

Boomerang – Travels in the Third World

Michael Lewis

Travelogue of a financial-disaster tourist of the FUTURE third world

Lewis' Odyssey takes him through Iceland, Greece, Ireland, Germany and California. Although none of them yet qualify for Third World status, Lewis chronicles the diligence with which they are working at it. The stupid things that people did in pursuit of money almost make the Wall Street characters of "The Big Short" look smart and foresighted.

Lewis really is a storyteller. Finance is merely his theme. As with all of his books this one is easy to read, hard to put down. Yesterday I noticed that my copy had been delivered to my Kindle a couple of days early, and I read it straight through.

As always, he picks out some especially picturesque characters to illustrate his story point. In "The Big Short" it included a trio of countercultural types in Berkeley who decided that they would rather get rich than work, and figured out how to do it. That rang true – I grew up in Berkeley and went to school there, and was able to identify with the mindset and the surroundings. This time it is a bit more of a stretch. I lived in Germany for four years, certainly much longer than the time Lewis spent there doing his research, and I did not encounter half of the scatological vocabulary that he reports or the fascination with all things excremental. I read his story with a smile, and might buy the books he cites on the subject, but I have to say it's hyperbole – exaggeration to make a good story. I like the story.

I think he also exaggerates the governor's recklessness bicycling through the streets of Los Angeles, but once again it makes a good story about how ungovernable California is. This tale relates well to the issues of the day, as other states such as Michigan and New Jersey are following California's lead in attempting to rein in public sector salaries and benefits. His take is that the politically independent, independently rich and widely known and respected Arnold was as ideally positioned as anybody to bring California's people together to solve their problems. And – the people of California simply did not want to do it. It is not that the governor was ineffectual, but rather that the people are ungovernable.

Greece comes off worst among the European countries. His verdict on them as the same. They all want more than they can have, and they refuse to consider the common good or even common sense. It is a house of cards that is bound to fall. The Germans will bail them out to a much greater extent than any prodigal nation could expect, but ultimately they will be undone by their own willfulness. They refuse to impose any financial order on themselves, but they get righteously indignant and claim it is "unjust" when somebody else, especially the maddeningly disciplined Germans, do it for them.

Lewis production cycle on this book was amazingly short. Some of the events that he writes about the place in summer of 2011 and are still in the news. It makes it highly pertinent to today's situation. Somebody contemplating what is likely to happen over the next couple of years, and deciding where to

put his money, should read this as background. Unfortunately, the only solid investment advice to come out is "guns and gold." Kind of bleak. He leaves us on our own.