

# RULES OF THE ROAD

Marc Leverton steps back into the 1970s with Bristol author Mike Manson...

Travel classics from *Treasure Island*, *Robinson Crusoe* to the Romantics all have connections to Bristol. Sawdays Publishing maintains that travel link today. The city itself is also shaped by travel; the docks, the railway, the suspension bridge and the M32 leave indelible marks the city.

Mike Manson's new novel *Rules of the Road*, builds on this fine tradition with the comic tale of two student dossers who hitch to Greece one summer in search of sun, sea and free love. Set in 1975 the novel is a reminder of how so much has changed in Europe – the end of the Cold War transformed the political and economic landscape, EasyJet and the Chunnel cut the physical distances and communications reduce the sense of distance and create a common culture.

"I wanted to write a book that was a ripping yarn, and the journey is a way of doing that," says Mike over his coffee. "So the idea was to have a journey, a chase, and arrival. Then the themes evolved as I wrote".

This is Mike's second novel, his debut *Where's My Money?* is set in a Bristol dole office and also drew upon the 1970s for inspiration. Does he have a preoccupation with the decade that style forgot? "I have just been reading Amis and he says that when you turn 50 a treasury of memories opens, which are very vivid in your mind. The period when I was busy bringing up the kids and building a career I remember almost nothing of. But when you are in your early 20s everything is new and up for grabs. There is also a lot of humour to be had from the 1970s."

The feel of social change is also apparent in the lives of the two main characters in the book Felix and Boz. Student friends who live in a house earmarked for slum clearance, "I was going for that Withnail and I feel," says Mike.

"During that period there was so much change in the air. Ranging from urban clearance for expressways like the M32 to issues like the Vietnam War. Plus we had a student grant, the pill, there was no HIV. In many ways we were a blessed generation, the whole world had opened up suddenly and I wanted to capture that spirit."

The students set off on their great trip with the innocence and naivety of youth. In a pre-internet age before budget travel the relatively short distance to Greece seems much further. This sense of adventure and innocence is illustrated best by the hitch-hiking adventures which form the characters' comically surreal 'rules of the road'. For example; Rule 1 'You only get a lift where there are cars' Rule 3 'Hitch at the bottom of a hill, that way you look smaller'. The rules range from the bleeding obvious to the faintly ridiculous.

"Flying was prohibitively expensive for young people, so you would travel by bus for three days, like The Magic Bus which took scores of hippies through Europe. But you got there really cheaply. Otherwise there was hitching which could open up fantastic adventures. Basically if you looked freaky, only freaky people would pick you up."

The novel also reminds us that the way in which we travel has changed – mobile phones and the internet mean it is harder

for us to leave home behind. A fact which Mike laments.

"I used to love that you were totally focused on where you were, you were totally in the present. Now you can email and call back home so easily that your mind never has the chance to leave. Home is often too accessible."

Researching this by-gone Europe the author set off on a trip with his partner to Albania, a place he describes 'as damaged and old school'. Leaving from Montpellier train station the pair left without a map, guide book or a mobile phone. Although he does admit they did have to compromise in Dubrovnik and buy a map.

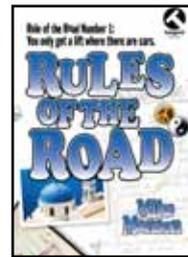
Perhaps more than anything *Rules of the Road* is also about the relationship between the young travelling companions Felix and Boz. Often awkward, the pair make an unlikely duo.

"I don't like the term 'bromance' but I do like the Jack Kerouac/Neal Cassady friendship idea of having a buddy to share things with... you never get that later in life," says Mike whistfully. "Also, I wanted the characters to learn from each other, and there was a real contrast in them in being Northerner and Southerner."

It is easy to be cynical about young people's gap years which seem to be almost obligatory today, but it's worth remembering that travel was a foundation stone in Timothy Leary's counter culture manifesto of 'tuning in, turning on and dropping out'. A concept which itself was hugely influenced by the writers of the Beat generation.

A link can also be drawn between the alternative lifestyles of the beats, the hippies and the birth of the environmental movement. But Mike feels this search may go back even further, "Coleridge was interested in alternative communities, writers and artists have always been searching for another way of doing things. But every generation always thinks they are the first ones to do it of course."

The book's serious backdrop is offset by the hapless pair blundering their way through the hippy dream. And with a surreal humour which is illustrated by the reoccurrence of pies which also appear in his first novel. "I think pies are just intrinsically funny" he chuckles. "Think of Desperate Dan's cow pies... actually, I am just courting sponsorship from Pieminister". ■



*Rules of the Road* by Mike Manson is published by Tangent Books, £8.95, and is available from [www.tangentbooks.co.uk](http://www.tangentbooks.co.uk)

## MIKE MANSON

Mike Manson is a historian, novelist and publisher. His books include *Bristol Beyond the Bridge and Riot!* (Past & Present Press), *The Hidden History of St Andrews*, the anthologies *Shedfest* and *Hidden Bristol* and his first novel *Where's My Money?* (Tangent Books)