

Roads Not Taken: A Novel

T. A. Keenleyside

Old Stone Press

(328pp)

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An intrepid journalist finds that he is less skilled in love than he is at chasing stories in the historical novel Roads Not Taken, about personal disappointments despite career successes.

Set against the backdrop of global conflicts, T. A. Keenleyside's historical novel *Roads Not Taken* is about relationships, lost love, and journalism.

Alistair, a photographic journalist, is caught in an identity crisis. Raised in Canada in the second half of the twentieth century, he navigates complexities in love and marriage. He's also fascinated by political conflicts—in the US, Africa, Asia, and Europe. Following his passion, he covers major events, including Martin Luther King Jr.'s March on Washington, the Vietnam War, and the civil war in Nigeria. Multiple relationships complicate this work—and are complicated by his enduring fixation on his first love, Ginny.

Alistair's perspective on historical events shines. His reflections on his assignments are rich and detailed, full of suspense and tension. When he feels he has the most to lose, his connections strengthen. Indeed, his romantic involvements are at their most powerful when they're entangled with major historical moments. Still, difficulties arise, and he often has to choose between his work life and his personal one. He often opts to preference the former, though doing so leaves him grappling with the loss of romantic partners on repeat. At other times, his partners are taken from him. Still, despite his inward reflections following each loss, Alistair grows little; he is by and large unchanged at the end of the novel. Further, his self-perception is at odds with his behaviors: Described early on as someone who focuses on all of the possible negative outcomes of his decisions, he often foregoes this behavior altogether, leading to repeated discord in his love life.

Furthermore, Alistair's conversations with others are clunky and flat, focused on everyday concerns and logistical issues (what takeout to order; backgrounds on the stories he wants to cover) rather than on deeper concerns or personal attachments. People's relationships to one another are vague as a result. Still, the book's women are developed in complex terms, such that their proximity to Alistair gives him a greater sense of depth than he has on his own. Indeed, when Alistair is alone, he often comes across as shallow, wallowing in regrets and apathy at the same time. Even his relationship with Ginny ends without fanfare; indeed, Alistair's response to losing the great love of his life is too unfeeling to make an impact.

A rich historical novel, *Roads Not Taken* is about identity, love, and difficult choices in a journalist's sprawling life.

JENNIFER MAVEETY (December 24, 2024)

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