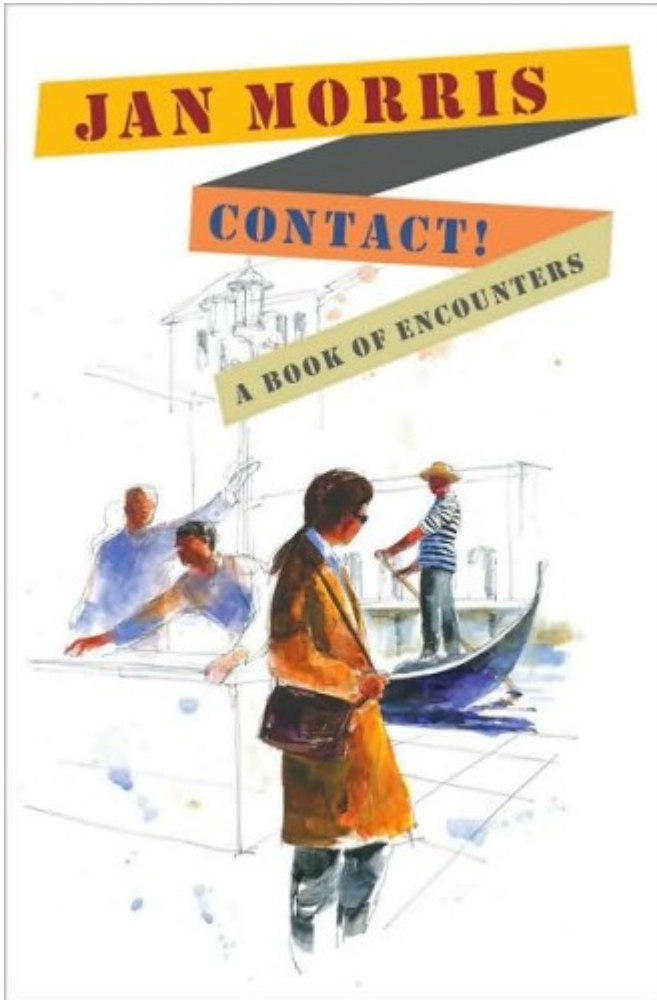


A review of Contact!

reviewed by [Brian Doyle](#) in the [October 5, 2010](#) issue

In Review



Contact!

By Jan Morris
Norton

Wouldn't it be great if one of the world's best travel writers, after 60 years and fortysome books, went back through her work and notes and plucked out hundreds

of haunting, revelatory, shimmering moments— brief encounters that "have been sparks of my work," she might say, "if often only in glimpses—a sighting through a window, a gentle snatch of sound, the touch of a hand . . . fleeting contacts [that] have fuelled my travels down the years, generated my motors, excited my laughter and summoned my sympathies."

Such a collection, you would think, might be astonishing in its range and prove, again and again, that the finest writing has to do with sharpness of eye and ear and enormity of heart. Even the tiniest stories, the briefest meetings, are crammed with meaning and emotion if seen from the right angle, yes? It would be a slight book, of course, one without a formal narrative, but one you could dip into anywhere with pleasure—a stack of moments that would tease your imagination, tickle your fancy to read more about, say, Oman or the Cape of Good Hope, and inevitably send you back into her work to ingest her startling sensibility in bigger doses. A master craftswoman's golden notebook, we might call it.

And lo, it is done, by the extraordinary Welsh writer Jan Morris, who here compiles glancing but substantive moments from all over the world over the last 60 years of her stunning travels: a steaming room of 40 Cairo tailors weaving their annual carpet for a shrine in Mecca; a line of people at dawn in Beijing singing and declaiming verse to a wall; a Beirut cabdriver channeling Dizzy Gillespie; a Basque fishmonger with the bearing of a bishop; a Madras police officer singing into her tape recorder; an East German sentry at the Berlin Wall, seen through a gap to be sound asleep in his chair; Adolf Eichmann fidgeting at his trial in Jerusalem like "some elderly pinched housewife in a flowered pinafore, shifting her false teeth, pining for a nice cup of tea"; Harry Truman spinning the globe in his study in Independence, Missouri, "in a manner I can only describe as proprietorial, reshaping my world, abolishing my empire."

Again and again Morris conjures a moment in which whole lives, and sometimes national characters, are compressed: a brisk West Point cadet marching just so until she breaks into a run and loses her cap as she falls into the arms of her father, "a figure from an old magazine cover, wearing boots and a floppy brown hat, his face shining with pride and happiness"; the "interested, faintly amused, speculative, and all but collusive" expression of Venetian bartenders; the way two women in Berlin, "mother and daughter, perhaps, sharing delicate jokes over their asparagus, balance their purses carefully on the rims of their glasses to stop the chestnut blossoms falling into their wine"; the Australian countryman in Darwin, on the lip of the

Outback, "as free a spirit as you can find in the world today, shackled by no inhibition of class or disadvantage, with little sense of thrift and still less of decorum, no agonizing reserve, no contempt, no meanness."

A whole essay might be written, and a very interesting one too, about dipping books—books into which you can wander any old way, books you can just as easily read backward as forward, books that are built of nuggets and notes and so can be read in snatches and gulps. *Contact!* is one of these odd creatures. It cannot be fairly compared to Morris's masterpieces, of which there are many: *Heaven's Command*, her sweeping account of the rise of the British Empire, or her wonderful books on Hong Kong and Venice, or her one great novel, the mysterious and piercing *Hav*. But it is a lively, penetrating, richly rewarding work in many ways, and it will be a rare reader who does not turn eagerly to Morris's many other fine books after savoring her golden notebook here. Considering that Morris is one of the finest writers in the English language, any book that sends readers into the sweet seas of her sentences is a gift.