

# SUNDAY Books

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## ON THE SHELVES

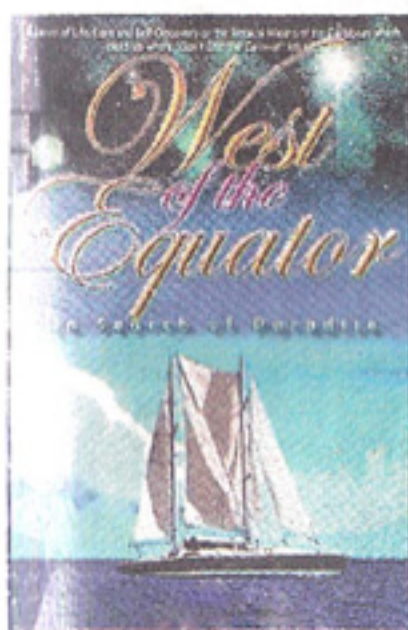
### "I Feel Bad About My Neck"

NORA EPHRON

A witty look at aging from a novelist and screenwriter ("When Harry Met Sally").

Best-Sellers List .....D5  
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## REVIEW



WEST OF THE EQUATOR: In Search of Paradise

Fiction

# Author and protagonist lost at sea

By LIN ROLENS  
NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

Paradise is a concept that changes from culture to culture, generation to generation, individual to individual. Whatever and wherever we think it might be, we yearn for it, seek it.

The author chased after paradise for years, including a stint as captain of her own charter boat in St. Maarten, Netherlands Antilles. She brings to her novel firsthand knowledge of the places and people she writes about, and when she settles in to write about sailing, in all weathers, she does very well. Unfortunately, this is only a small part of a satirical novel, desperately in need of an editor, that might have been trimmed and reshaped to good effect.

The story is nominally told by Ian, a guardian angel/spirit guide for Rob, the hapless protagonist. Ian is effectively useless and lets his charge ramble into a series of foolish and nearly deadly misadventures. Ian inserts himself into the text just about the time you've forgotten about him, generally to spout a bit of new age wisdom or Jimmy Buffetisms about wisdom or paradise. Ian makes himself useful once, at precisely the right moment, but otherwise he is a gratuitous epicycle in the rickety universe of this novel.

Rob is a young Chicago stock trader from a dysfunctional, middle-class, Midwestern family who has stumbled into what seems the perfect life: BMW, lovely condo, large savings account, wealthy and bosomy fiancée, and the respect and envy of his fellow traders.

But of course, this is all window dressing, and in his heart Rob knows there must be more; he bolts for a week's getaway on a friend's 75-foot yacht in Antigua. In a carefully planned development, the friend sells half the boat to a deeply drunken Rob for a cool half-million dollars and then bolts for parts unknown.

Stuck with a trim and wary female captain, the neophyte owner tries to make the best of the situation. He knows nothing and is essentially useless, except for the increasingly difficult-to-come-by infusions of cash that will prove vital as the story spirals into disarray. Captain Alex knows sailing, the island style and culture, and the boat; she quickly realizes that her new boss can be trusted with almost no tools, and she learns the hard way that he has difficulty remembering the difference between starboard and port. He is, of course, attractive anyway, and the two wounded souls begin an oblique courtship full of misadventures that range from a visit from his angry, born-to-shop fiancée, to being thrown in the slammer for possession of sage tea, to life-threatening injuries from bullet wounds, to outrunning storms. Also, of course, almost everyone lives happily ever after, having discovered that

Please see **ROLENS** on D7

## Too many footnotes and spelling errors

### ROLENS

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paradise is an inside job that neither money nor palm trees can make real.

This book is plagued by spelling errors, which in publishing is the equivalent of walking down the aisle with gravy spots on your wedding dress. The author includes dozens of footnotes; many of these are nautical terms (some of which are common knowledge), a few are cute, but many are simply insulting as they assume stunning ignorance on the reader's part. She feels compelled to add explanatory footnotes for the Carib Indians, catamaran, University of Chicago, Grenada, squall, reincarnation and many other such terms. Worse, the publisher has allowed a line of

regular text to fall below footnotes in a large chunk of the book, a technical error of remarkable indifference.

Humor should look effortless, but the humor here very often feels forced. The author tries to infuse her book with new age spiritual advice, all manner of pratfalls, sailing adventures, criminal heavies, surrogate parents, the hurricane of the century, real and faux drug dealers, corrupt locals, corrupt officials, dengue fever, boat crashes, the fiancée from hell, bad parents, a pet goat, spiritual and literal orphans, true love, high school reunions, cornfields and more.

The book is somehow enthusiastically smug and exhausting and rarely as funny as the author hopes; paradise it's not.

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