

MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

Too Far From Home: Ted Conover hears other people's stories by getting inside their skin.

Hi everybody! This is Tony Kahn, the producer and director of *Morning Stories*, from WGBH, in Boston. Some people like to travel as a way of life because it keeps them refreshed and maybe even a smaller subset of them can do that and make a living, at traveling. And then there is Ted Conover, maybe the most amazing traveler that I've ever met. He's a man who travels not just to other places but deep into other people's lives, and he's the subject of today's *Morning Story*, a kind of profile that we're calling: *Too Far From Home*.

Ted Conover:

Maybe you've heard it said: "All good stories begin either when a person leaves home or a stranger comes to town." And so it is with travel, and you can look at it either way; either you're leaving home and your story is beginning or you're arriving in the new place, and another story is beginning and I, I like that. You'll try a drink you never had; you'll, ahh... you might kiss a girl you never would've kissed over here, I mean you'll do things that aren't, aren't the you, that they know back home.

Tony Kahn:

Leaving home is what Ted Conover does for a living. He's written books and articles on his experiences riding the rails as a hobo; crossing the border illegally with undocumented Mexicans; serving as a maximum security prison guard at Sing Sing. He calls it "participatory journalism" but whatever your name for it, the idea is to travel light without preconceptions, and to travel deep into the heart of another person's life.

[Sound of freight train traveling swiftly]

It began in college when Ted decided to write a thesis on American hobos, from the inside looking out.

Ted Conover:

I thought this is the best idea I will ever have, an amazing adventure fraught with romance and excitement. The whole idea of hopping freights and traveling around the West on trains. Because there's no experience like traveling with other people to really come, come to know them, as people, to know their difficult side, to know their pleasures, to know how they handle adversity or just to get a sense of their spirit.

Tony Kahn:

Based on that experience he wrote his first book: *Rolling Nowhere*. [sound of train braking]

Ted Conover:

I remember once in Spokane, Washington I met up with two railroad hobos who said they wanted

to head to North Dakota to work in the sugar beet harvest. And to get there we rode the Burlington Northern Railroad more than twenty-four hours straight until we got to Minot, North Dakota, at which point, we sat around for three days. The third day was Sunday, one of them, B.B., came back to the campground with a Sunday paper. He read the whole thing and at the very end of the day he went through the "Help Wanted" listings, found one in the sugar beet harvest that sounded promising, but then he noticed that drivers' licenses were required and said, "Well, guess that's it for that. Let's head back to California." I think if I had not been an observer I would've said, "Are you crazy? Are you nuts?" But I wanted to just hang out with them and do things their way so I said, "Okay." And away we went. [sound of freight train clacking along]

Tony Kahn:

Like any process of discovery, travel is an exercise in point of view; what you find has a lot to do with what you're looking for. Ted's next big discovery met him one day in Bakersfield, California, right outside his freight car door.

Ted Conover:

I looked down the line as you always do when you climb off a train to see who else was riding the same train you were, 'cause often you don't know till it stops at the end. Only one guy climbed out; he was Mexican. I used my high school Spanish to say, "Comó esta usted?" And we spent three days together.

[Sounds of a lonely coyote, crickets and a campfire under next paragraph]

Tony Kahn:

That meeting was the seed of his next book, the story of his travel with America's newest hobos: undocumented Mexican workers. He shared their campfires, their border crossings, their escapes from the law. He earned their trust by putting himself in their place and under their skin, quite a trick for a college graduate with blonde hair and blue eyes.

Ted Conover:

People everywhere have stories to tell and there seems to be for many people a shortage of listeners to tell those stories to. More often than not, if you'll simply listen to somebody they will gladly welcome you to their campfire or the bar stool next to them or their, uh...their freight car

Tony Kahn:

- or their truck! [sound of old truck driving off, in second gear] One of the, the most interesting trips I've taken, I took through East Africa with a convoy of African truckers who drive along the roads that people say AIDS was first transmitted along by means of these truckers' sleeping with prostitutes along the way. The driver's assistant, his name was Josephat, he was a very intelligent guy and was fascinated by my constant scribbling in my notebook all day long. And sometimes he'd say, "What, what are you writing?" and I'd show him. And one day I came to, back to the truck from an errand and he had filled two pages of notebook paper with the openings of a novel in which there was a fast-talkin' secretary and a debonair detective faced with a corpse and deciding what to do about it.

And he had laid it all out in the first two pages and I said, you know, "Do, do you write often?" And he said, "No. I've always wanted to do this and I thought maybe you'd read it for me." And that was great and it also reinforced my conviction that there are people of immense talent and even genius, occupying menial positions in all parts of the world. I love moments like that.

Tony Kahn:

Like many travelers though, Ted has made some of his biggest discoveries and faced some of his greatest perils by coming home.

Ted Conover:

I think the most profound travel experience I've had was the one I made daily up to Ossining, New York which is twenty miles north and I would enter the insular world of a maximum security prison and do the state's job, overseeing inmates. [heavy metal door slams shut] And I had to be secretive because the state would never knowingly hire me. And other officers would assume I, you know, might be some kind of rat! So it had to be a secret, I mean, my neighbor's didn't know what I was doing. I changed my uniform at work; they wondered why my hair was so short, but just figured I'd adopted a downtown style, yeah . . . I thought I would be immune from how the job changes a person but I found myself short on patience at the end of the day, when I had to take care of the kids, I'd find myself uninterested in, in hearing about the day my wife had at work and I became skeptical of, of sorta humanity because of all the negative interactions you have when you're an officer with inmates. And, and, you know, most people like to think travel will broaden, experience will broaden, you should do it because it's hard; this was the first one where it struck me there was a chance that I might come out a little smaller than I went in.

Tony Kahn:

Travel for Ted has always been a study in freedom and the ways it's won and lost. That was never more true than now.

Ted Conover:

I decided a few years ago there are certain kinds of ties that I wanted and that home is something I didn't want to miss out on, as I got older. Because more than anything I think it's, it's home that, that lends us the character we have. But it's travel that tests it and broadens it, and tweaks it here and there and so I, I need, I need both and I'm still sorting that out. [sound of birds]

Tony Kahn:

Ted Conover presently makes his home in New York with his wife and their two small children, just twenty miles from the location of his most recent journey and an unknown distance from his next.

Back here in the studio with Gary Mott. That was actually recorded for a, a show a number of years ago called: *The Savvy Traveler*. Which sadly is no longer on the air, I was their, uh...

Gary Mott:

The "traveler at large?"

Tony Kahn:

"Traveler at large," thank you, Gary. [laughs] It was a wonderful job! I could really define "travel" sort of the way I wanted and for me, anytime you stop taking something for granted you've started a trip. [laughs] And here was a guy who did that, in, in spades. Quite, quite a fellow.

Gary Mott:

We were talkin' about this, what it's like to be on the road, the stories that come off the road...

Tony Kahn:

Yeah.

Gary Mott:

...and several weeks ago we spoke about a guy named "Sully."

Tony Kahn:

Sure.

Gary Mott:

Sully is the "front of house mix engineer" for Joe Nichols, a country artist, and I met up with Sully here, when Joe was swinging through town. Lovely guy, a family guy, lives in Nashville, has been doing the music thing for a number of years. He sent a script that he wrote, to read an excerpt: "When I get lonely on the road I call my wife and tell her how much I love and miss her and I promise to be a better husband and father. I can see her eyes pinned to the top of her head, [Tony laughs] as she reminds me, I am a good husband and father, [Gary and Tony laughing] and perhaps I should quit calling her after listening to country music. That's it! I'm gettin' a drinkin' problem, then the world will see how angst-ridden I am."

Tony Kahn:

Now Sully, don't go that far. She knows you're eager to come back home. Speaking about letters from the road we got a description not only of the person being on the road but of the road itself the person is on which I thought I'd like to pass on to you. This is from somebody in Australia; he says: "One of, the funny things that comes with podcasts is the contrast between what you hear and what you see. My bike ride commute goes through desert vegetation and eucalyptus river bottom forests. While your stories describe Cape Cod, winter streets in Boston or thunderstorms in Brazil, my eyes see flocks of gallas and cockatoos, kangaroos, 'guanans, [Tony laughs] and fantastic skies; my nose smells burning things in aboriginal fringe camps and my skin reacting to the 105 degree heat in the

summer. Funny enough, I now have rather unique associations to your genteel Boston accents [laughs] when you're announcing and discussing the stories. Thank you for making my bike rides more interesting and keep up the good work." This is from Paul in Alice Springs, Australia. Well thank you all for writing in, please keep those emails coming and to our major correspondent in the financial realm, please, oh, Ipswitch keep your wonderful support coming to us as well, we really appreciate it. They're the funders of our podcast and have been pretty much since the start, Ipswitch, a leader in file transfer software, no less. They're at <ipswitch.com> I-P-S-W-I-T-C-H.

Gary Mott:

And our email address is <morningstories@wgbh.org>. Love to hear from you and our web presence <wgbh.org/morningstories>

[Electric guitar music]

Tony Kahn:

Sully, don't touch that bottle, just come home. [laughs] We'll see you next Friday.

[Guitar music fades and ends]

[End of recording]

Transcribed by: Lynn Relyea

Lynn's note in an email to Liz:

Here's another, Liz and I liked this one so much, I'm thinking about purchasing a few of Ted's books in the near future. I think you'll enjoy this one as well.

And Liz says, I did enjoy it very much – both the first time I heard it, and this time, too. I love to hear about people who give credit to the nonlettered folks among us, for their intelligence. Not only was my father such a soul, but I meet a lot of people here in the South who didn't have the opportunities many of us had before the Civil Rights era, and thus are not formally educated, but are bright and creative.