

These books can be a patient's favorite roommate

By MARY AUGUSTA RODGERS

A book makes a good gift for a friend in the hospital, but here's a tip: hospital patients are off their feet in more ways than one, and their usual tastes may not apply.

I found this out the hard way, by being in the hospital myself. Books that would have been fine, under normal conditions, hit the floor and stayed there. I wasn't in the mood for a novel about concentration camp victims like "Sophie's Choice" (too depressing) or a spy thriller like "Smiley's People" (couldn't remember the plot) or the latest short stories of V.S. Pritchett (too subtle).

Even a best seller like "Scraples," the literary equivalent of Hostess Twinkies, was too much for a queasy stomach. Erma Bombeck's latest was too hearty, and what can you say about an attempt at hospital humor like "Hysterectomy Can Be Hilarious" except... well... explosive deleted? Still, if you're a reader, you need books desperately during a hospital stay. Friends want to help but too

many flowers make the room look like a funeral, and too much TV will drive you bananas.

THERE WAS A GENTLE SOUL in the hospital room next to mine who found all that inane chuckling on the Robert Young Sanka commercials ("But Sanka brand is real coffee, hahahaha!") so unbearable that she threw cubes of Jell-O at the TV screen.

You're better off with books. The best bets are books that are easy, entertaining and episodic. You need something that can be read in bits and pieces because your attention span, like your memory, isn't all that great.

A few random suggestions that meet these requirements are: "Metropolitan Life" by Fran Lebowitz, "Happy All the Time" by Laurie Colwin, a charming little novel that slips down as smoothly as a chocolate milkshake; "Scribble, Scribble" by Nora Ephron and "How To Eat Like a Child and Other Lessons In Not Being a Grownup" by Della Ephron, who happens to be Nora's sister.

Travel books make good hospital reading for an obvious reason — they

take you away from all that. But you can have a relapse later as you lie in your bed, feeling lousy, and think of those lucky enough to be sunbathing on a tropic beach, touring the Loire Valley in France, cruising the Greek isles or whatever.

That's why I preferred two unusual travel books now currently available in local bookstores — "Travels With Myself and Another" by Martha Gellhorn and "The Old Patagonian Express" by Paul Theroux.

Not only are they easy to read, and very entertaining, they describe exotic travels that are so miserably uncomfortable and exhausting that you feel, by contrast, cozy, content and generally in clover. This is worth a lot.

Of the two, "The Old Patagonian Express" is longer, more informative and more somber in tone. The picture it paints of most of Central and South America is so hopeless that the only solution seems to be to saw off the whole sub-continent south of the Panama Canal and let it sink out of sight.

AND YET this isn't a depressing book. The author is detached, like most

travelers, and he describes what he sees so vividly that you're with him all the way — chugging along on old trains across mountain gorges and through steamy jungle growth and past mud hut villages and crubling Spanish colonial towns and across the Argentine pampas until you reach the end of the line in Patagonia.

"I knew I was nowhere but the most surprising thing of all was that I was still in the world after all this time, on a dot at the lower end of the map . . ."

"Travels With Myself and Another" is for most part, pure pleasure. Martha Gellhorn is an experienced traveler — and a skillful writer who knows how to tell a good story.

She introduces herself — "I was seized by the idea of this book while sitting on a rotten little beach at the western tip of Crete, flanked by a waterlogged shoe and a rusted polly," — and then tells you, in a deceptively simple conversational style, about the best of her worst "horror journeys."

They are horrible, all right, and often very funny. The first is about a trip to

wartime China in 1941 with an unnamed companion (Ernest Hemingway was there when her husband) and an added Chinese interpreter whose favorite English word was "watchumacallit."

If you ever had youthful dreams of being a foreign correspondent, as I did, you will thank your lucky stars you never made it after reading this chapter — terrifying plane rides, an outbreak of cholera, all day hikes through mud and rain, plank beds in filthy rooms full of bedbugs and, for refreshment, snake wine.

There are other chapters on hunting for submarines in the Caribbean in 1942 (she never quite figured out what she'd do if she spotted one), Africa in 1952 (in Nairobi, she rented a Land Rover and set off into the bush with a driver who, it turned out, couldn't drive); a week's visit with dissident intellectuals in Moscow, about five years ago; and, in conclusion, a look at a hippy camp on the shores of the Red Sea in Israel in 1971. This last chapter is the least satisfactory in the book, and the shortest.

I still can't decide whether my favorite chapter is the one on China, or "One Look at Mother Russia." Here's a brief glimpse of the author, trying to get out of her assigned Moscow hotel, "a sardine tin with rooms" miles out of town, on the road to Minsk.

"Two other" apolitic travelers appeared, a big fat Texan and a small Asian, of indeterminate nationality. The Texan was splendid. Red in the face, he announced that this was the goddamndest lousiest place he ever saw, who wanted to be stuck out here, what kind of stinking country was this. The Asian, though less articulate, was no less displeased. He waved his camera at the bare lobby . . . he waved his camera at the outdoors, skinny pine trees. NO GOOD PICKSHA! he said in a high indignant voice. NO GOOD PICKSHA!

A concluding note mentions that the book was written "in temporary furnished quarters" at Claviers, Spetsai, Comino, Icospe, Naxos, Antigua, Ta'Xbiex, Lindos, Symi, Marsalforn. Lovely sounding names, and I hope she'll write about those places.

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