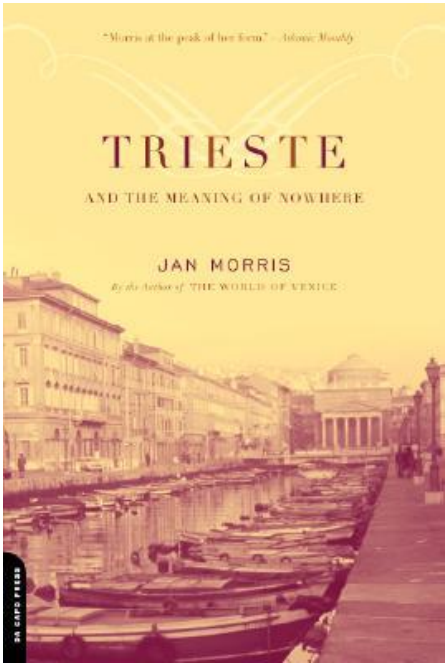

Trieste and The Meaning of Nowhere

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Here's a book for lovers of all things Italian. This city on the Adriatic has always tantalized Jan Morris with its moodiness and changeability. After visiting Trieste for more than half a century, she has come to see it as a touchstone for her interests and preoccupations: cities, seas, empires. It has even come to reflect her own life in its loves, disillusionments, and memories. Her meditation on the place is characteristically layered with history and sprinkled with stories of famous visitors from James Joyce to Sigmund Freud. A lyrical travelogue, *Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere* is also superb cultural history and the culmination of a singular career-"an elegant and bittersweet farewell" (Boston Globe).

Trieste and The Meaning of Nowhere Details

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From Reader Review Trieste and The Meaning of Nowhere for online ebook

Zuberino says

For as long as I can remember I've wanted to visit Trieste. In 1980s Nakhalpara, poring over the atlas at home after school, that odd name snuck away at the top of the Adriatic Sea, just where the leg of Italy meets the European landmass – that name "Trieste" used to make me wonder. A few years later, the ringing words of Churchill's Fulton speech floated down across the decades in grainy black-and-white on BBC: "From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent." Stettin, Trieste – what did these names signify? What kind of places were they, marking out the territorial limits of the Cold War?

I went to Trieste without much in the way of expectation. I only knew of a few vague markers – Habsburgs, James Joyce, Churchill, the Cold War. So that when I finally walked out into the city on that first morning, I was thoroughly unprepared for what met me. What I found was a true jewel of Mitteleuropa, once the principal seaport of the Habsburgs and perhaps the wealthiest city in the empire after Vienna. Today it is nothing more than a quiet provincial town on the Slovene border, with the vast Slavic hinterland beyond that stretches all the way from Istria to Vladivostok – but in Trieste itself, along every avenue and on every street corner still, there is evidence of such splendid riches – dazzling buildings and fabulous piazzas and the soaring cathedrals of a dozen different faiths - that you cannot help but fall into a meditative mood, pondering on the past, on the faded glory of lost empires, on the transience and maybe even futility of all human endeavour.

All that splendour still exists intact, but on the quays that once crawled with sailors and merchants from all over the world, dense with the sea-traffic of six continents, on the docks that morning I could see just one solitary vessel moored for fitouts. On that first day of exploration, Trieste reminded me of a walk long ago along the corniche in Alexandria, of mornings on the Malecon in Havana, of the ruined amphitheatre on the seafront in Cadiz. Trieste belonged in that select company of the once mighty now brought low, but with enough evidence left over still to inspire bouts of melancholy, nostalgia and romantic regret. (And I haven't even started on Joyce, Svevo and Trieste's splendid literary heritage.)

So reading Jan Morris's book on Trieste became practically an obligation. Morris is a writer after my own heart, and explores the above themes and many more in this extended love letter to her favorite city. She first went there as a young soldier after the Second World War (James Morris as she was at the time), when Trieste's fate was still being fought over by the Italians and Tito's Yugoslavs, not to be finalized for another decade. But the encounter proved decisive, and looking back from the vantage point of old age, Morris sets down a lifetime's wisdom and learning in this book which is also a wonderfully well-written and highly evocative history of the Habsburgs' Most Faithful City. She has all the answers: Why did I see so many Austrian licence plates in the Croatian resort of Opatija? Why is that big pier opposite Piazza Unita called Molo Audace? What was the function of the small park opposite the rail station in the early 1990s after the Berlin Wall fell? (It was the same park where 90 years earlier, Joyce had left his mistress Nora while he went to pick a drunken fight in the city centre.) Where did the explorer Burton live and die? Where is the Nobel winner Abdus Salam's famous research base? Who was Oberdan, after whom a town square is now named? Is that church journal full of Glagolitic script still available for public viewing? When Franz Ferdinand died in Sarajevo that morning in 1914, ringing the death knell of European civilisation, which ship brought him back to Trieste for the final overland journey to Vienna? And just where did the young Sigmund Freud cut open all those hundreds of eels, trying to figure out their sex organs?

I am grateful for the things I did get to see on my trip - the view from the obelisk high up in Opicina, with panoramas of the city backed by the Adriatic, the famous piazza where 77 years before me, Mussolini himself held a jampacked crowd of fanatics and followers spellbound, the house yes the very house where Joyce began to write Ulysses. But there is material enough in Morris' book, questions unanswered and sites unseen, to justify future trips, many more of them, to Trieste. Time did not permit me to see the castle of Miramare, but how to resist Maximilian's pride and joy, now seeped in the sadness of eternity, because it was the same Maximilian whose life came to such a sticky end in Mexico 150 years ago, sacrificed to lurid fantasies of empire and providing fodder for literature and film and Mexican legend ever since, featured in the middle parts of Bolano's "The Savage Detectives" and inspiring a vast, celebrated novel by Fernando del Paso? Having read Morris' descriptions of the savage winter wind called "bora" and seen old cartoons of it in Google Images, this too is a phenom that I must experience in person! I didn't visit the Lapidary Gardens by San Giusto, nor did I see the General Post Office or the Museo Revoltella, both described by Morris in such glowing terms.

Above all, Morris' book - her last one after a life devoted to literature - is best on the grudging tolerance and remarkable human diversity of the Habsburg experiment, Stefan Zweig's famed world of yesterday, something that I cannot help but feel is being slowly reformed in a different shape with the EU project, although not forgetting to acknowledge at the same time the immense human and economic cost of the common currency. Towards the end, her ruminations on history, memory and mortality soar into a sort of prose-poetry, and the nowhereness of the book's title hoves into full view. Like a fly encased in ancient amber or a mammoth in the Siberian ice, Trieste is forever trapped in time.

*

Names and images keep flooding back to me. Antonio Smareglia in the shadow of the arena in Pula, the same Smareglia whose operas were staged at the Teatro Verdi, the same acronym VERDI which became a touchstone for Italian irredentism. My tour guide, a lifelong Triestina, whose grandmother studied English under Joyce's younger brother Stanislaus. The hotel where the scholar Winckelmann died, the cafes Stella Polare and San Marco where the intelligentsia hung out. And always above me, the Habsburg streetlamps, that lovely, unique creation, a perfect golden sphere of glass trapped in a fine wire mesh, which for me is the enduring symbol of Trieste and its Habsburgs, and the image that spurs me on to my next book, Simon Winder's Danubia.

Pamela says

This is the final book by travel writer Jan Morris, and is both a fascinating account of a lesser-known city and a meditation on Morris' own feelings as she reflects on her memories. It is beautifully written, thoughtful and evocative.

Trieste is portrayed as a melancholy place, a kind of 'nowhere' that has passed through changes of history and geography until it ended up with no real place to belong. Even so, Morris finds beauty and kindness in the city and its people, and it is this sensitivity towards Trieste that makes this such a moving and enchanting read.

This is a very special kind of travel writing, and has definitely inspired me to seek out more of Morris' work.

Mind the Book says

Tågläsning på väg från Paris mot Trieste. Tycker mycket om tonen hos Morris. Enligt henne är den norditalienska staden...

visceral, surreal, lonely, subliminal, idiosynchratic, cosmopolitan, crepuscular, compelling, brooding, ambiguous, wistful, maudlin, peculiar, stagnant, redundant, unfulfilled, elusive

an ethnic enclave, industrial clutter, hinterland, limbo, sweet tristesse, chimera, unspecified yearning, lost continent, utopia

curiously haunting, defiantly eclectic, habitually melancholic

för artists, dropouts, renegades, exiles

"But for the drifter it's just right."

Lisa says

Jan Morris is exceptional in her coverage of a place and capturing it in its feeling and its personality. Hers isn't a travel book so much as it is a chronicle of the evidence she shows over and again as to the uniqueness of the city of Trieste.

The author helps us know the place through its history, its geography and its architecture. This Italian city to the author is arbitrarily part of that country now but it's history makes it more a regional place, so important within the Australian-Hungarian empire but shuttered aside once wars end and it is assigned to Italy. But clearly that doesn't make it an Italian city.

At times the author makes me yearn for this place she loves and other times I wonder if it will be lost to its inability to move forward.

Lyn Elliott says

Morris explors the idea of being 'in between' in this book. She first visited Trieste as James Morris, a young sailor. Her reflections on Trieste, written as a much older Jan Morris, contemplate her own status as a person born between genders, and Trieste as a city between worlds, linked backed to Vienna and Austria as the Mediterranean sea port for the Habsburg Empire. It is also a city of the Mediterranean, now part of Italy but not at all convinced about that. This is a haunting book, misty, melancholic - very much like Trieste itself. Morris is such an interesting writer because she connects history, geography, politics and social interactions with the places she observes so closely. In this book, she does all of that, and ties in some of the most significant part of her life's journey too. Unforgettable.

Nicole says

It took me a long time to get through "Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere" because it’s a dense book, full of centuries’ worth of historical lessons and anecdotes, and because Morris writes in a careful third-person style that’s very different from the zany, personal stories that are popular now.

The time was well spent, though. Morris paints an interesting portrait of Trieste, a city I’ve never been to (and one which, according to a possibly apocryphal 1999 poll, 70% of Italians don’t realize is in Italy). She covers all aspects of Trieste’s history and culture, from the city’s Jewish Diaspora to the city’s relations with its Slavic neighbors.

Just when the anecdotes start to get a little cloying and you’re starting to wonder where she’s going with all of them, Morris wraps up the book—her last, she says--with a magnificent chapter that explains why Trieste has been significant to her throughout the years. It’s a beautiful end to not just a book but an entire distinguished writing career. The final chapter manages to tell us a lot about both the author and the city, without being either self-indulgent or dryly historical. In my experience, that’s a hard balance to strike. It’s easy to tell your own story about a place, and easy to impart a history lesson, but very hard to make your own experiences interesting and relevant to a general audience. This book shows how that’s done.

Flora says

Before going to Trieste, I read this 2003 book by Jan Morris. It was the last book by this formidable travel writer, which she did in her seventies. I decided to re-read it after visiting Trieste. Morris writes with such depth of insight and feeling that the city is more vivid than if I visited without reading her book.

Carol Smith says

We savor those rare experiences when we discover a marvelous author with a lengthy bibliography. Jan Morris is such a find for me. As a fan of travel writing, how can I have overlooked her all these years? Looking forward to catching up on her substantial back catalog.

I read this on a plane to Trieste. By the time I touched down, I felt I understood the town, that I had gained a sense of it in a way that effectively melds history, culture, geography, inhabitants, quirks, and features. On our first half-day in town, I referred to so many passages in the book that you'd think it was a travel guide. It's not, but I wish I could read a similar treatise for every place I've visited or plan to visit.

Benny says

Trieste, the sad port of lost Mitteleuropa, is a city of palaces, banks and halls that got lost in history, as

borders shifted and old alliances changed. It’s a place that inspires melancholy, a longing for an imagined past.

The city finds itself in Italy now. Its Piazza Grande now perhaps too proudly calls itself the Piazza Unita d’Italia. But Slovenia and the old Habsburg empire is still in the air. And on the Piazza della Borsa a banner pleaded the US and the UK to please come back and reinstate the Free Territory of Trieste (as it was in the years after the last world war).

Jan Morris (then James Morris) was a British soldier in Trieste back then and now a grande dame of English literature, she set out to write *Trieste or the Meaning of Nowhere* as her final book. It’s a melancholic adieu. This wonderful little book is a personal reflection on times gone by, but also an inspiring travel book that you can still use today. In Trieste not that much has changed over the last few decades.

Rossella says

Sometimes when I finish a book I have a strange feeling, sort of a nostalgia, a loss of a world, a "being sorry that the book is over". It was usually good narrative that used to give me that feeling - until I read this book, the only descriptive travel book that managed to catch my heart and not my brain only.

My position toward this book is privileged, since I was born and raised in Trieste, and even though I haven't been living there for some time it's still my dearest town, the one I know better.
As a consequence, places, people, views, feelings I know so well kicked in, in my memory, in such a powerful way that sometimes I felt like I was losing the point of view of the author. But maybe that's what makes the author so remarkable, because this has never happened to me before when reading about Trieste - she really managed to get into the very heart of this city, and report the very feelings it arises. I was particularly impressed by the fact that she perceived what in my opinion are two of the main ghosts that haunt me as a Triestina: hypochondria and in particular the sense of wanting something without knowing what, expecting something, wondering about oneself and the meaning of one's own life.

I'm still wondering about the peculiar concept of nowhereness, that makes the title of the book, and that the author attributes to Trieste. I would like it to be true. And in part it is. I have the impression, though, that the author has somewhat idealized Trieste in this respect, in a way that's typical of visitors that don't actually live there for an extended, continuous time, dealing with the "everyday side" of a place. But maybe she just decided to leave that part out ... who cares after all? At the very end she admits to have portrayed nothing but herself, her Trieste. That's authentic enough.

I highly recommend this book.

Cheryl Kennedy says

Trieste - "An outsider that I am, I still see myself as part of that half-real, half-imagined seaport, so now that after all these years I am writing a book about Trieste (at age 75, my last book, too)it is bound to be a work partly of civic impressionism, but partly of introspection----or self-indulgence."

The Habsburg monarchy in Vienna brought it into the modern world and chose Trieste to be its main deep-sea port on the Adriatic. By the twentieth century it prospered from trade with Austria, Hungary, Bohemia and central Europe. The city on the Adriatic Sea was considered the connection of Europe and Asia. The third entrance of the Suez Canal. In fact, the first commercial vessel to sail through the canal, was the Primo of Trieste before the inaugural ceremony in 1869.

But at the end of the first world war in 1919, Trieste found itself separated from the Habsburg empire, joined to the newly invented Yugoslavia kingdom and the united kingdom of Italy.

"For me Trieste is an allegory of limbo, nowhere defined by an hiatus after the second world war when Communists laid claim. In 1954 the city was handed back to Italy with its surrounds going to Yugoslavia."

In the twenty-first century, Trieste streets are jammed like any other European city with a quarter of a million people.

"My acquaintance with the city spans the whole of my adult life, but like my life it still gives me a waiting feeling, as if something big but unspecified is always about to happen."

Jan Morris lived and wrote as James Morris until she completed a change of sexual role in 1972.

Lee Kofman says

I literally forced myself to finish this book. I just couldn’t give up the hope that this writer, who so enchanted me in her memoir Conundrum, will tell me something urgent, something beautiful, something enchanting, something wise. While beauty and enchantment do grace some of the pages, and there are occasional glimpses of wisdom, the urgency just wasn’t there. Not for me, at least. I don’t normally love travel writing unless it has some emotional story to tell too, or if it offers some fresh philosophical and/or historical and/or cultural insights, and I didn’t find any of these in this book. For the most of it, Trieste is an overly detailed, and often repetitive, account of a not-that-fascinating place. Or perhaps what fascinates Morris there – endless names of obscure historical personages (there were some more prominent appearances, though, e.g. of Joyce and Maximillian), economic history, intricacies of some ethnic institutions – holds little interest for me. But I did love learning more about Austro-Hungarian empire from this book. And more about Joyce…

Mark says

This is Jan Morris‘s melancholy love letter to a city that was formed by a dozen different civilizations over the course of four thousand years but seems not to belong to any of them. Indo-Europeans known as Illyrians founded the city, then the Romans took it, the city-state of Venice colonized it, the Habsburgs occupied it, and finally the modern state of Italy got it after World War I. A hundred years ago, Trieste was one of the most bustling ports in Europe but is now largely forgotten, even by Italians: though Trieste is the capital of the Italian province also named Trieste, 70 percent of Italians polled in 1999 didn’t even know it was in Italy! For Morris, the transience of Trieste’s glory is a metaphor for the impermanence of life itself.

Morris is interested in Trieste mainly as a utopia: she conceives of it as the capital city of all the people who don’t feel at home in the countries of their birth and are always longing for something at the edge of

definition. Internal exiles. What Melville calls Isolatoes.

“They share with each other, across all nations, common values of humour and understanding. When you are among them, you will not be mocked or resented. . . They laugh easily. They are easily grateful. They are never mean. They are not inhibited by fashion, public opinion or political correctness. They are exiles in their own communities, because they are always in a minority, but they form a mighty nation, if they only knew it. It is the nation of nowhere, and I have come to think that its natural capital is Trieste.”

Morris takes a great deal of time and care to report the history and physical characteristics of Trieste accurately. She wants to locate her idea of utopia paradoxically in a real place, and the accumulation of well-observed, odd details about the city has the curious effect of building a portrait of dislocation that seeps outside of the book and into the place where you're reading it, so that every place on earth begins to seem a little odd and dislocated. Through Trieste, Morris finds the nowhere that is everywhere and claims the city as the natural home to everyone whose unfulfilled longings are as important to them as their grandest accomplishments.

Tony says

Trieste, Jan Morris begins, *is not one of your iconic cities, instantly visible in the memory or the imagination. It offers no unforgettable landmark, no universally familiar melody, no unmistakable cuisine, hardly a single native name that everyone knows. It is a middle-sized, essentially middle-aged Italian seaport, ethnically ambivalent, historically confused, only intermittently prosperous, tucked away at the top right-hand corner of the Adriatic Sea, and so lacking the customary characteristics of Italy that in 1990 some 70 percent of Italians, so a poll claimed to discover, did not know it was in Italy at all.*

Perhaps the inexorable problem with Trieste is its location:

You can see it up there, tucked right where Morris said it was. There's no denying it has a great view of Venice, but take a closer look:

Awkward, that, like one country came and took a slice of another country, and valuable sea access land no less. We've seen this *causus belli* before.

But, once upon a time, Trieste was Italian, yes, but also a part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. A dual monarchy they called it. That changed after the First World War when Italy scooped it up. Suddenly, dudes with names like Kogut became Cogetti.

Ettore Schmitz got the message and when he began publishing his novels he did so under the *nom de plume* Italo Svevo. He became chums with James Joyce who became something of an expatriate in Trieste, no doubt enjoying the extended drinking hours. It was there that Joyce wrote Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and also where he heard an odd admixture of language (*sonababic* meant son-of-a-bitch) that he absorbed and which served as the template language of Finnegan's Wake. *In some ways it seems to me that Joyce and Trieste were made for each other,* Morris writes.

It was in Trieste that Freud studied the sexual organs of eels. Proust did not get out of his bed to visit, but he nevertheless used Trieste. His *Narrator, who imagined it as deliciously melancholy, changed his mind when he heard his Albertine was enjoying Sapphic sex there, and called it an accursed city that ought to go up in flames.*

Egon Schiele was there for a bit then went back home to Vienna and immediately painted this self-portrait:

The Nazis, Morris writes, *found no real use for Trieste.* They annexed it anyway when the Italians quit and used it for their ongoing foul purpose (more on that later). When the Americans and Brits picked it up during their period of governance, they *were more concerned about who Trieste should belong to than what it was for.*

When Churchill got specific in his "Iron Curtain" speech, he said that line dividing democracy and Communism stretched *from Stettin to Trieste.*

Well, that's enough name-dropping.

What use, then, does Morris make of this place she calls *nowhere*, where a country was once one thing and then another, and its people too? Here's a sampling:

-- I began to see the idea of the nation-state in a new light. I already knew what Dr. Johnson's saw, about patriotism being the last refuge of the scoundrel. Now I glimpsed the fateful nonsense of nationalism, for which so many of my generation, and my father's too, had fought and died.

and:

-- If race is a fraud, as I often think in Trieste, then nationality is a cruel pretence. There is nothing organic to it. As the tangled history of this place shows, it is disposable. You can change your nationality by the stroke of a notary's pen; you can enjoy two nationalities at the same time or find your nationality altered for you, overnight, by statesmen far away. In one of his books Joseph Conrad (né Korzeniowski), knowing how artificial nationality was, likened it to "an accomplishment with varying degrees of excellence." It is not usually racial prejudice that incites hooligans to bash each other in football stadiums, but particularly accomplished convictions of nationhood. The false passion of the nation-state made my conceptual Europe no more than a chimera: and because of nationality the city around me that day, far from being a member of some mighty ideal whole, was debilitated in loneliness.

So, this book about nowhere.

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My reading is often serendipitous, and none the poorer for it. The reading gods have been kind. But sometimes I plan. I came to Jan Morris late in life and am quite smitten. She's very old but still alive, last I checked. She wrote that this would be her last book, but she lied. Just a little bit.

In any event, I've decided to read one of her books every year, maybe as a hope for an extension of *my* life. This is asking a lot of someone known for his obsessions.

But, more than that, I picked this one of Morris's books because there's another book about Trieste lurking on my TBR shelves. And so, back-to-back.

I wrote above that those Nazis might pop up again. And so they will. But . . .

. . . *to be continued* . . .

COMING SOON, in a review to you: Trieste.

Antonio Ceté says

Tiene suficientes historias de monarcas exiliados y capillas diminutas para que casi olvide las ocasionales exaltaciones del imperio británico. Es muy triste, eso sí.
