



passionate nomads

Jon Krakauer, move over: This spring, adventure tales by women are coming to town.

Warmbrunn was followed in this honor by Jill Fredston.) And since its publication in 2001, *Four Corners*, Kira Salak's gut-wrenching account of her solo trek through Papua New Guinea, has become a kind of exploration classic, if not a best-seller.

This spring brings a rush of adventure books penned by women, from Johanna Stoberock's haunting *City of Ghosts* (Norton), a debut novel about a young Manhattanite who travels to Nepal, to Wendy Duke's deeply funny *Avoiding Prison and Other Noble Vacation Goals* (Three Rivers), which chronicles her journeys to Beirut and Honduras. Perhaps the best of the lot—the one that really gives someone like Krakauer a run for his money—is *Somebody's Heart Is Burning* (Vintage Original), Tanya Shaffer's searing, self-deprecating memoir of a year spent wandering alone through Africa. Shaffer hits the road, in part, for escape—from the demands of relationship and career, from the conventions of middle-class American life, and, most of all, from herself. "We all probably have the desire to escape our personalities," she tells me, "to be completely free of the baggage and assumptions of the past." In Africa she does indeed lose herself, becoming immersed in the stories of the people she meets. These incredible characters—like Santana, a relentlessly curious Ghanaian woman who simultaneously adores Shaffer and resents her position of relative privilege—form a vivid pastiche.

Though she certainly didn't shy away from danger in her travels, Shaffer strategically avoided Africa's war-torn regions. In contrast, veteran reporter Lynne Duke didn't have that luxury. As *The Washington Post's* African correspondent in the late nineties, Duke, an African-American, covered the wars in Angola, Congo, and Rwanda, and the first turbulent years of South Africa's democratic government. Her account of that experience, *Mandela, Mobutu, and Me* (Doubleday), provides an unsparing counterpoint to Shaffer's gentle tales. "People who work amid brutal conflict and vast human suffering build up a protective emotional armor," Duke writes. "Without that armor, you could go mad." The author never completely develops that armor (nor, thankfully, does she go mad). Instead, she visits remote villages and devastated slums, collecting the kinds of stories newspapers don't often cover. lives ▶ 425

GLOBAL WARMING: AUTHOR TANYA SCHAFFER AND FRIEND SANTANA AT A FESTIVAL IN APAM, GHANA.

Tales of masculine adventure are nothing new, from the writings of Sir Richard Burton, who made covert journeys into Mecca and Medina in the 1850s and translated the peerless *Arabian Nights*, to the diaries of Apsley Cherry-Garrard, which charted Robert Falcon Scott's 1910 Antarctic expedition and set a gold standard for the genre. Of course, these fellows had their female counterparts, like Isabella Bird, whose popular books chronicled her mid-nineteenth-century travels to then-exotic places, and African explorer Mary Kingsley, whose witty tomes were huge in the 1890s. But in the past few years, it's been largely a male arena, as titles like Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air* and Sebastian Junger's *The Perfect Storm* have crowded the best-seller list. Lately, though, books by women adventurers have been stealing into bookstores, as publishers realize women have as much to say about the subject as men do.

In 2001, for the first time ever, a woman, Erika Warmbrunn, won the Outdoor Literature category of the National Outdoor Book Awards for *Where the Pavement Ends: One Woman's Bicycle Trip Through Mongolia, China, and Vietnam*. (In 2002,



HAPPY DAYS: SCHAFFER WITH THREE CHILDREN IN AFRANGUAH, GHANA (LEFT) AND IN THE AFRICAN VILLAGE.



COURTESY OF TANYA SCHAFFER

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People are Talking about

Shaffer and Duke let the hardships of traveling as a woman through difficult terrain take a backseat to the communities they encounter. This is, ultimately, what separates the women from the boys: Female explorers tend to write about the people they meet, while men often focus on physical endurance. It's an approach that dates back to those women explorers of the Victorian era—Bird, Kingsley, and pioneering archeologist Katherine Routledge, who, until now, had largely been forgotten.

Born in 1866 in Darlington, England, into a wealthy Quaker clan, Katherine Pease was one of the first women admitted to Oxford, where she studied anthropology. Unable to conform to the social codes of the Victorian era, she regularly traveled to Africa as a young woman, more at ease in bug-infested lean-tos than in her London mansion. At 40, long after her family had written her off as a spinster, she married William Scoresby Routledge, an amateur ethnologist. After a stint in Africa, the couple built a private yacht and set sail for Easter Island, where they would attempt to unravel the mystery of the *mooi*, the island's ancient, enigmatic limestone statues. It was Katherine who did most of the unraveling. She learned the language of the native people and spent her days listening to their tales, developing theories about the *mooi*'s meaning (then unknown even to the island's residents). Upon her return to England, she compiled her findings in *The Mystery of Easter Island*, the novelistic account of her journey that made Routledge the toast of 1920.

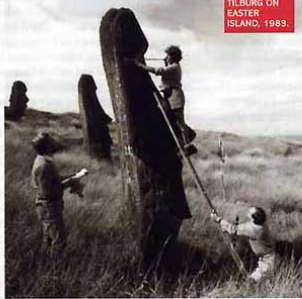
This season a new biography and novel revisit Routledge's trip: In *Among Stone Giants* (Scribner), Jo Anne Van Tilburg paints Routledge as a woman plagued by schizophrenia and depression, desperately unhappy within the constraints of London society. *Easter Island* (Dial), a wonderful first novel from Jennifer Vandenberg, reinvents Routledge as a pretty young governess who travels to Easter Island with her anthropologist husband.

The real Routledge, as Van Tilburg recounts, met a tragic end. In 1929 her hus-

band had her committed to an asylum. She died six years later, still proclaiming her sanity and insisting her husband was trying to poison her.

Naturally, not every adventurer comes to such a dismal conclusion, but exploration is an inherently dangerous enterprise—which is, of course, the point. "Risking our lives is a fundamental impulse. It reminds you that life is worth living," says Anthony

INTO THE WILD: JO ANNE VAN TILBURG ON EASTER ISLAND, 1983.



Brandt, book critic for *National Geographic Adventure*. And those of us who will never trek through the jungles of Borneo—well, we put ourselves in harm's way vicariously, by reading about it. And in doing so, we affirm our own vitality.

Still, it's hard not to view Routledge as a casualty of her time, a woman who flouted Victorian conventions and suffered for it, rather like the doomed fictional heroine of *The Yellow Wallpaper*. *The Mystery of Easter Island*, however, conveys nothing but the thrill of an entire universe opening up to you and you alone, what English explorer Freya Stark (once dubbed "the last of the Romantic Travelers") called "passing through fear, into the absence of fear." Some years later, Stark would refine that sentiment into a mantra of sorts for the call of the wild, no matter what one's gender.

"The word *ecstasy* is always related to some sort of discovery, a novelty to sense or spirit," she wrote in *Beyond Euphrates*, "and it is in search of this word that in love, in religion, in art or in travel, the adventurous are ready to face the unknown." —JOANNA SMITH RAKOFF puts ▶ 426

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