

Emma John: A Wayfaring Stranger in Bluegrass

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A Book Review by Richelle Putnam

“Our haphazard assembly of instruments produced a thick cloud of sound, from which emerged snatches of tune. The notes themselves seemed to move around our group like a swarm, settling for a short while on a banjo, next buzzing gently in the strings of a mandolin. I gripped the neck of my violin and willed them not to come my way. The music was flighty, cheerful, virtuosic; a thin, spectacled bassist kept the pace high. There were no chord sheets or pages of lyrics; everyone here knew the song, or at least knew how to follow along. Everyone except me.” (Emma John)

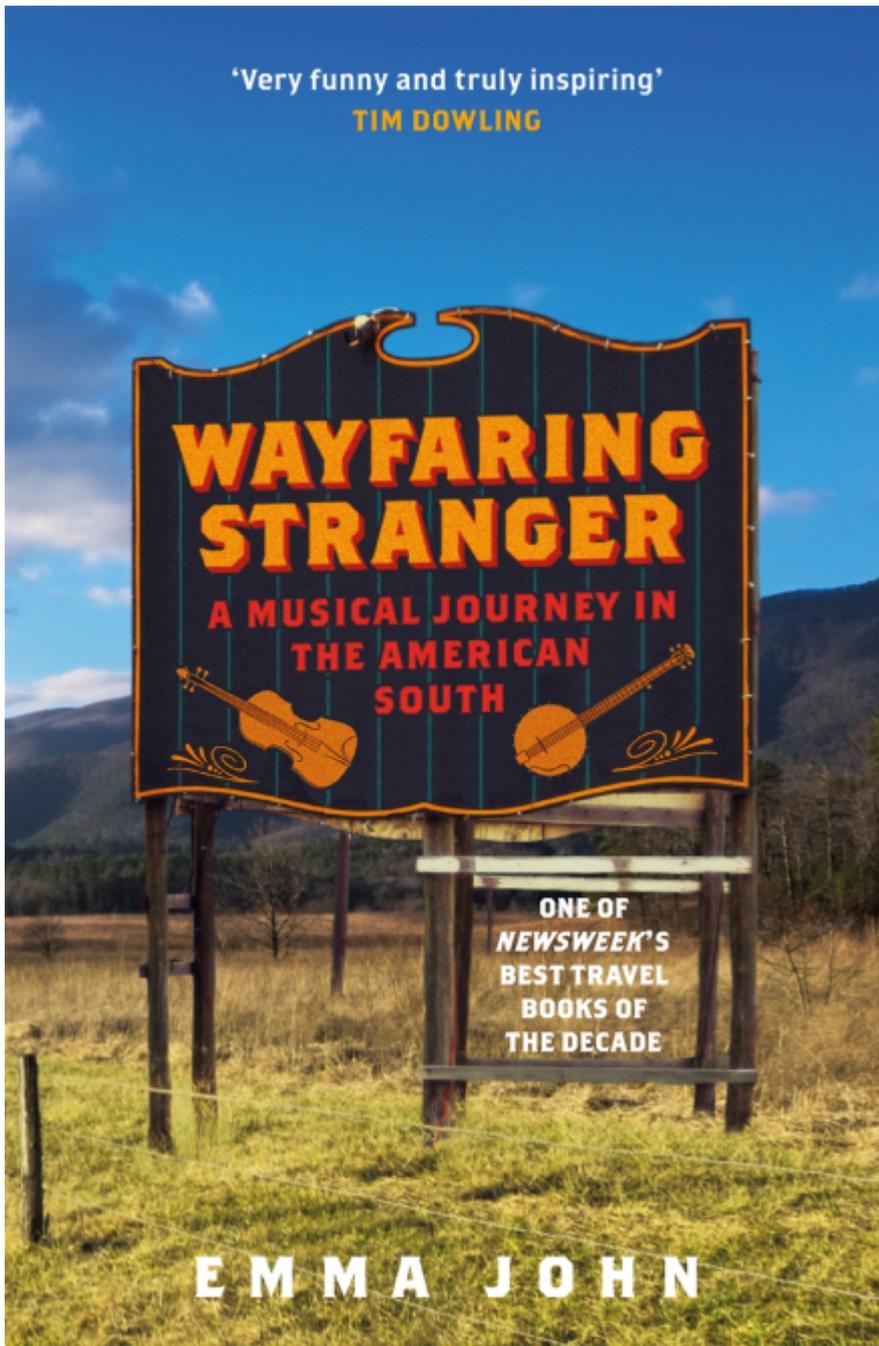


Emma John

Author

British author Emma John didn't know what to expect when she set out for the U.S. Appalachian Mountains to explore the roots of bluegrass music. What she did know was that bluegrass music intrigued her and that for years her love had been strained for the violin on which she had been classically trained. She knew also that the sensation of Mumford & Sons and *O Brother Where Art Thou?* had shaken the world with enthusiastic ferocity. Incorporating a fiddle in the music mix became a new trend in London's local bands.

"I had never heard a violin played like that before: fast and furious, in unpredictable and impenetrable patterns. This wasn't music you could imitate, it was a secret code, its cleverness so complete that, without the key, all efforts were in vain. All the while its playfulness, its cocky swagger, tantalised the listener. Even the most explosive technical fireworks were handled with outrageous nonchalance. I'd never seen a violin player look so cool. And it tempted me, for the first time in a long time, to pick up my instrument again."
(John, 2019)



Emma John

Author

Knowing little to nothing about the Southern landscape and zero about where to go and where to stay (think Google Search), John sets out to excavate the roots of this mountain music called bluegrass and to rekindle her love for the violin. These become the subjects of her first book, *Wayfaring Stranger: A Musical Journey in the American South*. However, it is not her first “published” book. As John explained in her August 24, 2020, Rick Bayles interview in Americana UK, “music and travel genres don’t sell well,” therefore, neither agent

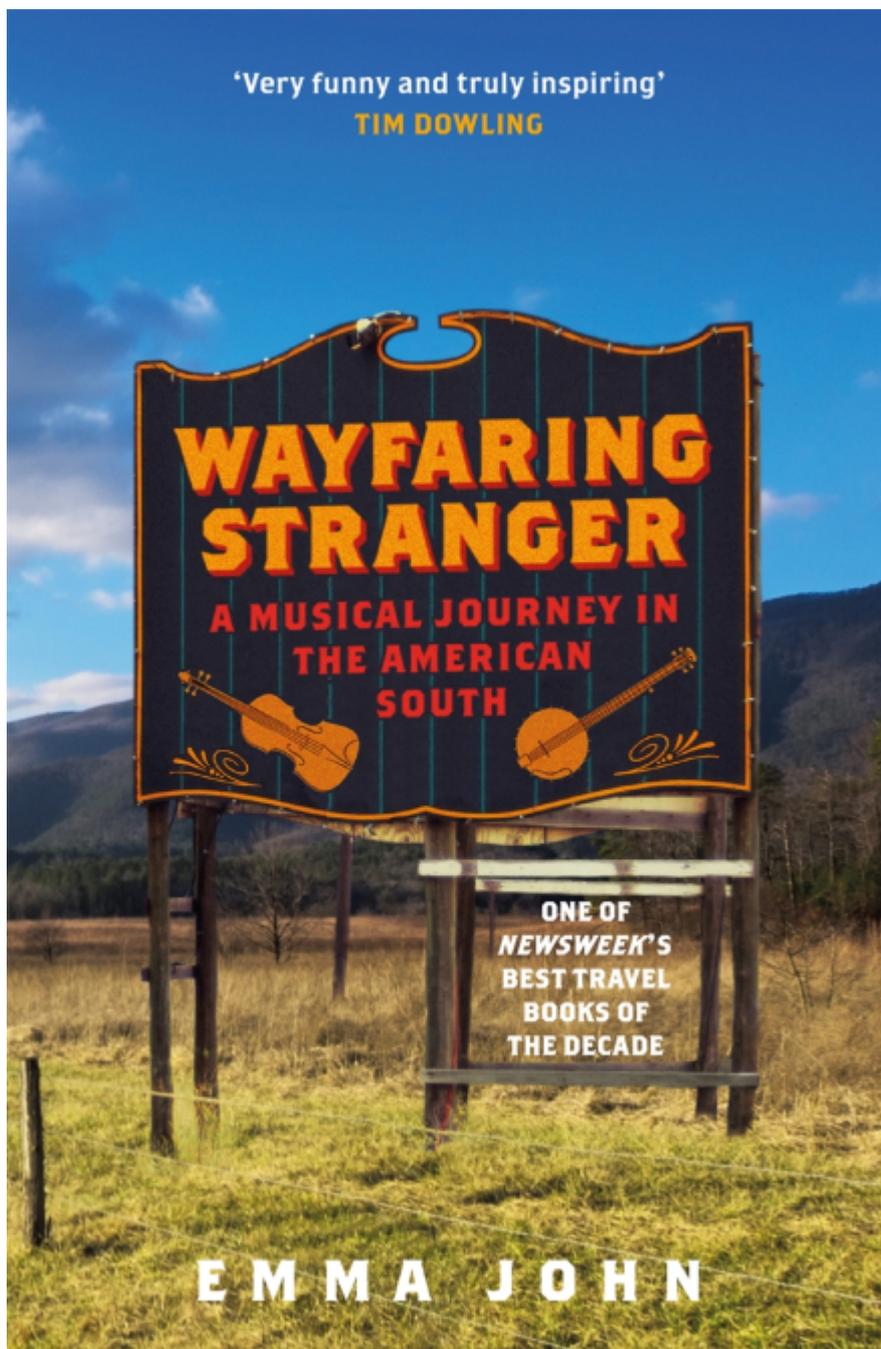
nor publisher had any interest in the book. John's first published book, *Following On: A Memoir of Teenage Obsession and Terrible Cricket*, covered another of the author's obsessions: the 1990s England's Cricket Team. *Following On* became the 2017 Wisden Book of The Year. We are grateful John returned to her first book and Weidenfeld & Nicolson released *Wayfaring Stranger: A Musical Journey in the American South* on May 30, 2019 (date on publisher's site). Since then, (to the likely dismay of the agents and publishers who turned it down) John's memoir became a Newsweek Travel Book of the Decade and the British Guild of Travel Writers' Travel Book of the Year.

The song "The Wayfaring Stranger" or "The Poor Wayfaring Stranger" became well-known after singer and actor Jos Slovic sang it a Capello in the war movie *1917*. The origins of the song remain unknown, but many believe it's rooted in American folk and gospel music. It is listed as #3339 on the Roud Folk Index, probably the largest English-language folk song index in the world. "Wayfaring Stranger" evolved into a coveted cover for the likes of Johnny Cash, Emmylou Harris, and Burl Ives. Its poignant lyrics deftly molded into a haunting minor chord structure, clearly speak of death and leaving this world behind, but also relate to a reflective person on a journey through life. "Wayfaring Stranger" is absolutely the perfect title for this insightful memoir.

The 300+ pages pass by too quickly as we watch John bare all. She seems to trust her readers enough to share what most try desperately to hide—vulnerabilities, misconceptions, encounters, assumptions, and conclusions about unfamiliar people in a foreign culture we don't understand. In one noteworthy moment, John exposes her unease:

"But right now, as I sat under an advert for snake repellent, inhaling dust and paint thinner, my foreignness had never seemed more acute. When I'd begun my journey, I had felt like an adventuress; now I felt like a fraud. A committed city girl, a lover of creature comforts and liberal politics,

earning songs whose evocation of humble country living meant nothing to me, whose corniness and attitudes to women made my modern sensibilities cringe. Bluegrass music was suffused with its love of home, of mountain mamas and cabins in the woods – a sentimentality I couldn't share, for a place I'd never lived. In a style I couldn't even play. As the music hustled on and I stumbled behind, catching at its coattails, all I felt was the vast distance between me and everything it represented. And I wondered: why did I ever think this was a good idea?" (John, 2019)

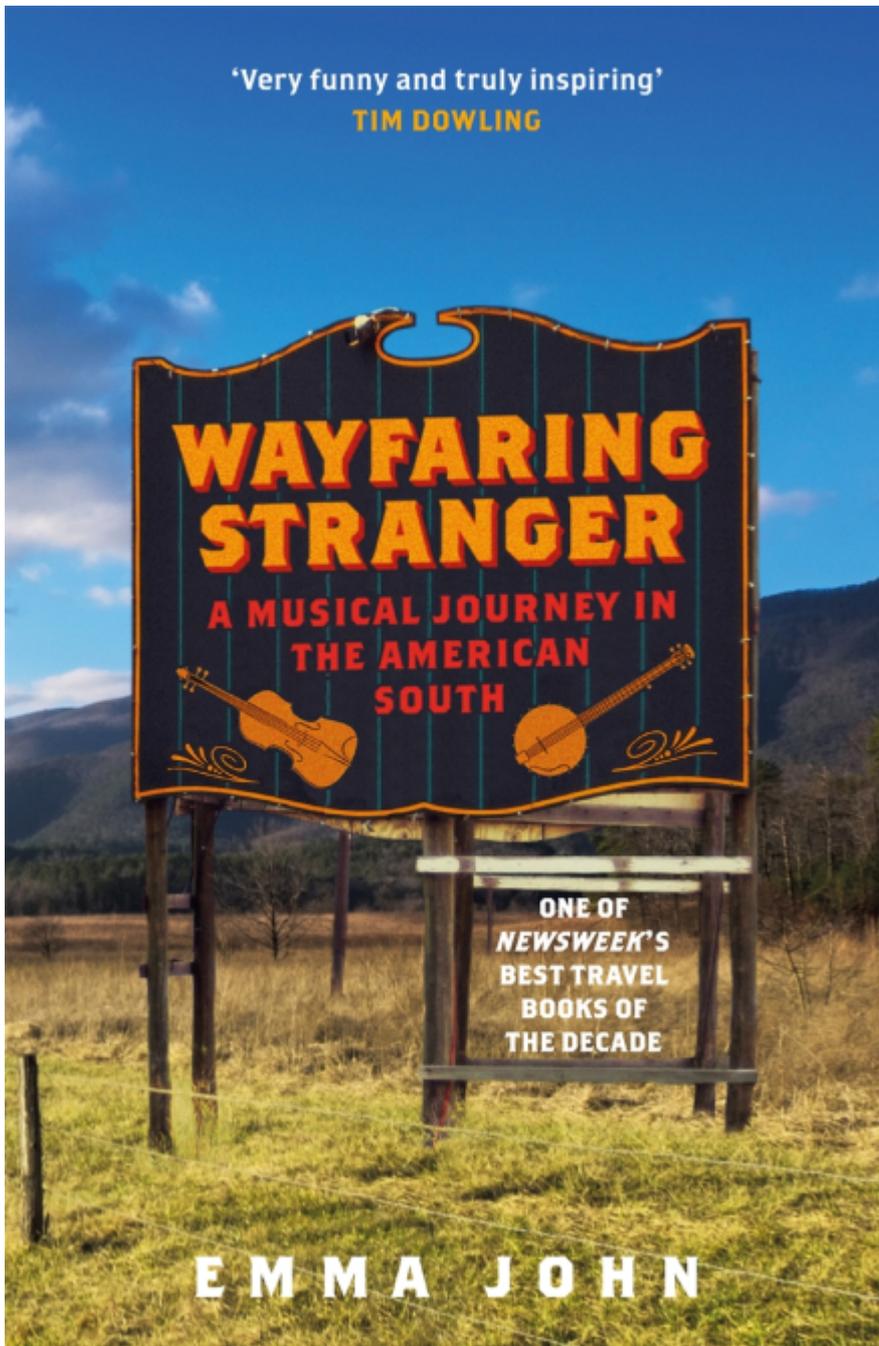


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John's candidness allows readers to experience her angst, her insecurity, and even her English audacity in dropping herself into a Southern landscape that had only shown itself to her in movies like *Deliverance* and *The Chainsaw Massacre*. A Southerner might take offense to the author's uncensored thoughts and assumptions, especially her political views, but if we are all honest with ourselves and recognize and admit to our own biases, we appreciate her ability and willingness to completely share herself without a protective covering, something most of us long to do. And if you take offense, you miss John's whole purpose in her journey—and how so completely this Southern landscape filled with mountain people so unlike her and their music changed her:

"Fred and his wife, Doris, lived on a suburban street in a small town in the south of the state, not far from the city of Charlotte. Mailboxes stretched languorously down the road and each house nestled comfortably on a large apron-front of immaculately groomed, discreetly watered lawn. The longer I stayed with Fred and Doris, the less I wanted to leave. I took walks and drives in the North Carolina countryside; I joined in with the routines of their small-town life. The change of pace was an unexpected relief; my usual restlessness fell away; I embraced my unproductivity. Some days I got no further than the porch. In the still, heavy heat, the backyard throbbed with color – purple coneflowers, tangerine lilies – and an occasional breeze stirred up the scent of honeysuckle."
(John, 2019)



Emma John
Author

John does leave the lovely North Carolina home of Fred and Doris, but it is too late. Bluegrass has beguiled her. It was, in her own words, “music that showed off; it scratched an exhibitionist itch.” She had started violin lessons at age four, but by age 21, she was through with the instrument and had no interest in music ...at all. Until bluegrass. Emma John returns to the Appalachian Mountains. And this time ...she would become a fiddler.

Here, John's transformation begins, in Boone, N.C., where this classical violinist and her 300-year-old violin learn the rules of bluegrass jamming, where she tosses sheet music and learns how to improvise by ear, where she spends nights at bluegrass jams, and travels to bluegrass festivals and events in North Carolina, Kentucky, Indiana, Virginia, and Tennessee. Alongside John, readers from around the world learn about bluegrass music and the legends—Bill Monroe, Ralph Stanley, Flatt & Scruggs, Jim and Jesse—who first brought the harmonic lyrics of cheatin', drinkin', killin', the homeplace, and trains to our ears.

John's emotive portrayal of the Southern landscape and its people urge us to remove our heavily guarded walls with which we so fiercely protect our proud Southern culture and ...listen. If you do, you'll admire this well-educated, independent, successful writer, and sassy Briton who exposes without shame her self-doubt and musical ineptness against those improvising bluegrass jammers who thrive effortlessly on every lightning note. Like John in her bluegrass journey, you will enter these pages as a stranger, but you'll leave as Emma John's old friend.

In short, we highly recommend *Wayfaring Stranger: A Musical Journey in the American South*, not only for your reading pleasure but for a journey you will likely never forget.

Reference:

Quotes from: John, E. *Wayfaring Stranger: A Musical Journey in the American South*. 2019, May 30. Weidenfeld & Nicholson, Publisher

Emma John photo by Justin John Doherty