

Review: Le rat des villes. Récits géographiques lardés de souvenirs, de rêveries et de fantasmes (The rats from cites, the: Geographical stabbed stories of memories, dreams and fantasies)

By Luc Bureau

Reviewed by: Yves Laberge

Centr'ERE, Québec. G1V 0A6, Canada

Bureau, Luc. *Le rat des villes. Récits géographiques lardés de souvenirs, de rêveries et de fantasmes*. Québec: Les Éditions GID, 2014. 288 pp. ISBN: 97828963420006. CAN\$29.95. Paperback. French.

A geographer of imaginaries, constant traveller and former university professor of geography and environmental studies in Québec City, Dr. Luc Bureau completed his Ph.D. in geography at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. During the last six decades, he has visited countless cities and capitals. In this book, his thirteenth in French, he refers to “geographical narratives made of memories, dreams and fantasies” and connects a real description of famous cities with the basic historical facts, the urban legends and the imaginaries which have used these places in literary works. The result is a splendid tribute to modern voyagers and perhaps the opposite of a mere tourist guide; it would rather serve as an inspiration for travelling or for dreaming about some unknown cities which novels and vintage movies have told us about. The author is very well aware that each city has its own reputation and carries a mythology which is the result of centuries of meditations and impressions. In this series of urban portraits, fifteen selected cities are introduced and described, one at the time, systematically and dreamfully: Québec City, Montréal, Paris, London, New York City, Rome, Madrid, Florence, Bruges, Marseille, Cairo, Moscow, Berlin, Havana, and Shanghai. There are no photographs included here, but only a few illustrations (mainly sketches) and some imprecise maps.

Luc Bureau uses the same approach for each site: an impressionist description of the urban landscape, some historical facts and anecdotes. He even mentions a few urban legends or myths (in the case of older capitals such as Cairo or Roma). Because he is firstly a geographer, he can compare what the tourist guides say about each place and comments about “the things not to be missed even if you only have 24 hours to spend” and their shortcomings that are the unique places no one told you to see (p. 188). Much to our pleasure, the author remembers what famous authors wrote about each city he has visited and therefore quotes abound in all chapters, even though the bibliographical sources do not always appear in the footnotes (see p. 118). At some point, he suggests his own classification of his personal pantheon of mythical cities according to one of our senses (p. 186). According to this unusual scheme, there are the “visual cities” such as New York City and Las Vegas; the places one would preferably want to smell like Grasse, Alep, Calcutta, Yaoundé, or the sonic cities, which are

the musical cities, e.g. Vienna and Salzburg (p. 186). Marseille has a privileged position as the city of all senses (p. 186).

In this original mix of historical geography and cultural geography, Luc Bureau has achieved a very personal and joyful book about ideal cities and landscapes. He never places himself as a judge of the tourists' games, pastimes, and their apparent superficiality; on the contrary, he observes them respectfully and does not feel the need to comment on their activities. This book "*Le rat des villes*" [The rat from cities] refers to a fable by Jean de La Fontaine; it is full of literary references and allusions. It does not conceive famous cities as productive places with tall buildings and big industries, or trendy boutiques and hip centers, but rather as locations with an aura, symbols, histories, ephemeral natural parks and with a dose of fragility. His approach based on imaginaries makes his book - an inspiration for other geographers who would like to retell another city's story without using the guides' clichés or the standardized words of city planners and experts in urbanism.

Yves Laberge, Ph.D., < yves.laberge.1@ulaval.ca >, Centre de recherche en éducation et formation relatives à l'environnement et à l'écocitoyenneté – Centr'ERE Québec. G1V 0A6, Canada.

Electronic Green Journal, Issue 37, 2014, ISSN: 1076-7975