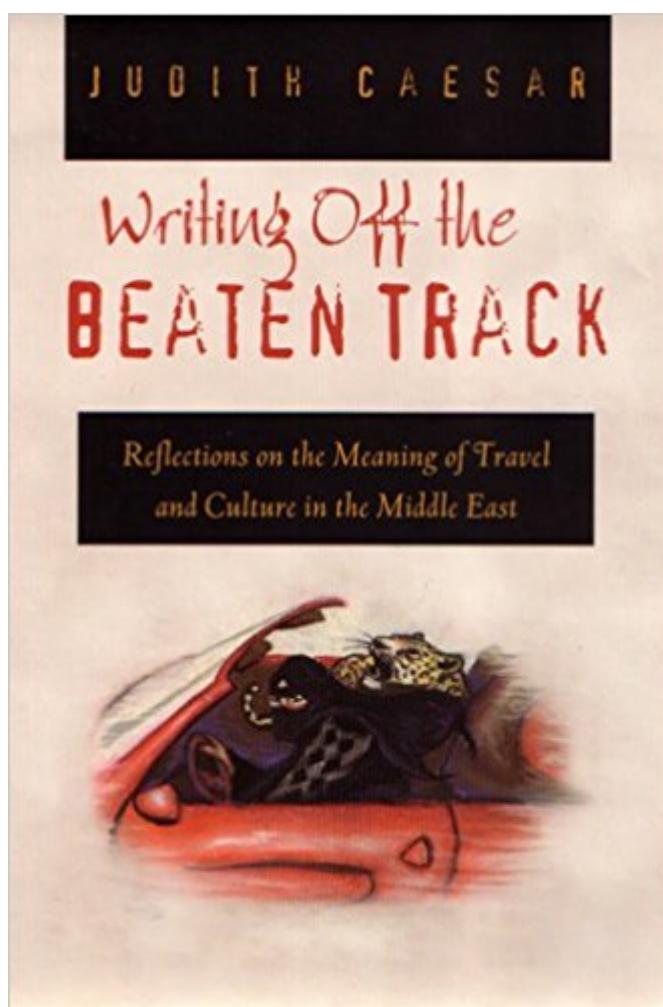


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# Writing Off The Beaten Track: Reflections On The Meaning Of Travel And Culture In The Middle East (Contemporary Issues In The Middle East)





## **Synopsis**

These thought-provoking essays provide insightful reflection on both the experience and the condition of experiencing another culture.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Caesar (Crossing Borders: An American Woman in the Middle East) is a well-intentioned but disappointing narrator who fails in an attempt to extrapolate from her experiences teaching English at a university in the United Arab Emirates to a larger commentary on the Middle East. Despite 10 years in the region, she comes across as wide-eyed. Rather than the "muddle east," a term used by her expatriate friends in Saudi Arabia (where Caesar has lived), in the Emirates she finds "a kind of melded east": she marvels at women with abayahs (veils) and cell phones, and finds it surprising that she is able to sit "in a French-named coffee shop in an American-style shopping mall in Dubai drinking Italian espresso." She is disappointed to find middle America in the Middle East, but she is content to repeat predictable stories with little analysis or context, based on conversations with expatriate teachers or their spouses and with a handful of her restive students. Caesar does not claim to be an expert, and some of her thoughts on travel in general are perceptive, though a little wooden—"I liked living in other cultures because it made me question what I thought I knew." Her more observant anecdotes are about what it is to be an American abroad and how travel has made her more aware of issues in America-like poverty, misogyny and hate crimes—that she had previously been blind to. Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Judith Caesar is associate professor of English and chair of the English Department at American University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates. She is the author *Crossing Borders: An American Woman in the Middle East*, also published by Syracuse University Press.

I totally disagree with the Publisher's Weekly 2002 review of this book....the reviewer didn't get the point. Caesar did NOT attempt and therefore didn't fail to "extrapolate from her experiences...to a larger commentary on the Middle East." On the contrary, what I liked about her essays was their disinterest in the "big ME conflict" issues and her focus on the sometimes bizarre but always thought provoking juxtapositions of traditional/local and modern/global aspects of life in a contemporary Arab capital. Millions of people in this region get up every morning, go to school and work, go shopping and come home or visit with friends without thinking about the Middle East conflict. This book witnesses that. As an American living and travelling in this region for more than 25 years, I found her insights as a teacher and observer rang true and articulated very well some complex aspects of relationships in these communities undergoing compressed social change. I highly recommend this book to anyone who cares to go beyond the limitations of news headlines into the fascinating diversity of social relationships and aspirations in the Middle East today. I especially recommend it to academics planning to teach cross-culturally in the growing number of "American" universities sprouting up across the region.

Andrew Carnegie once said a library " is the never-ending spring in the desert." In *Writing Off the Beaten Track*, Judith Caesar invites her readers into an unfamiliar desert world, that of the UAE, and leads them to an oasis of understanding and delight. Primarily about her experiences as an American woman living in the Emirates and teaching at the American University of Sharjah, her writing well illustrates what Thomas Meron meant when he said that a real journey is interior. That Caesar understands this is clear from her introduction, " Why Don't You Just Stay Home?" as she begins to let the readers into her own past to explain why this book is about a world so different from her native northwestern Pennsylvania. As all skillful writers do, no matter the form or subject, she both educates and entertains in this delightful book, revealing a world so far removed from most of her readers in geography, history, and culture. And yet, like the Emirati culture itself, with its blending of Middle Eastern ways and American pop culture influences, its love for traditions oddly mixed with the latest in gee-whiz postmodern architecture, she has the ability to make the strange familiar and the familiar sometimes oddly strange. A very small example of this can be seen in one

of her early explorations of her new desert world as she finds herself wondering at, and wondering about, the differences between the sand dunes there and the lake-effect snowdrifts of her native home. Less careful observers might dismiss this as a superficial contrast, but it illustrates the curiosity and openness she brings to all her encounters, a willingness to dig beneath the surface for the truths that lie there, taking her readers far beyond what they thought they already knew. As she begins to try to understand her new land, exploring the cities of Dubai and Sharjah, and the desert lands beyond, she shows that the map truly is not the territory, that to understand the Emirates of today, she must reach back into their history, both remembered and re-constructed. She discovers it is not quite what one would think, as she delves further and further back into the past of Sharjah and Dubai. And if J.B. Jackson was right in telling us that the value of history (and he here meant the vernacular history of place) is what it teaches us about the future, then what Caesar learns about the Emirates may reveal less obvious lessons for American readers, both those who travel abroad and those who just stay home, traveling only in their minds. Not only does she learn about the place but also, and more importantly, the people, and her encounters with her students, as she writes, "teaching and learning across cultures," are at the very heart of this book, as she explores both the problems and rewards of teaching multiculturally and being multicultural. Her students, too, with a mixture of cultures, backgrounds, and attitudes, find themselves in a different sort of alien world as they explore such works of literature as Ibsen's *A Doll's House* or Alice Munro's short story, "An Ounce of Cure." Familiar with American pop culture but without much further experience of the western world, they bring to the study and discussion of the literature points of view that add a new understanding to the works, both for them and for their professor as together they face the task of searching for meaning across cultural gaps. And sometimes, as in the case of *A Doll's House* or other works in translation, this involves yet a third primary culture, that of the work's author. That Caesar handles this so well illustrates her willingness to be aware of, and accept, those multiple viewpoints, both in her teaching and in herself. These multiple viewpoints appear throughout the book, as she observes, living within herself somewhere outside her native United States, looking back at her own society with a vision altered by distance and experience. Like Hiawatha's Mittens, she turns the inside outside and the outside inside. By the end of the book, she again finds herself in the desert--this time for the Millennium. Here the careful readers may grasp the answer--an answer--to the question posed in the introduction: why didn't she just stay home? And they should be glad she didn't, as I am, that we were invited along for the journey. And, as in her first book, *Crossing Borders*, she leaves us with a poetic image at the end, a moment caught in time, that makes the whole trip worthwhile.

Judith Caesar's Writing Off The Beaten Track: Reflections On The Meaning Of Travel And Culture In The Middle East reflects on the meaning of travel and culture in the Middle East as it surveys her journey through the Untied Arab Emirates and the flavors of Arabia. Cultural and social insights abound.

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