

BEYOND WANDERLUST

By Richard Taylor

The Citizen's Weekly Reading, December 29, 2002

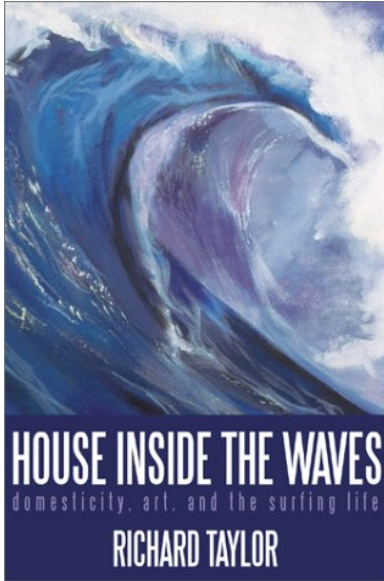
Diane Stuemmer and Richard Taylor swap e-mails and share adventures from behind their tales.

Richard Taylor and Diane Stuemmer unplugged from the rat race and left the suburbs of Ottawa with their families to creatively work out their midlife crises. One parachuted into a beach house on the east coast of Australia. The other sailed around the world.

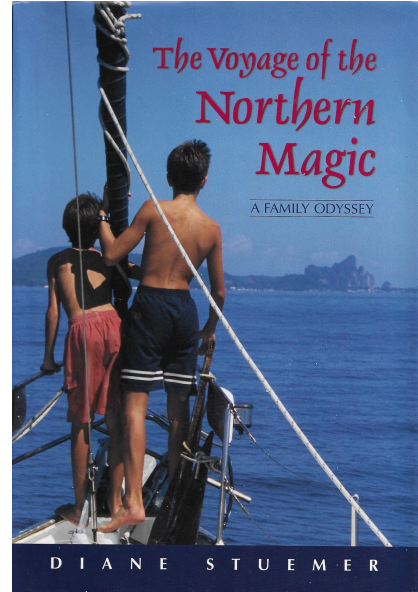


Photo by Lynn Ball, for the Ottawa Citizen

Adventurers, authors and Ottawa residents – for now – Richard Taylor and Diane Stuemmer have each published memoirs this year.



During a period of four years, both wrote many articles in the *Citizen*. This year, each published a travel memoir, *House Inside the Waves: Domesticity, Art and the Surfing Life* and *The Voyage of the Northern Magic: A Family Odyssey*. The writers had a chance to meet and swap books at Ottawa International Writers Fest.



They later discussed their works by e-mail:

Rick: The last few nights I've been diving into *Northern Magic* with glee because it's taking me around the world again. I feel like I really know you. I'm sure you're having a similar experience as you go through *House Inside The Waves*. It's kind of eerie to think that so many people who read our books will have a deep glimpse into our souls and the routines and intimate moments of our spouses and children.

The thing with writing a nonfiction travel memoir, and I noticed this while reading your book - as an author, you can't really hide or fake your personality, faults, virtues, enthusiasms, shortcomings, snobberies, etc. It's all there, so personal and unfolding along with the reader's way of dealing with the world.

Although we have unique stories to tell, different writing styles and personalities, we have much in common. Certainly the wanderlust, the desire to share our adventures with other people, and the ability to promote our dreams.

My book doesn't have the same generosity of spirit that drives yours, because *House* has a darker, more ambiguous engine. But I don't think readers seek out travel memoirs to find the same formula - they read for the pleasure of travelling to unknown places, both geographical and psychological.

Diane, you know there are a hell of a lot of waves in your book. I think in your other life you may have been a bit of a surfer chick.

Diane: Rick, your surfer lifestyle choice wouldn't be mine, but I found myself (reluctantly, somehow) liking you more and more as I read through the book and understood your passion better. We lived through very different experiences, but both of us managed to bring tremendous benefits to ourselves and our families by sharing our love of travel with our children. In our case, we began the trip for pretty selfish reasons, and by the end our journey our lives had changed in ways we could never have expected.

Rick: The night we met at the Writers Fest we talked about the similarities between our books, our families and our life experiences: Both families willed their dreams to come true, and were able to turn their dreams into art, and share their dreams with the reading public. Both writers reflect on the sanctuary of home vs. the sublime reach of the open road.

Both books are a deep, tender portrait of family life. Both books deal with extreme sports: balls out surfing, and balls out sailing. Both books are bathed in the mystery of faraway places.
And water.

Diane: And chocolate chip cookies! Why is it that chocolate chip cookies play a big role in both books?

Rick: I call my Rick's Oatmeal, Coconut, Chocolate Chip Cookies the great pacifier. You must have cracked one of your lovely smiles when you noticed cookies travel from my early househusband days with the ladies, to university classrooms and finally get gobbled up by gnarly surfer dudes in Oz. Your Aunt Linda's Excellent Oatmeal Chocolate Chip Cookies travelled the seven seas and gave you such obvious solace.

This is a hard time for us. My wife Dale was good friends and taught with the teachers murdered up at Val Des Monts. Incredible what can happen in your own backyard, wrong place at the wrong time. Dale knew Bonnie very well. Had in fact planned to see her at a dinner next Monday with a small group of Broadview teachers who get together once a month.

When I think of Dale and I travelling around the world twice, all the crazy places we travelled and lived, with our kids even, and you and your four-

year odyssey around the world, it doesn't make sense. But you can't live worrying about shark attacks, or typhoons. You just have to live and ride out whatever hits you.

Diane: Tragedy can strike any of us, at any time. I had to get cancer at age 35 to come face to face with my mortality. One of the lessons we learned is that we each have to find the passion that drives us, get in touch with the little voice that tells us who we were really meant to be. And then follow that voice.

None of us ever knows how much time we will be given on this Earth. We've got to make the most of each day. It's better, I think, to knowingly take risks when necessary and live the life you were meant to live. The biggest risk of all is not living your life to the fullest.

Rick: What really hit me near the end of your book was the constant confession about your reluctance to go home to the routine and bland existence of day-to-day life compared to the magic intensity of travel. We're still mooning about our last long trip even after five years. Now that we are back to the grind of schedules, the longer we remain harnessed up to the accelerating treadmill of modern life, I don't know if we'll both be able to keep the promise of balance in our lives, living with the passion that is easy to sustain when you travel.

Diane: We made the very same promise, and so far have (mainly) been able to keep it. When we returned home, both Herbert and I agonized over what we were going to do to earn a living. We had a strong sense that we didn't want to go back to how we were living before. We badly needed to stay involved with the projects we've established in Indonesia and Africa. It was our way of keeping our journey going, of continuing to make a difference. Of reminding people what a wonderful paradise they live in, here in Canada.

So we just decided what we needed to do - keep sharing our story, keep working on our projects, and somehow, so far, it's all worked out. The book and the public speaking we've been doing have not only permitted that, but helped us continue to spread the lessons of what we've learned on our voyage - not just about daring to dream, but about the world.

Rick: It's the constant dilemma of the traveller. On p. 246 you wrote: "We went on safari and couldn't help reflect that the money we spent on the safari could have fed Boniface's entire family for years." We have had the

same thoughts as we travelled and lived around the world, going on our romantic quests for pleasure and excitement, that most of the world is still trying to feed and shelter themselves...You have done a fine thing by addressing this issue and making a difference.

I love a great metaphorical revelation in your book on p. 258: "All we did was plink one little stone down a mountain. Maybe it would help start an avalanche."

I always talk about our bank account being overdrawn but our soul account is brimming because of the way we have chosen to live.

Diane: Well we've come to realize that although we think we own our possessions, the truth is they own us. The more things we own, the more we are tied down to them. But the only lasting thing we can ever create are our experiences, that shape and form us and our children, and the people we touch. As writers and as parents we hope for our little piece of immortality through our children, and the books we leave behind. But the photographs you've created in your mind's eye, all of the times you've shared in discovery with your wife and children, those are the true riches of a life well lived.

Congratulations, Rick, for following your passion, for living a big life. And thank you for sharing it with me, through your book.

In the words of Michael, our oldest son: " Life is glorious. There's so much to do, and no time to waste."

Maybe next time around I will come back as a surfer chick!

Epilogue

Less than a week after *Beyond Wanderlust* was published, Dec. 29, 2002, I got an email from Diane on January 4, 2003. We had developed a quick, relaxed friendship after meeting at the Writer's Festival only 2 months earlier. Because of our discovery that oatmeal chocolate chip cookies play a big role in both of our books, we had brainstormed a half-baked idea (Diane's pun) about doing a book together: A literary, philosophical, aquatic, travel book about passion and food. Something like, *Literary Recipes for Hungry Souls*. I said we could act as editors and get some well known writers to submit recipes and short reflective pieces. I had

connections with Michael Ondaatje, Isabel Huggan, Audrey Thomas, Timothy Findley, and maybe Joan Didion, Paul Theroux and James Salter.

Unfortunately in that same January 4th email Diane said:

Re: *Literary Recipes*, the idea of having famous writers contribute has some promise. Let me think about it for a while. I'm pretty distracted right now because I seem to have developed some weird neurological problem that is explained only by some pretty dire hypothesis (brain cancer, aneurysm, spine fracture.) My tongue is half paralysed and I've had a killing headache since Boxing Day. I'm speaking reasonably well although people who know me can hear my speech is slurred. That's going to really wow them in Toronto when I limp on stage, cradling my head and speak with a lisp! I'm booked for 10 events in Toronto over the next two weeks. I'm running around to the hospital at all hours of the day and night, having MRI's, CT scans etc. trying to figure out what's at the bottom of this and so other things are taking a bit of a back seat as I deal with it. As Herbert and I sat there in the hospital all I could think about is, "Thank God we did what we were meant to do, and made the most of every day. No regrets." Yes, the real risk is not living life to the fullest.

Cheerths, (that's my lisp)

Diane.

On January 15th Diane emailed to say she ended up going by ambulance to emergency and she was a lot worse, vomiting for two days, stronger headache:

I'm just coping day by day hoping someone finds the cause of this. I think we may be able to camouflage the headache with enough painkillers - although it's turning me into a brainless zombie - but no one has a clue about my tongue. Pretty funny when I'm making my living as a public speaker now! Anyway, I'm hanging in there.

Cheers,

D

I heard in the news that Diane was not doing very well. On February 16, I sent her a short email:

Subject: Beauty, Grace, Joy, Compassion, Balls.

Hey Diane,

It's Rick.

One of the fine things Hemingway wrote applies to your writing:

“From things that have happened and from things as they exist and from all things that you know and all those things you cannot know, you make something through your invention that is not a representation but a whole new thing truer than anything true and alive, and you make it alive, and if you make it well enough, you give it immortality.” It was a real honour and pleasure doing our email dialogue together. I already knew you through the words of your book, but our email exchange was an even purer connection. Let me know if there is anything I can do.

Love,
Rick

A month later on March 15th Diane died of malignant melanoma from skin cancer she thought she had beaten years earlier.

Dale and I attended the funeral on March 20th with hundreds of others at the Dominion Chalmers United Church for a kind of celebration of a “questing for adventure” life. In front of the altar, everyone stared at a big-framed photo of Diane sitting on the bow of the Northern Magic. It was beautiful and horribly sad. In one of the eulogies, someone said Diane used to call water nectar, and on the voyage around the world her children would say, “Pass the nectar.”

After a life-altering four years sailing around the world with her husband and three sons, Diane was concerned about adjusting to a regular life in suburbia; how to keep living life with passion.

In the brief time before she died, as her cancer accelerated, Diane had visited with other cancer patients. Diane commented on one woman who had died beautifully, and that Diane was determined to die beautifully as well. She said she wanted her death to be a transition, not an end.

All I could think about was the book we didn’t write together. I listened to Diane’s sister, Linda, who also possesses Diane’s radiant smile, deliver her moving eulogy. And I remembered Diane writing about Aunt Linda’s Excellent Oatmeal Chocolate Chip Cookies. ALEOCCCs.

In an email to Diane on October 29th, 2002 called Adventures Behind the Tales, I had written:

You commented on my Prologue to *House Inside the Waves* where I talk about chocolate chip cookies being the great pacifier. I teach writing at Collected Works Bookstore and Coffee Bar. I don't drink coffee but they sell designer cookies. In five years of teaching at the bookstore, I've never bought a single cookie. Last night after my class I thought I might buy a cookie because I was so hungry. And I was thinking about you. I asked Peter how old they were. He looked at me over the top of his glasses and said, "About a week and a half." So I picked out a macadamia chocolate chip cookie, paid for it, and then took the bag for the long drive home. It snapped nicely, because it was old. And you know, incredibly, it was the best damned cookie I'd had in a long time. I have to get the recipe. Hey, I just thought of something. How about you and I write a literary/aquatic/travel book together: *Literary Recipes for Hungry Souls* or something?

Rick

Right away, Diane sent me a quick decisive email:

You taught at a cookie bar for five years and never bought a cookie?!
Unbelievable!

But a good cookie shouldn't really snap... crusty on the outside, soft and warm on the inside. Cold glass of milk. Heaven!

Diane

