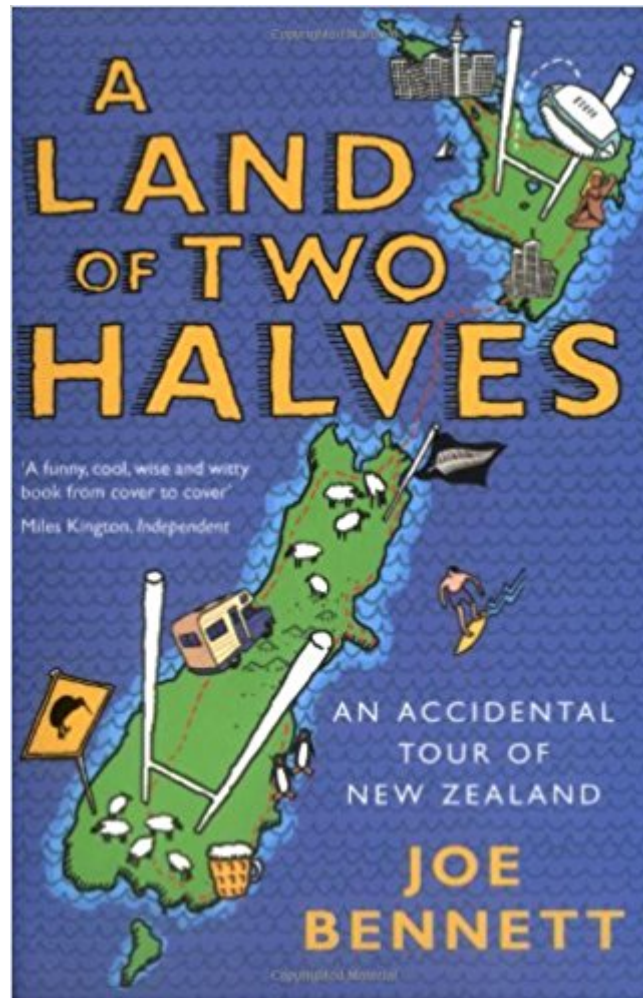




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A Land Of Two Halves



Synopsis

After 10 years in New Zealand, Joe Bennett asked himself what on earth he was doing there. Other than his dogs, what was it about these two small islands on the edge of the world that had kept him an otherwise restless traveller for really much longer than they seemed to deserve? Bennett thought he'd better pack his bag and find out. Hitching around both the intriguingly named North and South Islands, with an eye for oddity and a taste for conversation, Bennett began to remind himself of the reasons New Zealand is quietly seducing the rest of the world.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

“Shrewd entertainment.” -- Kirkus Reviews

Joe Bennett was born in Brighton and since leaving Cambridge University has taught English in a variety of countries including Canada, Spain and New Zealand. He lives in Christchurch, New Zealand.

"If I've got nothing to read I feel like an amputee. In earlier hitchhiking years I often found myself in foreign lavatories with nothing printed but my passport. I can still recite, more or less, that lovely piece about Her Britannic Majesty's Principal Secretary of State requesting and requiring, in the name of Her Majesty, every wop kraut dago mick and spick not only to let me pass freely without let

or hindrance but also to bandage any wounds I may incur and lend me a fiver to get home. Or else."

- Joe Bennett in *A LAND OF TWO HALVES*

Joe Bennett, born and raised south of London, England, took up permanent residence in New Zealand in 1989 at age 29. Sixteen years later, he wrote *LAND OF TWO HALVES*, a travel narrative that describes his hitchhiking circuit of the North and South Islands of his adopted country. Besides enjoying Bennett for the travel essayist he is, my interest in this particular book was catalyzed by the magnificent New Zealand mountain topography as seen in such recent films as the *Â The Lord of the Rings: The Motion Picture Trilogy (Platinum Series Special Extended Edition)* *Â* - topography that is located on the South Island. What I enjoy most about Joe is his curmudgeon-in-training worldview, his ability to delight me with descriptive imagery, and his self-deprecating humor. The first is illustrated by his observation of those he finds in Queenstown, South Island: "... it's full of the young, wearing the sort of trousers that have zips at the knee and that can be turned into shorts by a flick of a Velcro tab, or into a rucksack, or a four-wheel drive amphibious vehicle with drinks cabinet and emergency whistle. A disproportionate number of the young people are British. I constantly eavesdrop on boastful discussions about parapenting and hangovers, conducted in accents that I can place to the nearest soap opera." (Not being familiar with the term "parapenting", I had to look it up; it's paragliding by another name.) The author's imagery and self-deprecating humor are represented by his experiences with motels - and one in particular on the North Island: "I didn't stay in a motel till I was twenty-five when I hitched down the west coast of the States. Motels were the cheapest places to stay and the cheapest of them were seriously dire. They resembled temporary porn studios - and some of them probably were, though rarely while I was in them. But they established my mental template for a motel room, a sort of Platonic ideal of grunge. It's this room (in Rotorua). Dark, humming with the noise of close traffic, a narrow sink, a leaking tap, don't-care joinery thick with paint, a tissue-thin pillowcase with the ghosts of stains washed into the once pink cloth, a ceiling of stippled plaster, each stipple minutely tipped with dirt like a smoker's tooth, a dented kettle that won't switch itself off, and beneath it a laminated wooden tea-tray, bleached and buckled and chipped by time and chance and a thousand transient forgotten guests. Every one of those guests has left a molecule of self. The air's like gravy ... The room is so authentically dispiriting that I like it. I head out to pootle in a good mood." ("Pootle" means to walk about exploring.) Mind you, Bennett's narrative does justice to (at least) the physical beauty of New Zealand, particularly the South Island. However, I'm not sure that the local tourist boards or chambers of commerce would always find his observations concerning the related amenities and activities helpful, especially as he readily admits to loathing the usual touristy stuff. And hitching isn't the way most would choose to do an itinerary. I certainly

wouldn't. More recently since the release of *A LAND OF TWO HALVES*, Joe wrote and had published *Mustn't Grumble: In Search of England and the English*, an account of his return to and exploration of England to discover if it was as he remembered it after an absence of two decades. It was, and yet wasn't; grumble he did. I could relate particularly well to this book as I've visited the United Kingdom - my favorite destination on the planet - multiple times from 1975 to 2010, and Bennett's observations on things changed and unchanged seemed right on. I enjoyed *MUSTN'T GRUMBLE* immensely. An avid traveler myself, and one not afraid to go it solo, one passage in *A LAND OF TWO HALVES* was particularly resonant: "The man-with-a-book is a restrained sort, cautious, sensible, polite, wary of danger, little more than warm and breathing furniture, barely affecting the place he occupies. By ten o'clock he's back in his motel bed, well-fed, content, and still reading. His adventures are the adventures of others, the word-made pictures in his head." Bennett has now joined Bill Bryson as the two travel essayists whose writings I'll endeavor to indiscriminately acquire and read, come what may. Such an author, for a bibliophile of whatever reading tastes, is a pearl beyond value in a lifetime of reading.

The author's perspective is, at least to me, that he has spent too much time in New Zealand and doesn't really enjoy living there. If it wasn't for his dogs then he would have no real reason to stay. He hitchhikes around a lot of New Zealand in search of a reason to stay. He spends a lot of his book discussing hitchhiking techniques or potential rides. What he describes of the scenery or way of life is always in a somewhat bored, sarcastic tone. I'm sure that there are Kiwis that think in those terms, but in all my trips thru NZ, I never met any locals that were like that. They usually are quite upbeat about where they are. But to put things straight, he is an English transplant and has lived there 15 years. But what I really liked about his book is his descriptions of the details of life in NZ. Just lots of little insights into rugby, youth and travel, bits of history, local politics. Just little stuff that would be missed in larger scope books.

Joe's books are uniformly great, and this one is no exception. I've never been to NZ (I don't count the hour I spent in the airport at Auckland) but traveling with Joe is the next best thing....

A fun and highly detailed journey about Joe's New Zealand adventure. I could very much relate to his opinions on people and tourist sites, which was humorous for me. There seemed to be a bit too much effort with the vocabulary at times, but that didn't slow the read down too much. Overall, not the best travel adventure book I have ever read yet still recommend. Ignore the 1-star review by

another reviewer. Notice he only has one review (that one) and is simply a hater.

I love Joe's book and have re-read it 3 times thus far. I've written two popular NZ travel/outdoors guidebooks (NZ Frenzy), and thus I'm very familiar with tourism and travel within NZ. My opinion is that this book, not being a "glowing travelogue", is not the one a potential visitor to NZ wants to read. For all its faults, "Straying from the Flock" – Straying from the Flock: Travels in New Zealand is a much better get-psyched-to-go-to-NZ primer (the only book of this type available to potential travelers). Joe's book is different. Joe is a successful newspaper columnist/satirist in Christchurch, most of his humorous writings pointing out the ironies of general NZ life. He writes for a Kiwi audience, not so much for a traveler audience. That said, this book is a poignant account of a middle aged man who takes off on a hitch-hiking jaunt across NZ. This book is about Joe, his keen sense of humor, satire, and irony....all taken on the road in New Zealand and full of the troubles a middle-aged hitchhiker would face. His trip is brutal at times---bad weather, bad people, bad luck! I laugh out loud at both his insights and travails. For people living in NZ, this book is a fun laugh, but for visitors getting primed for a "trip of a lifetime", leave this book for when you return from NZ. You'll laugh more when you've already had first-hand experience of NZ, rather than when you are fantasizing about your first trip to NZ. Hope this helps....Cheers, scott

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