



*The*  
**NINE HORIZONS**

MIKE ROBBINS

# The Nine Horizons: Travels in Sundry Places

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In 1987 Mike Robbins, a young journalist in London, felt restless and decided to travel. He never really stopped. In the quarter century that followed he lived and worked in countries as diverse as the world itself.

The pieces in this book take the reader from rural Sudan to the headwaters of the Amazon, from Semana Santa in Quito to Buddhist temples in the Himalayas, across Bhutan on a motorbike, into the ancient souk of Aleppo, to the steppes of Central Asia and finally to New York. Along the way there is Ethiopian gin, a sex tourist in Moscow, Kyrgyz women in cycling pants, a surreal toilet in Brussels, echoes of slavery in Brazil, and an encounter with Helen of Troy in Third Avenue. The Nine Horizons is an anarchic snapshot of a troubled but beautiful world in transition.

## **The Nine Horizons: Travels in Sundry Places Details**

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## **From Reader Review The Nine Horizons: Travels in Sundry Places for online ebook**

### **Jason says**

This is an interesting collection of memories by Mike Robbins, Mike has certainly lead an interesting life and travelled to many exotic places, not for the sake of travelling but because of work. Part of me is jealous of what he has done but the other part, the part that is bone idle is glad to have read this book instead. A lot of the places he has been don't appeal too much to me, but central Asia though, that is a place I hope to travel around one day. (Once I've finished exploring the UK)

Mike has a wonderful writing style that draws you in, photos are not needed to aid you, the writing shows you what he has seen.

I did find a hidden gem in this book, his time in New York is written as real snapshots, half pages of moments in time, he reminds me a lot of Bukowski and his people watching that he loved to do. I'd like to read more like that, Mike sent a lot of them to a friend as letters, I hope they have been kept safe so that one day they could be produced into a book.

Blog review is here> <https://felcherman.wordpress.com/2017...>

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### **Meriel Brooke says**

The Nine Horizons by Mike Robbins.

This was so informative that I had to read it twice. It's a beautifully written series of anecdotes taking us across continents from Africa to South America and central Asia and eventually to New York. But these were journeys that none of us can undertake today, and probably not even then. We are transported to a developing world at a time of change, and are given meticulous descriptions of scenes of great beauty. Not just the places, but of the people who lived and worked there. Wonderfully intimate, funny and sometimes sad. A unique piece of writing.

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### **Elizabeth Krall says**

Someone recently asked me the question, "Why do you read?" My answer was simple: to escape. Nine Horizons is one of the best escape books I have read in quite some time. From a few delicate minutes in late afternoon when a Sudanese sky transitions from bleached white to vibrant blue, to the violence of a storm sweeping over New York City, I escaped. Mike Robbins has a gift for crafting vivid descriptions that immerse you in a place and a time, and stir your thoughts.

In a book such as this, the reader becomes curious about the author. Robbins gives us enough details to explain his actions, but he generally remains in the background and I think that is how it should be; this book is not an autobiography. The snapshots he presents are of the where and the when, not of himself.

Of all the snapshots in Nine Horizons, I think I enjoyed the first one the most. Sudan was a terra incognita to

me but Robbins brought its people and its lands to sudden life. The book closes with a brief mention of a more recent Sudan, an unexpected symmetry that I found satisfying.

I could find only one flaw with this book: it's not long enough. I would have liked ninety-nine new horizons to explore, not only nine.

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### **Deborah Gilboa says**

If I could choose an activity and a superpower to enjoy the rest of my life, they would be travel and time travel, respectively. As the realities of life interfere with the singular pursuit of those goals, *The Nine Horizons: Travels in Sundry Places* makes a wonderful substitute. Robbins provides an experience unlike any I've ever read - a complete sensory picture of a place I've never been, along with enough human connection to it to place my own self there in his stead, but with a scant enough personal history of his emotions and plot in that place as to let me keep his story as simply a person I might have met in that setting.

These nine different situations encompass as small an area as a ill-fettled room and as large a picture as countries and those they border. Robbins takes us seamlessly back and forth between the microcosmic and the macrocosmic, forcing us to connect with our senses and then with our intellect to vast beauty, deprivation and struggle.

Though I'll never be able to travel to these places and times, Robbins makes me both wish and feel as though I have. Mr. Robbins was kind enough to provide me a free copy of the book in exchange for an honest review.

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### **Jason Pettus says**

(Reprinted from the Chicago Center for Literature and Photography [cclapcenter.com]. I am the original author of this essay, as well as the owner of CCLaP; it is not being reprinted illegally.)

Although there's nothing particularly outstanding about Mike Robbins' *The Nine Horizons*, travel fans will want to pick up a copy anyway, simply because it's such a solid and strong example of a classic travelogue based on real experiences. Split into nine chapters detailing nine trips the British author made throughout the 1980s and '90s, this has the formal tone of an older travel writer like George Orwell, a certain primness to the proceedings that helps keep the sometimes outrageous stories about exotic locations in check; and I must admit, it's fascinating to read so long after the fact Robbins' political observations about certain areas of the world that were once hotbeds twenty or thirty years ago but no longer are (or are sometimes hot again for entirely different reasons, like his entertaining account of a pre-Arab-Spring Syria). Although not a genre-crossing "must read" even for people who don't particularly like travelogues, it certainly should go in your to-be-read list if you are, an illuminating and well-done series of vignettes that kept me quickly turning pages until I was done.

Out of 10: **8.3**, or **9.3** for fans of travel writing

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## **Robert Kelly says**

“The Nine Horizons: Travel In Sundry Places” is billed as a series of snapshots and lives up to this claim, offering nine sparkling vignettes of the author's experiences in Sudan, Quito in Ecuador, a rainforest (Ecuador again), Bhutan, Syria, Central Asia, Brazil, New York, and during an England to USA crossing. His method of financing his travels is through “development”, a vaguely worded profession that consists of volunteer work for the UN, the EU, NGO's, and other do-gooder organizations. His interests began in 1987 with the modest goal of getting out of a journalistic rut in London and escalated toward language studies. Ultimately, the theory and practice of economic development was taken on at advanced levels.

His interest in hiking is usually presented as the highpoint of his travels in each country, possibly because it allowed him a quite literal overview of the country. In the structure of the book, recollections of his hiking serve a different purpose: they allow plenty of free space within which he can touch on the diversity of these lands and on the integrity of the vastly different peoples and cultures he has helped and learned from. Make no mistake, if you read this book, you too will learn. Robbins is a master teacher and his methods are beguiling.

The first sentence: “You do not need to know much about me” contains only nine words, but they set the tone, which is both understated and supremely confident. Once immersed in the book, we understand why. His writing style appears to grow organically out of his journeys, for the stories show that he took countries as he found them. He sought out central areas of the cities for solitary living quarters, for example, rather than settling for suburban comforts. He often arrived into and exited from a country with his worldly possessions crammed into a single knapsack, albeit the contents may have changed. In between times, he clambered up and down mountain trails with alacrity and agility (notwithstanding bashing a rib or two). Robbins is a great travel writer but there are surely limits to what one can imply through clouds, and I fear that he reached the limit about half-way through the book. White, fluffy, fat, pale, wispy, foggy or otherwise, I was glad when the clouds (or the incessant rain for that matter) cleared out and made way for more earth-bound matters. Other than this quirk, I enjoyed his descriptive verse, which must account for the majority of the book. Long passages can be tiring, but fortunately he is also a master of the short sentence, and the results are never less than graceful. One might question what makes a man travel so persistently, but there is a discernible arc to the stories, and, ultimately, a satisfying resolution — which need not be revealed here. Robbins seems occasionally to mistrust “progress” almost as much as some of the remote rainforest tribes he profiles. Can you blame him? His creed, if it were reduced to a few words, might sound something like “...feeding the world without wrecking it...” (page 194). Saving the world is a large problem, and I don't mean to give the impression that Robbins claims to know how. But, this book does show that he found the world and its inhabitants to be beautiful, which may be a more important thing.

Only in the last few pages does Robbins' writing become a bit more abstract as he draws a few lessons from the body of the book. These are well-founded observations perfectly pitched to what has gone before. Like many of the propeller-driven airplane rides just described, these observations bring the reader to a graceful touch-down after an exhilarating and enlightening flight. It's interesting to note that “Nine Horizons” is only one of three books that Robbins published in early 2014. Having enjoyed this first one so much, it makes me happy to think of what lies ahead.

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## **S.L. Shelton says**

Cast across all continents but Antarctica, this winding, sometimes disjointed story of decades, wandering the globe was a rare treat. Though nearly completely lacking in dialog, the narrative slipped in and out between wistful prose and crisp detail. Very little is left to the imagination when trying to picture the surrounds and

much is left to the imagination in regard to interactions with others.

At times, I almost expected to read a blurb or two about listening devices being planted or pesky officials whisked away with bags over their heads, never to be seen or heard from again; such is the level of excitement conveyed of the many and varied travels by the author. Even without the presence of such intrigue, I'm left feeling like my world has gotten a little larger by reading it.

Missing were the beautifully described photos the author spoke of. And though my own voyeuristic nature would have appreciated a higher level of detail in regards to personal interactions, even a hint of relationship detail above the sanitized version would add more connection to the telling.

Without a doubt, with a modicum of polish, this collection of travels could well become a much more broadly marketed work; dare I say, perhaps even a film.

I give this story 4.5 stars, the addition of the photos would have pushed it to 5 (which by the way is what I round up to anyway) A wonderful story. I am grateful for the opportunity to read it.

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### **J.C. Wing says**

Mike Robbins has created a beautiful tale, a collection of nine in all, that take the reader to all of the world's continents save for one. It is a rich tapestry, brightly colored and vivid in texture, but strangely distant in the telling. It is a curious mix of intricate detail which the author offers in breathtaking fashion, while he himself remains a bit distant. Robbins does preface his collection with an author's note that tells the reader what they are about to read is not an autobiography but a series of snapshots, and he begins the first story by stating that the reader need not know much about him. Although Robbins offered this, the style in which he presents his journeys was unique and something I had to adjust to. It didn't take me long, and what a wonderful ride I was taken on throughout the pages of *The Nine Horizons*.

There is no debate that Robbins has a gift for the written word. So often times I found myself reading again many of the phrases he constructed simply because I loved the way his words rolled together to create a stunning portrait in my mind. The prose is peppered with words in languages I do not understand. I have not visited a great number of the places the author described, but neither of these things were of any consequence. The scenes, or snapshots, were written in such fine detail that I could see what Robbins so artfully described, could understand the meanings of unfamiliar words with the least bit of effort.

What amazing adventures Mike Robbins has had in his lifetime! *The Nine Horizons* is a beautiful summary of his travels, written in exquisite detail that allows his readers to experience so much of what he saw and what he did while he was on his long journey. If he were to ever forget any facet of his incredible excursion, all he need do is flip through the pages of his book. He has created for himself a stunning album full of words and mental images, and we, his readers, are lucky that he has offered to share them with us.

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### **Adam Snowflake says**

I was given a free copy in exchange for this review. However this does not impact my opinions of the work.

I love this book. I do. I absolutely adore it.

I normally don't look at non fiction given it's incredibly hard to review or analyze somebodies life story. However this is not an autobiography but merely snapshots.

I find the book to be incredibly written. Normally with nonfiction books it can be to technical or objective. However this book is almost poetic in it's writing. The writing in all honesty completely made the book for me.

This book can be opinionated (I am using the term in a positive sense.) and though I would normally have an issue with such, given that this book is non fiction I see no issue with it. The book provides opinions of other cultures from the standpoint of an outsider, and yet discusses them in great details.

It's hard for me to tell whether or not there is any bias given I have never been to the cultures or researched them myself. However they are still enjoyable to read about within the context of this book.

Overall I fairly enjoyed this book and recommend it to all.

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## **Luke Marsden says**

At the beginning of The Nine Horizons it says:

"This is not an autobiography. It is a series of snapshots.

A snapshot is random, and excludes everything that the writer did not see. But it may also capture what might otherwise be dismissed as of no value. I have not ignored wider issues, but you can find these in *The Economist* or journals of foreign affairs. What they won't tell you is why the 1931 *Miss Ecuador* competition was a failure, why Bhutanese pigs are happy, or what the Speaker of the Kazakh Parliament thinks about pornography."

This is an admirable introduction. As a series of snapshots, this book does all of the above, and accomplishes its objectives. But it also does a little bit more, perhaps unintentionally. Despite what it says at the beginning, I couldn't help but consider it as part autobiography - it was impossible for me to see it through eyes other than the author's. He does not efface himself altogether from his snapshots and we pick up glimpses of him along the way. He is the real deal as a traveller and does not do things by halves, staying for years in the countries he visits and generally getting involved in attempts to make a positive difference to them. It is engaging to watch as his focus of interest moves from journalism towards sustainable agriculture, or as he puts it "feeding the world without destroying it". He finds sumptuously verdant valleys in Bhutan, and carefully grazed semi-arid yak pastures in the high steppes of central Asia, that embody his ideal of human equilibrium with nature, and learns from them. He also sees the flip sides - depressing landscapes of gratuitous destruction in Brazil and the Middle East - and tries to help remedy them.

Looking back at his descriptions is poignant at times. He spends four years in Aleppo, and you wonder how much is left of what he recounts there. By a quirk of fortune I came across an article, a couple of days before finishing the book, that described how the International Centre for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas (ICARDA) - the very place where he worked in Aleppo - had been forced to make the world's first ever

withdrawal from the 'doomsday' seed vault in the Arctic as it had been partially destroyed (<http://www.smh.com.au/world/syrian-wa...>). This brought home the value of these kinds of written accounts. They record an atmosphere, what it was like to be in a given place at a given time, a delicate interplay of people, events, establishments, culture, technology and prevailing politics that will never be repeated, before it is lost to the mists of time (as is now at least partly the case in Aleppo). He excels at elucidating the essence of these times and places, but at points his self-effacement leaves something missing. Having built up some identification with the author/narrator, I was left looking between the lines for clues about his personal take on the things he was witnessing, even though it was not the intention of the book to provide this.

The Nine Horizons was an effortless way to vicariously visit some extraordinary parts of the world, and some fascinating periods of recent history, helped along by a writing style that flows easily into the mind's eye. The author chose his times and places well, from a reader's point of view, and it is a privilege to be able to enjoy them from the comfort of wherever you happen to open this book.

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### **Karen Fields says**

Amazing Journeys!

The Nine Horizons the author tells the story of how he left London in the late eighties to see the world. The "horizons" represent each of the locations he visited. For those of us of a certain age, the eighties don't seem so far away, but in reality, the world of this book is the world of twenty-five years ago. Not only does the author describe the Sudan, Ecuador, Syria and other places in terms of the land, the people, the food and the culture, but also he captures the nuance of being in those places as they were at the time.

Mike Robbins has had an amazing life. He has a gift for capturing every-day experiences and describing them so that they're relatable. The book is a bittersweet journey into lands lost.

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### **Emma Jaye says**

Mike Robbins is an observer of the world, a man whose curiosity about what, and whom, is over the horizon has defined large swathes of his life.

The Nine horizons are a collection of his observations, sometimes poetic, sometimes starkly realistic of the places, people and cultures he has visited. Overwhelmingly he is accepting of what he sees, from casual cruelty, death and illness in Sudan, to the various characters he meets in New York.

I enjoyed the vivid descriptions of the meals he shared with various people throughout the world, finding out what was 'normal' in that time and place. At times it feels as if he considered himself to be a mere fly on the wall, and at others, that he was perfectly content. The time he spent in Bhutan appeared to have been some of his favourites, and as such, it resonated with me more than the others.

The nine horizons is a peek into an unusual, somewhat disjointed life of a man who considers it normal behaviour to head across the world to somewhere where he doesn't speak the language, with little funds, and only a change of clothes in a rucksack as a back up. I can't help thinking that Mr Robbins, despite coming from a similar background to myself, is a totally different animal altogether.

Vive la difference.

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## **Harry Whitewolf says**

After going on a round-the-world gap year, you might claim to have 'travelled'. Next to Mike Robbins, however, you will realise that your journey was the equivalent of a short jolly holiday.

The author of this book has spent most of his adult life travelling to vastly different countries; staying and working in some for years at a time. Putting so many years of memories into a single book of 258 pages is no easy feat and Robbins manages to do it rather well. However, when I came to the end of the first chapter in Sudan, I was left feeling that I wanted more - I was only just becoming acquainted with the country and its people - but then I reminded myself that this book is supposed to be seen as a series of snapshots, so it was then on to the next place, and Sudan was soon forgotten. I quickly got used to the change of scenery, and I just let myself go along for the ride, but occasionally I would still feel like I wanted more from certain places. For instance, Robbins spends four years in Aleppo and yet it's one of the shortest chapters. With such a place now so firmly out of bounds, I would have liked to have known much more about Syria in the mid-nineties.

As much as Robbins is a very accomplished writer, I did feel like there could have been more of the man in the book. We get to know him well enough through various scenes and narration, but at the end of the day, this book is a memoir as much as it is a travel book (even if the author may disagree), so it would have been nice to have had more personal moments included. Not everybody will just up and leave and have no one home, so I'd have been interested to know more about the motives and philosophies of the author.

Minor nit-picking aside, this is everything a good travel book should be. It vibrantly describes places and scenes. It makes you want to be there yourself and sometimes it makes you feel as though you are there. It contains just the right amount of information on each place, whether it's about the history, the economy, the ecology or the agriculture. It also includes sharp observations about the people and the cultures, alongside good humoured and funny stories.

I'm pretty confident that you won't find another travel book that contains: Sudan, Ecuador, Bhutan, Syria, Brazil, New York and others, nor any that would give you a very real glimpse into each place in quite the same way, so I'm very glad I went on this journey and recommend that you do too.

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## **Kevin Cole says**

I have lived abroad for ten years now, something that twenty years ago I'd never have dreamed possible. Like many Americans, my younger self barely acknowledged the rest of the world and had little desire to see it. The few times I went to Europe, I felt pathetically uncomfortable. Now I live in Serbia and wouldn't dream of returning to the States. Something happened at one point in my life that swung the pendulum from xenophobe to expat-with-a-vengeance.

The wanderlust that defined my thirties has since calmed down (economics), but on occasion it still hits

sharply and there follows a period of moaning that I'm unable to travel more. Fortunately, thanks to books, I can always live vicariously through others.

The Nine Horizons is a chronicle of the author's world travels, living the life I once wanted for myself. Over a thirty-year period, Mike Robbins has lived in some unusual places, ones I'm now glad I've gotten to know: Sudan, Ecuador, Bhutan (look it up), Syria, Brazil, as well as tour of the central Asian former Soviet -stan states.

I have read only Mike's fiction before so it's a treat to get to know him as a person from his own travels. For instance, twice in the narrative, his apparently beautiful voice is remarked upon by others. He's even asked to come on the radio in Bhutan and read the local literature (translated). I kept thinking of Orson Welles.

And in what seems a trademark Robbins manuever, the odd and hilarious knife-in-the dark criticism flashes from prose that's otherwise cool and in control. I also learned that I should probably call Mike Dr. Robbins from now on.

I particularly enjoyed the Sudan and Ecuador chapters. I was also struck by the Brazil chapter. Robbins' troubles in Brazil surprised me. Some people outright try to screw him over and the general cynicism is nothing like he's encountered in far poorer countries. Then there's the sleepless night in which Mike is on the verge of having a mid-life crisis. Since his age at the time is close to my own now, this was too close for comfort.

Wisely, Mike's New York experiences are portrayed in a different way. People are all too familiar with the Big Apple, so he recounts his years there in a random series of vignettes. His stint in Syria is likely objectively striking, for obvious reasons. Reading about an Aleppo that hasn't been reduced to the Stone Age is almost unbelievable.

More than once, I kept wanting Mike to go to other countries as well. Why couldn't he have visited Turkmenistan while he was in the general area? I would've loved getting a firsthand account of that basket case. But I'm a greedy live-through-another type.

Mike speculates that New Yorkers of the past may have sounded more like the British. I have read elsewhere that the general Northeast accent of a century ago was rather closer to Received Pronunciation than accents elsewhere in the US. You can hear it in the voices of early Hollywood stars (Bette Davis, for instance), who all came from the same area. It was only after World War II that the flat Midwestern accent was decided to be more red, white and blue by the broadcasting powers that be.

This was a great memoir. I just hope it's not the complete one.

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### **Hock Tjoa says**

This collection of impeccably written essays puzzles me.

One of the nine chapters is entitled "If it's Tuesday, this must be Bishkek." What followed immediately was not encouraging: "It was Saturday; I had been walking in the Forêt de Soignes on the edge of Brussels, trying

not to think too hard about tomorrow. The summer evening light lit the leaves of the trees that sheltered my third-floor flat and played upon the surface of the Ixelles lake, just visible through the gaps in the buildings. I had taken the flat at least in part because the lake was nearby. I did not know then that it was infested with botulism.”

Eventually the chapter did concern itself with Central Asia, Almaty, Bishkek and Tashkent, and a memorable flight: Gently lifting off from Bishkek and climbing as it were up the side of the Tien Shan (mountain range), the plane then descended into Uzbekistan. “Snow-capped summits rose to meet us, then fell away into deep valleys carved by glaciers. Long lakes snaked down the deeper valleys; mysterious tracks traversed the hillsides; here and there was a square enclosure of drystone walls for animals, in the middle of nowhere, that could have been there for one year or five hundred. I saw a group of bright blue and green and turquoise lakes like semi-precious stones in the morning sun.”

Such rapturous nuggets are scarce though, and one wonders what the author’s intentions were: travelogue, humor, moral or political comment? Why tell us about the whores of Kyrgyzstan or the ten dollar art buy in Uzbekistan or the mélange of images that crowd into his dreams? Without context such details might appear odd or even trite.

In the first chapter, the author informs us that at thirty he signed up for a “two-year volunteer program”; he was struggling to get a career going and “London in the 1980s felt more and more soulless.” He is eventually sent to Khartoum and “I knew I had started a long journey, but did not know how long.”

He reports in this chapter that he was struck by “the private nature of a house in Sudan; it was surrounded by a high wall, and the street outside was no-man’s-land. The distinction between the general, which did not matter, and the particular, which did, was often very strong.”

Similarly astute observations appear here and there in the book. But to this reviewer, they do not add up to “more.” To my taste, the book appears to be literary minimalism; I felt that the always careful writing and the occasional shrewd observation should have “more.”

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