wanting nothing more than escape from Niger, from the heat and the official corruption and the inevitable suspicion directed at him, a lone white American, as he pursues knowledge of a great mystery, the road. Riding the Demon: On the Road in West Africa is a book worthy of Graham Greene, whom Chilson claims as an influence, in the lushness of its physical detail, the clarity of its cultural observations, and the depth of its inquiry into what makes for a truly human existence, a life lived morally and well. To call this (or any) book a "must read" would be pointless -- you could obviously continue to draw breath without it. But this is certainly a "should read," because you will gain by reading it. Splendidly written and fascinating in its subject matter, Riding the Demon: On the Road in West Africa deserves your attention.

It's incredible that Chilson manages to convey the entire culture of Niger (as well as incidental discussions of its history during French colonialism) through his reporting of his travels with several bush taxi drivers and how they manage their lives and the lives of their passengers on the road. Americans often think that we live in a car culture and have a love/hate relationship with our

overdependency on cars. I challenge anyone to read this book and not come away thinking that traffic problems and reckless driving in our country are at best inconveniences compared to the literal hell in Niger. Here is a country where a highway patrol is manned by the military and is funded almost entirely through bribes extorted at road checks; where automobiles are literally pieced together with wreckage from the hundreds of near daily, fiery crashes that seem to line the Nigerien roads the way weeds and garbage line our highways; where talismans to ward off the road demons that lurk in the night are carried by everyone - not out of superstition - but in an earnest belief that one may not make it to the end of one's journey without them. Utterly fascinating, expertly and cleanly written, this book is an eye-opening reading experience.

This book was very disappointing indeed. Niger is a large country, but the author only rode a few short stretches on the only real highway at the Southern border. Niger is endless sand dunes with tiny water holes that are tough to find. It has ghost towns and the salt oasis of Bilma. It has small oases where the people never saw a doctor and where children will die from infections when they step on an acacia thorn. It is a land of camel caravans where natives get lost and die in the desert. And where, in the mountains, live the blue men of the desert, the Tuaregs. On the desert sands, you can find fish skeletons. And in Agadez you see the world's oldest mosque and can shake hands with the sultan. And where was the author? Nowhere in sight of the real Niger.Forget it.

I desperatly needed some inspiration and Chilson and his book gave it to me. He weaves an interesting story through Niger meeting just the right mixture of people (intellectual, working class types and others) and describes the country to a penetrating affect.

This book was informative, but it is limited to "on the road". You'll hear about the bush taxis and their drivers, but will visit only a small part of the country. This book could have used a good editor -- there's some repetition -- and a better map. The map in the front of the book doesn't list all the towns, villages, etc. that were visited and doesn't name the adjacent countries. I thought it was worth reading, but disappointing.

What most reviewers of "Riding the Demon" miss is the way in which the author metaphorizes Africa for his own "literary" ends. As non-Africans have done now for centuries, Chilson translates "Africa" into a useful tool for his own soul-searching-and pontificating. While in some respects the book may open western eyes to the complex that is "Africa," ultimately Chilson bends "Africa" to his purposes

and authorial desires.

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