

More Praise for *Lost on Earth*

“I hope many people will be touched — as I am — by the human tragedies *Lost on Earth* conveys with such emotion and talent.”

—Elie Wiesel

“It is a rare bit of luck these past 10 years that put a writer as gifted as Mark Fritz at most of our world’s historic venues . . . a remarkable blend of history, analysis and humanity.”

—*Detroit Free Press*

“This is an unpretentious book, but it brings out lucidly the moral and political problems caused by one of mankind’s greatest migratory upheavals. *Lost on Earth* is a series of vivid dispatches from this shadowland of outlanders, and at their best they are the premier reports about the contemporary refugee.”

—*Boston Globe*

“*Lost on Earth* is an enjoyable read, not least because of Fritz’s eye for details.”

—*Washington Monthly*

“Recommended reading. Helps put the new refugees (from Kosovo) in a larger context by examining the world’s new homeless.”

—*USA Today*

“Unfolds like a series of loosely interconnected short stories. Fritz writes with streetwise empathy for his dislocated subjects.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“An arresting eyewitness account of the end of the Cold War.”

—*Cleveland Plain Dealer*

“This is a book about travel, but the travelers have no home to leave behind, their destination is nowhere, and the reason for the trip is anything but pleasure. The fact that our nation of immigrants (and tourists) has its borders closed to them is terrible and humiliating.”

—P. J. O’Rourke, author of *Eat the Rich* and *Holidays in Hell*

“A vivid account and thoughtful examination of history’s largest human migration. . . . All too often, these are the stories that go ignored by the American media; one must praise Fritz for bringing them to light.”

—*Kirkus*

“This is inspired reporting — a trek through a world of dislocation and distress, a microscopic look at the human consequences of poor leadership and ignorance among our so-called family of nations. Mark Fritz focuses upon individual lost souls, then makes the connections to the reverberating waves of displacement that are slowly, but steadily, coming away.”

—Arthur Kent, Emmy Award-winning war correspondent

“These are not just touching stories of poor refugees caught in a world gone mad. They are stories that starkly demonstrate just how interdependent the world has become.”

—*St. Petersburg Times*

“Accessible and insightful . . . provides a context that’s missing from daily headlines and nightly news reports.”

—*Portland Oregonian*

“To make real the usually hidden human dimension of the high politics we read about in the morning paper; to show people’s stories to be interconnected and overlapping with others whose existence they can barely fathom; to provide food for empathy — all are ambitious and important tasks that Fritz accomplishes with flair.”

—*Current History*

“Street stories from the main theaters of the migrations of the 1990s. . . . Sharp, contemporary journalism gives depth to the daily news images.”

—*Booklist*

“Fritz has laced this easily read and absorbing book with vignettes of refugees’ journeys across borders and into lands they had no idea they ever would see. So many news stories have passed before our eyes in the last decade that we need a book like this.”

—*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*



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# lost on earth

► nomads of the new world

mark fritz

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*To Karyn*



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There is no greater sorrow on earth than  
the loss of one's native land

EURIPIDES



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## contents

Introduction	3
1 ► Portal	7
2 ► Return of the Gypsies	20
3 ► Mergers and Acquisitions	37
4 ► Bombing Babylonia	61
5 ► Backlash	81
6 ► The Point of Origin	98
7 ► Fresh Orphans	121
8 ► Raising the Drawbridge	131
9 ► Losing Japanese	142
10 ► Stick People	164
11 ► Mission Creep	179
12 ► Lost in Transit	199
13 ► Vicious Circles	219
14 ► History Lesson	164
Epilogue	274
Acknowledgments	297
Index	299



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## introduction

**W**HO says the Berlin Wall has fallen? What do we *mean* the Berlin Wall has fallen? Did we *see* the Berlin Wall fall? Is there a big hole there?"

Frank Crepeau was holding a little slip of paper. It was a dispatch that had just come in from Berlin. It was filed with what was known as a flash priority, which was pretty much reserved for, say, the assassination of an American president or an invasion from outer space. It was a single sentence, unattributed, too remarkable to be real. It simply said that the Berlin Wall had fallen.

I was a copyeditor on the foreign desk of a wire service, The Associated Press in New York. Frank Crepeau was the assistant foreign editor. He'd worked in Moscow and Berlin and Prague, among other places, back in the days when nations were constructed to keep their citizens caged. I sat in the slot, the center of a horseshoe-shaped collection of desks, and he sat off to the side, waiting to pounce on the mistakes that the rewrites and the filers like me inevitably made during the chaos of deadline.

## ► INTRODUCTION

So when something akin to science fiction popped up on the little printer at my right elbow, I handed the printer slip to him. And he looked at it with the incredulity of someone who had personally felt the chill winds of the Cold War.

He called the bureau in Berlin. East Germany's government had, indeed, lifted travel restrictions. The wall, technically, was open. Frank was satisfied. I pressed a key on my computer and put a bulletin on the wire. It was November 9, 1989. The Berlin Wall had fallen, and nobody could quite believe it.

Five months later, mostly by coincidence, I was sent to East Germany, and from there I took assignments to Moscow, the Persian Gulf, Somalia, Liberia, Rwanda, Bosnia and many other places. And it seemed like most of the stories I wrote in some way included a large number of people who had been forced to leave their homes, their jobs, their countries, their particular place in the world. Whether it was a Tutsi teenager on the road in Rwanda or a Togolese computer expert fleeing across the Sahara, every event seemed to have a sizable population of displaced people attached to it. But it wasn't until I came home five years later, after I'd left behind the little pieces of different places, that I realized how much all of these people were part of the same story.

In September 1995, during one of the many events held to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations, a group of diplomats, writers and humanitarians convened at Columbia University in New York to discuss a phenomenon that policy analysts refer to as forced migration. The purpose was to bring together people with a knowledge of the topic to discuss what to do about the multitude of refugees spawned by the porous borders, ethnically retooled homelands and overhauled ideologies that emerged when the Soviet Union quit the Cold War.

At one point, the discussion turned to the apathy that people in the wealthy West in general and the United States in particular had for what seemed to be the same faceless mass of wanderers, distant and anonymous and perpetually in need of a handout. And it dawned on me that perhaps *that* was the overlooked element that should have made their stories compelling: the shared voyage, their participation in a phenomenon so large and complex that most people can see it only as small pieces that look wearisomely alike.

An estimated 50 million people were either driven from their countries or uprooted within them by the mid-1990s, roughly one out of every hundred people on earth. Counting those who emigrated for what were viewed as dire economic reasons, the figure more than doubles. The impact of this great migration has been enormous. It has compelled U.S.-led armies to intervene in faraway wars. It has led to a reactionary wave of restrictive immigration laws around the world. And it has planted the seeds of countless future conflicts.

This book doesn't seek to join the sometimes insular debate about the future of U.S. policy in the post-Cold War era, but to perhaps move some aspects of it to slightly broader precincts, to put a few faces on the aftermath of one era and the rough beginnings of another, to detail how individual lives have been changed forever by abstract events. This book is a visit to a misunderstood world, a veritable refugee nation, a shadowland of outlanders that overlaps uncomfortably with our own world, but which exists very much in a different dimension governed by its own rules for survival. The inhabitants are motivated by varying degrees of two basic impulses: a desire to escape danger and a yearning for a life that comes closest to the one that we

## ► INTRODUCTION

live. If we take a big enough step backward to see this world, if we study its contours, it is clear we are moving through one of mankind's greatest migratory disturbances, one with the power to shape our future.

On the surface, this book is a collection of character sketches about ordinary people who just happened to be standing in the way when history got made. Some of them make it back home, some of them find new places to live. Some simply disappear, back into the fog. Mostly, though, I've tried to use the pieces of these lives — from the running woman in the first chapter to the running woman, older and wearier, in the last — to create a single character to symbolize the twentieth century's stunning last decade. This is the tale of the contemporary refugee, an ordinary human being forced to cross a crumbling bridge between two eras. It is a chronicle of escape and pursuit, pilgrimage and exile. It is a postcard from oblivion.