Praise for *Wonder Travels*

“Barkan takes us on a brave tour through marriage and divorce and the Western Hemisphere. It's a sort of Anna Karenina written from Karenin's point of view, with amazing frankness. And at the same time, while looking for the trails of infidelity, we travel to Morocco, Spain, Paris, Rome, soul-searching. After all the upheavals, Barkan reaches a state of ataraxia, and manages to look into the past to see not only the pain and suffering but the beauty and adventure. This memoir/roman a clef, is a veritable page turner, with absolute narrative freedom. Barkan is a master tour guide of the human soul.”

—Josip Novakovich, finalist for the Man Booker International Prize and winner of the American Book Award

Praise for *Mexico: Stories*

“Barkan turns in a near-perfect debut collection that's addictive, delicious, and confounding in its knife-edge ride through the hard lives of its characters.”

—*Library Journal* (starred)

“Masterful stories that peel away at the thin border between everyday life and profane violence in modern-day Mexico.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred)

“‘I kind of think the purpose of life is to sing,’ muses an American picked up by thugs in ‘The Kidnapping.’ ‘I don’t mean, literally, always to sing, but to sing metaphorically, to sing in some way of beauty, to raise the spirits of our voices in hope.’ In that sense, ‘Mexico’ is an ensemble performance for which Barkan composed all of the parts.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“These stories are gripping…I had to blink and look away occasionally because these are also intentionally, and successfully, terrifying. . . ‘Mexico’ demonstrates his significant talent and promises there is more to anticipate from this fine writer.”

—*Washington Independent Review of Books*
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“Why not go out on a limb? Isn’t that where the fruit is?”
—Mark Twain

“Fail again. Fail better.”—Samuel Beckett

“Humiliation is the single most powerful human emotion, and overcoming it is the second most powerful human emotion.”
—Thomas L. Friedman
Learning About the Affair
(2008)

In Morocco, she fucked another man. He—generally a mystery, but I had seen photos of him before, dressed in a green and yellow Adidas tracksuit. Or was that his tall sidekick, the one making goofy karate kicks in the air in front of the Ouarzazate fort? Muhammad was his name. Mody the love name she gave him. “Mody, Mody.” In the photos, his eyes bloodshot like someone who fucks a lot at night. His eyes in control of her, mesmerizing her, strong, brown limpid eyes which connect with her as she photographs him indoors intimately, lying on long cushions in his house; the intimate light of late evening moves across the azure walls of his home; he has served her Moroccan sweet tea. He is laughing, playing with his sidekick in his home, his teeth bright white and fit, the alpha dog joshing with his friend, but his focus is on the photographer who he will sleep with that night and the next five nights, even though his gaze, while hungry for her, seems to also already look through the lens of the camera with anticipation of the end. He is looking at her and through her, smiling for her like a poor prince, who she met on the beach, charming her, reeling her in. They must have fucked well.

There are other photos, too. Of her driving a car in Morocco even though she owned no car and never rented cars. She was on a six-month backpack trip when she met him. He had to have taken the photo of her behind the wheel . . . So, she is smiling for him. One day, they drive to the edge of the Sahara and they eat camel meat with prunes. There are two other tourists with them from England, and Mody is the guide. But this isn’t really work he tells them. He’s doing this as a favor. He has arranged the trip just because he likes them. His real work is mostly with German tourists. No, he tells them, he likes them. They take in “exotic” Morocco, with him as the non-guide who sets everything up.
Life is good. He owns a house overlooking the pristine long beach near the artist community of Mirleft where she meets him. He tells her he doesn’t usually sleep with married women. He tells her this after he sleeps with her. He tells her this after he plays Frisbee with her for a few days, after he runs into her on the beach with his sidekick. The moment she meets him she’s just ridden a bicycle down a precarious dirt road, which others have told her not to take, down from the high bluffs of the town of Mirleft; she is alone and he and his sidekick are there to play. She plays with him. She has one of the best times in years on the beach. She loves the beach. She grew up near a beach in Spain. She’s already tan from hiking in the Atlas Mountains for two weeks, before she wended her way down to the small town of Mirleft, where she changes the course of her intended trip because she remembers how much she loves the beach; but she gets even tanner now. Her legs become strong. She runs and feels the happy memory of just playing all day on the beach like when she was a child. She’s never been that good at throwing a Frisbee, but it doesn’t matter now. Muhammad is patient. Muhammad throws to her and smiles. The sidekick completes the triangle, throwing the Frisbee back. She can feel she’s attracted to Mody. Powerfully attracted. He invites her up to dinner at his house, and she decides to stay a few more days. She switches to a cheaper hotel so she can stay longer.

Before she sleeps with him, her plan was to travel into the desert of Morocco. After five days of Frisbee she packs her backpack and heads to the only road out of town, to a place where she can catch a local minibus to the next stop on her trip, but she arrives too late for the minibus and it is gone. Muhammad happens to appear out of nowhere, at the bus stop. “What happened?” he asks. “Did you miss the bus?” They walk down to the beach. He points to her wedding ring. “What’s that about? Where is your husband?”

“He’s in New York,” she says. “I feel . . . disconnected from him.” Later she claims this is a revelation to her, something she didn’t realize until Mody asks her about her ring on the beach. They begin to kiss. The sun is setting bright orange. They kiss forcefully, passionately. They make it up to his house, and they fuck all night. They fuck like passionate lovers. They fuck like animals. She cries. She has committed her first infidelity after thirteen years of marriage. Her anniversary is coming in a few days. It
is the first week of April and she has been in Morocco for three weeks, and her trip to Morocco is close to coming to an end. Her husband has bought her a ticket from Marrakech to Milan for April 10. He has arranged for all of her airplane tickets during her six months of traveling. Their anniversary is April 7, but both of them play it casual on their anniversary. When they married they eloped, with only two witnesses of a ceremony by a justice of the peace. They said the vows. They kissed and kissed again. She wore a pretty gray silk dress. But even though they play it casual, her husband sends her an email telling her happy anniversary. He misses her back in New York. He’s waiting for her to return. After Italy she’ll come home on April 30, and her six-month and one week trip of wandering, since October 22, will be over, and he won’t be alone anymore the way he’s been through a long, hard, solitary winter in New York City.

She fucks Muhammad and cries, and he comforts her. She doesn’t respond to her husband’s email about their anniversary. Maybe she doesn’t see the email because she’s too busy fucking her brains out, or maybe she sees it and ignores it. She’s not in contact. She has been out of contact more and more, since she arrived in Morocco, while he sends her emails almost daily and tracks where she is in the Atlas Mountains with satellite photos on Google Maps.

All she tells her husband in an email is that she’ll wend her way back a different route to Marrakech than she’d originally planned. She’ll go around the backside of the Atlas Mountains to the 17th-century fort of Ouarzazate. She’ll travel with the British couple she traveled with to the edge of the Sahara. She mentions to her husband—in the one email she sends—that the nice guy who deals with German tourists has found a car to take all of them back to Marrakech.

There’s a photo of the hotel room where they stayed in Ouarzazate. To the right, a wood shutter is open and a stream of quiet morning light comes in, yet the room is mostly dark in secretive shadows. The bed is made too neatly. A black velvet painting with the image of a stallion is the only art on the wall.

When she gets to Italy she says it’s cruel how the men from Morocco are treated at the airport. It is cruel how they treat the Muslim men, as if they are subhuman at the border. I (the husband) agree with her. I have set her up at the house of a rich friend in Milan. I call her when she’s
in the car from the airport, going to the house of the friend in a BMW Mini Cooper, because I haven’t been able to speak to her much in Morocco for the better part of a month. She says a quick hello and then tells me she’ll talk later. Later at the house, she tells me she doesn’t want to talk much because she doesn’t want to be rude to her hosts.

For three weeks she travels around Italy, first to Milan, then Padua, Venice, Florence and Rome. It's expensive in Italy, so she stays in a number of hostels. She's vague about where she'll be staying. I ask her if she can give me a specific hostel address so I can call her on Skype and talk to her for a longer time. She sends some postcards telling me how good the gelato is in Florence and how we have to come back there together. But she emails infrequently. I call her on her cell phone in Rome, and the traffic noise on the street is strong as she stands in front of the Colosseum. Four days later, for her last night in Rome, she finally moves into a hotel with her own private room. I can call and have a real conversation with her there, I think. When I call it's close to midnight in Rome. She speaks in a quiet voice, but she says the neighbors are banging on her wall telling her to keep quiet, and I think I can hear them banging, so it doesn't seem too strange to me she speaks in a whisper. She says she has to be quiet and maybe hang up, but I tell her I want to talk. She gets under the covers and talks, hidden like a mummy. I imagine her like a kid at camp with a flashlight under the covers. I tell her about a coming-home party I’ve set up for her with all her friends in New York, three days after she gets back, and she tells me she’s excited to see them. It's a busy time for me because my first novel is coming out the day she gets home, and I have to run up to Boston to do my first reading, and before I planned the reading I asked her if she’d like to come to Boston with me, and she had said yes; but it seems important to have a party right when she comes home so she can share the excitement and adventures of her trip around the world to Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Israel, India, Spain, Morocco and Italy. I’ve decided not to ask her about work or anything practical when she returns. I want her to be able to ease into her reentry to America and to normal life.

“So are you ready to return to New York?” I ask. I want her trip to be complete. I want her to feel she’s had a full adventure, free to do whatever she needs to feel the intensity of life again. When she left New York she seemed close to a nervous breakdown, burnt out after fifteen years
of solid work, ever since she'd immigrated to the United States from Spain.

“Yes, I’m looking forward to seeing my friends,” she says. She says she's excited to come home. She speaks under the covers. It's hard to hear her.

When she gets to New York her plane is seven hours late. It's two in the morning. I’ll pick up a rental car in the morning to drive to Boston for the first reading the next evening. I wander around the large terminal of JFK airport, and the shops are all closed for the night with metal gates pulled down. The ceiling is at least three stories high, and the place feels like a mall after midnight. A lone man buffs the linoleum floor, and the tiles, although shiny, have a look of worn grime—of thousands of ghostly passengers moving through on their way somewhere else. Two food options are still available. One sells pieces of cake wrapped in plastic, which sit cold in a refrigerator, and bruised bananas, pale under the fluorescent lights. Another has the residue of soup in two crocks, and the soup has dribbled down the sides of the pots and burnt. I buy a banana because I’m so hungry from waiting.

I've told my sister and parents for weeks how excited I am she's coming home and how much I miss her. For six months I've waited for her to return. When she left the feeling was mixed. Sadness, but relief, too, she was gone. But as she returns there is no mixed feeling.

I wait at the closest place to where the passengers will exit immigration. I lean against a metal barrier set up to keep people back from the passengers as they come out. Finally, the arrival screen informs she has arrived. The passengers of her plane, from Italy, exit—identifiable by their European tighter clothes, the fashion of their haircuts, and the small backpacks with brighter colors than those of Americans, and the backpackers look too clean to be real bohemians. She doesn't exit. Another plane from Jamaica lands, and the passengers exiting wear Panama hats, and the few white men wear Hawaiian shirts and are burnt almost as red as their wives. A trickle of Italians. Still, I don't worry—she and I play it cool—but I look closely at everyone coming out hoping she’ll be next. I'm ready to see her sweet smile, ready to kiss and hold her.

She comes out in a stylish blue coat, face tan, and her light brown hair has hints of blonde from the Moroccan sun, and she moves slowly with her backpack, and when she gets out the doors of immigration she
hangs back as if a slow river is keeping her from moving forward, and she bunches up her shoulders as if to ask “who me?” and whether she is still the same person, whether I recognize her, and she is small and not moving forward quickly, so I assume she’s playing it cool the way she likes to, and I think she looks beautiful, and I go under the metal barrier to get to her. She doesn’t throw her arms around me. She puts her bag down slowly on the floor. I smile at her slyly, as if to say: you did it again, you did it your own way, you went on an adventure and made it happen. I am proud of her. I’ve been so proud of her, following her trip on the maps, looking at photos of everywhere she’s gone. I wrap my arms around her slowly and give her a kiss. Not a long kiss, because I’m shy in public, and I’m thinking about getting back to the bedroom of our house and making love. I kiss her again, and she doesn’t linger on me. I take her backpack to help her carry it. It’s late, and even though we usually take public transport back from the airport I’ve decided, long ago, we’ll be happiest taking a cab. We get to the taxi stand, and two other passengers in line have come on the plane from Italy with her, a couple that was seated beside her. She tells me she wants to share a cab with them. I don’t want to. I want to be alone, together in the cab, slowly touching each other, slowly feeling her return. “Are you sure?” I ask. My tone makes it clear I don’t want to. But she insists we share a cab back with them. So we pack in tight, four in the cab, and we make chitchat to be polite when all I want to do is hold her.

It’s a full hour back to the apartment. It’s three in the morning. We live in a six-story walk-up. I pay more than half the fare when we get out of the cab together because I just want to get home to be with my wife; I don’t want to spend time figuring out who owes what. We enter the lobby of our apartment building. She’s home now, after six months and one week of traveling. I hope she’s happy to be home. I’m excited to show her the cover of my new book, which has just been printed and that I’ve worked on for five years. We approach the first step, and the fluorescent lights cast a tired blue color, but the mosaic pattern of the floor and the ornate details of the banister are beautiful, and this is our home, and we are home now, finally together. She’s behind me as I carry her heavy backpack full of treasures bought on the road; she trails back, and before I reach the first step she says, “Why did you kiss me that way at the airport?” I stop, and I don’t understand.

“What do you mean?” I say.
“You know,” she says. “Like that.” She pauses and lets the air feel like a heavy hammer descending. She shrugs her shoulders.

“I don’t understand what you mean.”

“It’s just the way you kissed me. It felt like you didn’t care. You didn’t really come out quickly to meet me. And your kiss wasn’t very passionate.”

There are words that make you asphyxiate, which make your head cloudy so that it is hard to see and breathe, which slow down time until you are stuck in ice, and someone breaks the ice with a hammer and chisel. I stand with my head hung low, with the weight of the backpack at my feet, which I know I’ll have to pick up, but I can’t move and I start to cry; I can’t wait to cry until we enter our apartment alone. I don’t want to make any noise as I carry her backpack up the flights of steps because I don’t want to cry for everyone in the building to hear, but I can’t stop crying even as I try to muffle the sound. She doesn’t say anything to comfort me. When we reach the apartment, I look for the keys and open the door and step into the small wood entryway and drop the heavy backpack to the floor. I stand barely inside the door slowly sobbing. “How could you say that?” I ask. “How could you say that to me after I’ve been waiting for you for more than six months?” I shake my head between gasps. “You don’t understand. You don’t understand just how much I’ve been waiting for you to come home.”

I go to the bathroom to wash my face. I come out, and she’s holding a copy of my book, which is newly printed, and she looks at it with disinterest as if it is a stillborn baby. “It’s not so bad,” she says of the cover. “You said it printed dark . . .” She puts it down on a small dining room table near the bathroom. I’ve waited in the 590 square feet of our apartment alone for six months, finishing the final edits of my novel and working on the publicity for the release, trying to keep myself hopeful as I waited for her, following all her movements around the world, sending her daily emails, calling her daily when she was in Spain for two months with her family, and she is finally in the space with me. It’s her custom to have great sexual expectations whenever one of us comes back from a trip, as if the power of our lovemaking—no matter how long the voyage, no matter how late at night—is a sign of the state of our love for each other. When we were first married it was true, we could barely wait to see each other before we were in bed.

She is home now. She goes to the bathroom. I feel the residue of tears from when I trudged up the steps. She says nothing to explain herself.
We go to bed together, and we make love like strangers, love like ghosts.

Two months later, she went back to see Muhammad. This time she was no longer backpacking. She packed her best white, silk nightie and her black lace lingerie from the French brand ERES. Before she left she bought a new light-beige bra, with small tasteful ribbons, which held her corset-tight and pushed her breasts forward and up. She was forty. She had just turned forty on June 2, and the dinner had been one of the most somber fortieth birthday parties ever. I had asked her if she wanted a big party, and she’d said no—with her excuse we’d just had a big party for her coming home—when I had bought $500 of wine and cheese, which was a very big sum for me. At the coming-home party there were plates of prosciutto piled high, freshly sliced at Zabar’s and served with balls of melon. There were artisanal cheeses from California and really good wine from Italy. To make the party more glamorous, it was held at the apartment of a friend who wrote screenplays and who wanted to have a slideshow of her travels. After the trip to Boston for my first reading, she’d put together a fantastic slideshow with pictures of Syrian forts and ruins, of turbaned men in Rajasthan, of the deserts of Jordan, and of the oldest churches of Israel, near the site of Christ’s crucifixion. During her stay in Israel, when she’d stayed at the Austrian Hostel—a beautiful yet communal sleeping place—she’d complained of a man who she’d said was crazy. He was dogmatic, Germanic, overly opinionated. He had told her with great scolding, “Six months without your husband? You are traveling for six months? Without him? . . . No more husband, when you get back. No more.” This had infuriated her. What did he know? she’d said.

She was an art director of magazines. We had moved from Boston to New York specifically so she could continue her job in magazine design, because there were few opportunities for advancement in Boston. Most of the guests at the party for her homecoming were friends she’d made in the magazine business at the two places she’d worked since we’d moved to New York. For me, the transition was difficult from Boston to New York. I had left a job teaching at Harvard and had come to the city to help keep her career progressing. I’d also left the job at Harvard to write a novel, and it wasn’t always easy writing. I’d been much more alone than she was in
The City. With her eye for patterns and photography, she’d put together a beautiful slideshow. The one strange thing, however, was how few people-shots she’d taken. Most of her photographs were of visual curiosities: cool graffiti, the special arrangement of park benches and food, the Greek ruins of Turkey, all framed in quiet, subtle design. But when she’d arrived in Morocco—once she’d reached the Atlas Mountains—something changed, as if a switch went off and her senses were heightened. Even before she reached Muhammad, she’d begun to take more intimate photos of subjects. She took photographs of Berber children playing in the mountains, their hair uncombed and in knots, dressed in traditional bright clothing, some smiling some not, all stoic and truly adorable, with cuts on their faces where they’d been hit as they threw stones at each other for fun because they were too poor to own toys. Throwing rocks was a pastime. She had photos of the innkeeper at the small hotel where she’d accidentally ended up when the shared taxi she rode from Marrakech to the Moroccan coast had broken down as the car radiator blew, the car coasting down the wild, curvy roads of Morocco until she landed by chance at the small inn. In Morocco, it was as though her senses were being perfumed; and perhaps her senses were open because she’d already made up her mind to end our marriage when in Spain. The most intimate photos were shots of Muhammad. Suddenly, there were close-ups. Suddenly, instead of photos taken of people at a distance there were photos of him in proximity. For a couple of weeks, her pictures went from good and interesting, but without greatness, to National Geographic quality.

The fortieth birthday party felt like a funeral dirge. I’d assumed the real reason she didn’t want a large party was because she was simply afraid of getting old. I understood the fear of a fortieth birthday, so I decided not to press anything. We got together with three of her closest friends. Two were our best friends from Boston, a lesbian couple going through constant problems together. That night, their relationship was strained. They sat apart, self-consciously. The third friend had just left her husband after twenty-eight years. There was a silence at the party, where we ate in the back patio of a Thai restaurant in Queens. Water trickled from a fountain, we sat under a pergola, the air was sweet and breezy, the sun was warm, but none of that could overcome the silence.

Later, I understood why everyone was so silent. She had already
About the Author

JOSH BARKAN won the Lightship International Short Story Prize and was runner-up for the Grace Paley Prize for Short Fiction, the Paterson Fiction Prize, and the Juniper Prize for Fiction. He is the recipient of a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, and his writing has appeared in *Esquire*. He has taught creative writing at Harvard, NYU, the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa, Hollins University and MIT. His books include the novel *Blind Speed* and short story collections *Before Hiroshima* and *Mexico* (Hogarth/Penguin Random House)—selected as one of the five best story collections of 2017 by *Library Journal*. His work has been translated into Spanish and French. He lives in Boston.