

"You in the Picture: Cultural Exploration and the First Person"

a talk by author

Ted Conover

4:00 p.m. Thursday, October 9

The Renaissance Room, Mary Reed Hall, The University of Denver

Conover recalls being introduced by the editor of *The New Yorker* as "a writer who made a living sleeping on the ground," an apt snapshot of an ambitious career that's resulted in award-winning magazine work and five books: *The Routes of Man: Travels in the Paved World* (Peru, East Africa, China, Nigeria, the Himalayas, the West Bank), *Newjack: Guarding Sing Sing* (spending a year as a prison guard); *Whiteout: Lost in Aspen*; *Coyotes: A Journey Across Borders with America's Illegal Migrants*; and *Rolling Nowhere: Riding the Rails with America's Hoboes*. His extended pieces have appeared in *Harper's* (most recently, "The Way of All Flesh," a cover story about two months as a USDA meat inspector), *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Nation*, *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker* and others. Conover is a graduate of Denver's Manual High School.

Bio

I feel lucky to do what I do. I write about real people, often by living their lives for a while—visiting their lives, you might say. Trying them on for size. Though there are easier ways to make a living, I suppose, none strike me as a fraction so interesting.

My first real adventures were cross-country bicycle rides, and a summer's work in a sausage factory in Pamplona, Spain. During time off from college, I did community organizing in Dallas as a VISTA volunteer. Then came riding the rails (*Rolling Nowhere*), which originated as another escape from college, but doubled as research for a senior anthropology thesis. A transcendent moment occurred in a freight yard in Bakersfield, California, where, as I spoke with a guy my age named Enrique Jarra, it dawned on me that Mexican illegals were the true, modern-day incarnation of the classic American hobo. *Coyotes*, my second book, recounts a year of work and travel with these men.

A smart guy I met in New York (he now edits the *New Yorker* magazine) introduced me at a party as a writer who "made a living sleeping on the ground," which got me thinking and led me to *Aspen* and *Whiteout*, a very different sort of first-person ethnography. And then came *Newjack*, an account of immersion in a world that is tough and dangerous and—if a person's not careful—soul-shrinking. That research was my hardest ever, but also paid an enduring dividend of knowledge.

In my latest book, *The Routes of Man*, I link a series of challenging first-person passages down roads with reflections on how this most extensive manmade artifact changes us all, both intentionally and not. It's a book about roads, yes, but like my others it's also a book about me. I continue to admire writing where the writer has something at stake; where he doesn't just depend on experts but rather takes time to think and research and participate, thereby transforming himself into an expert; where his caring and the urgency of the subject can transform the writing into something that matters, an act of witnessing.



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