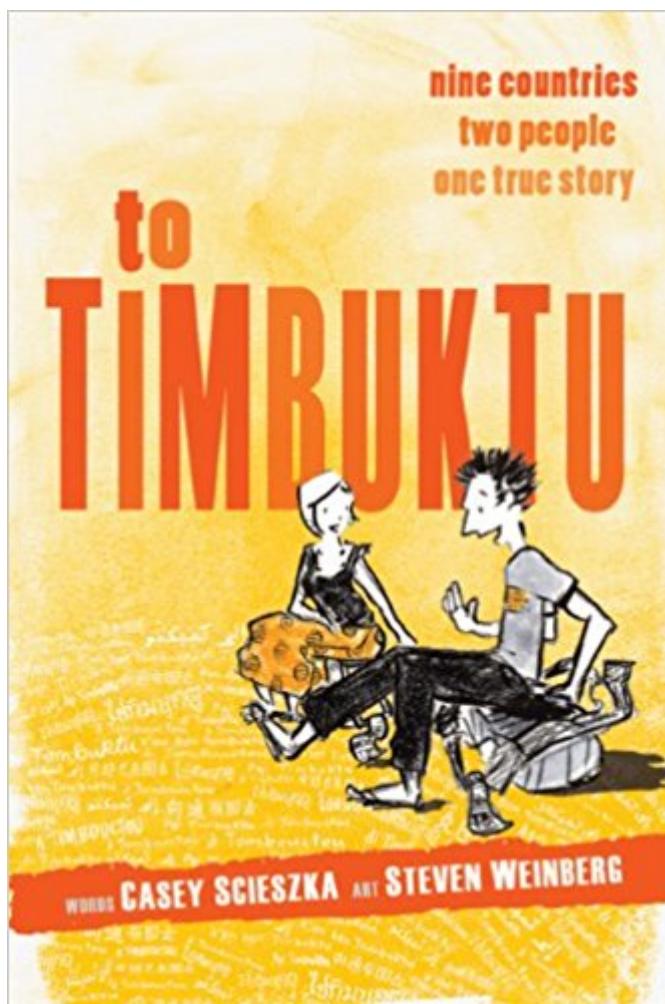


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# To Timbuktu: Nine Countries, Two People, One True Story



## Synopsis

Casey and Steven met in Morocco, moved to China then went all the way to Timbuktu. This illustrated travel memoir tells the story of their first two years out of college spent teaching English, making friends across language barriers, researching, painting, and learning to be themselves wherever they are.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The author and illustrator of this unique travelogue met and sparked a relationship while studying abroad in Morocco their junior year, and after finishing college, they found that they shared three postgraduation goals: One: get out of the country. Two: pursue our creative interests (visual art for him, writing for me). And three: be together. This title documents their two-year international jaunt teaching English in China; traveling through Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam; and, finally, living in Mali, where Scieszka studied the role of Islam in education on a Fulbright grant. Nearly every page is split between Scieszka's cheery narration and Weinberg's charcoal cartoon drawings, which capture slice-of-life vignettes and depict the many people they met along the way. The couple's experiences can run together into a sort of And then . . . and then . . . style of travelers who are careful to recount every adventure and insight but rarely get too deep into any one. For teens itching to get out into the world, though, this is a great road map, and Casey and Steven make for eminently pleasant traveling companions. Grades 9-12. --Ian Chipman

Casey and Steven met and sparked a relationship while studying abroad in Morocco their junior

year, and after finishing college, they found that they shared three postgraduation goals: "One: get out of the country. Two: pursue our creative interests (visual art for him, writing for me). And three: be together." This unique travelogue documents their two-year international jaunt teaching English in China; traveling through Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam; and, finally, living in Mali, where Casey studied the role of Islam in education on a Fulbright grant. Nearly every page is split between Casey's cheery narration and Steven's charcoal cartoon drawings, which capture slice-of-life vignettes and depict the many people they met along the way. The couple's experiences can run together into a sort of "And then . . . and then . . ." style of travelers who are careful to recount every adventure and insight but rarely get too deep into any one. For teens itching to get out into the world, this is a road map, and Casey and Steven make for eminently pleasant traveling companions. • Booklist • Heading into adulthood from the younger end of *Eat, Pray, Love* territory, two young college grads with itchy feet take most of a double wanderjahr to test their coupledom overseas. In quick, good-humored black-and-white sketches that occupy at least half of nearly every page, Weinberg not only evokes a sense of place in depicting apartments and street scenes but displays an unusual ability to capture fleeting expressions, poses and the emotional tenor of momentary encounters. The two build funds of self-confidence teaching English to children in Beijing, dawdle their way through Southeast Asia, then settle in Mali for most of a year for a Fulbright-funded research project. Occasional brushes with police, illness and hostile locals or disenchanted fellow travelers aside, Scieszka maintains an upbeat tone in her episodic, present-tense travelogue--noting the destructive effects of politics, poverty and tourism but focusing on the pleasures of new friends, new foods, adapting to local conditions, being grownups ("It's liberating! It's full of pressure") and finding reasons to get "out of bed on the other side of the world even when it's raining, you haven't made any friends yet and you've got the travel shits like whoa." Newly fledged adults (and even those with plenty of mileage under their wings) will find both entertainment and perhaps a dollop of inspiration. • Kirkus Reviews • Fusing travelogue and personal exploration, this entertaining chronicle covers the nearly two-year odyssey debut talents Scieszka (daughter of Jon) and Weinberg embarked on after graduating from college in 2006. Their goals? "One: get out of the country. Two: pursue our creative interests.... And three: be together." After a six-month stint in Beijing teaching English, the couple journeyed to Shanghai, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand before landing in Mali, where Scieszka (with a Fulbright grant) researched the role of Islam in the educational system. Impressively witty, perceptive, and candid, Scieszka's present-tense narrative catapults readers into each setting, as do Weinberg's fluid cartoon sketches, seamlessly incorporated into every page. The author introduces the various countries with clever

q&as ("[M]ake sure you check out my Mae Kong River parties," advises a personified Laos) and explores each nation's language, politics, traditions, and food. Yet at the heart of the book are the friendships that Scieszka and Weinberg forge, as well as their own maturing relationship. Come grad season, skip *Oh, the Places You'll Go!*--this will be far better appreciated, with its effortless mix of globe-trotting adventure, romance, humor, and expanding self-knowledge. Ages 14-up. •

• Publishers Weekly, Starred Review

This was by far one of my favorite books of the year. Scieszka's distinct voice and Weinberg's artistic style was a compelling combination. When I first picked it up, I worried it would be yet another travel story with little unique value. What I found was the opposite; its unlike anything you'll read, with the perfect balance of humor, cultural insights, and a look at the one-of-a-kind relationship between Scieszka and Weinberg. I highly recommend it.

Scieszka's elegant, but playful prose and Weinberg's humorous illustrations invite the reader to take part in two of life's greatest adventures: falling in love and figuring out for yourself just what life has in store for you. The story takes place across a myriad of settings and situations, all brought to life with clever illustrations and a poetic writing style which will transport you around the world as the story's protagonists explore new places, befriend a host of colorful characters, and settle into a new relationship and life after college. "To Timbuktu" is an exquisite piece of storytelling which all audiences are sure to enjoy.

As an English/social studies teacher this book was a great buy! I shared excerpts with my students and passed it on to other teachers. We were thrilled to hear that this is Jon Scieszka's daughter--good writing runs in the family, and yes, Jon is mentioned in the tale. You will feel like you are traveling with Casey & Steven. Don't let the number of pages psych out your kids; it reads fast with Steven's fun drawings.

Upon glimpsing the cover of *TO TIMBUKTU*, one feels compelled to immediately flip through the pages to discover what the book is about. Don't get me wrong, I'm not encouraging anyone to spoil an amazing story. I'm just saying it's impossible not to glance at the incredible artwork before you read. The caption on the cover says it all: "WORDS: Casey Scieszka ART: Steven Weinberg." Words and art: what a way to show the simple beauty of a travel story created by artists. The author of *TO TIMBUKTU* is the daughter of famous children's author Jon Scieszka, and she's quite good.

Illustrator Steven Weinberg (her boyfriend) has filled their memoir with charcoal drawings --- classic cartoon art after my own heart, similar to "Calvin and Hobbes." Needless to say, he is an illustrator with substantial gifts, and because the two are a real-life couple, they've managed to pair their writing and drawings perfectly, matching every scene with a picture that illuminates and gives the story life. The word-art combinations are laugh-out-loud funny and make the book one you'll want to buy and keep. After meeting in Morocco, these two twenty-somethings decide to go one step further and explore the world together while getting used to each other. Not inclined to cut things short or delay their relationship for years, they endeavor to see the world before deciding what to do with their careers and their hearts. After finalizing collegiate experiences, they pursue foreign exchange, a program typically managed by means of a government grant. Grantors require something substantial of their American "ambassadors," so Scieszka and Weinberg submit individual goals and expectations and then receive approval, followed by a voyage to the Far East and then into undeveloped Africa. Their first stop is China --- one place Scieszka has already seen --- and so, with little knowledge of the native dialects and cross-cultural expectations, they accept teaching jobs, becoming instant instructors to a large number of Chinese children of varying ages. After an overwhelmingly positive experience, they next venture to Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Morocco --- and, of course, make a special stop at Timbuktu. (As long as you're going third-world, why not go all the way?) The couple's combined experiences take them to strange and desolate places, making the expedition difficult in unanticipated ways. Africa proves a more challenging place to live than the Far East, yet they express little surprise in discovering how natural it feels to be a Westerner in remote parts of the world. Needless to say, Scieszka and Weinberg are both adventurous people with an admirable approach. They are fearless, multi-lingual, get-out-and-go types, each with considerable drive and determination to tackle experiences with enthusiasm and a positive outlook. They also show limited bias in adapting to different regions that are dissimilar in dialect and cultural expectations. The food, described in much detail, is equally dissimilar wherever they go. Contrary to popular belief, Scieszka reports, the Far East has limited areas where there are actually hanging dog carcasses in the markets --- but there are some. Of greatest concern are the difficult religious and social expectations of certain people, and also the dangers posed to foreigners, particularly to Americans. The couple must work through obstacles to stay their planned time. Living as locals, they encounter language barriers, mysterious illnesses, shocking hygiene standards, delectable and sickening foods, seedy black markets, hazardous mopeds, serious scares, and --- yes --- the unfortunate, very frightening experience of being forcibly taken into custody by the African police. Overall, their expedition is impressive and continually

comical, an experience that screams "go out and find your own adventure." This is a bright story about appreciating different people and places. The writing and art are impressive, making it possible for the reader to be transported. I was also happy to discover that the government-funded venture was not a waste of money. With worthy goals and an idealistic approach, two humanitarians set off to leave each place better than they found it, and this they did. Since returning to the States, Scieszka and Weinberg have dedicated themselves to aiding third-world countries and all of the bright, kind-hearted folks they got to know around the world. You'll be sure to love *TO TIMBUKTU*, regardless of your age or background. It is my favorite book of the year thus far. --- Reviewed by Melanie Smith

The author of *To Timbuktu* is the daughter of famous children's author Jon Scieszka, and she's quite good. Illustrator Steven Weinberg (her boyfriend) has filled the memoir with charcoal drawings--classic cartoon art similar to *Calvin and Hobbes*. He is an illustrator with substantial gifts, and because the two are a real-life couple, they've managed to pair their writing and drawings perfectly, matching every scene with a picture that illuminates and gives the story life. The word-art combinations are laugh-out-loud funny and make the book one you'll want to buy and keep. After meeting in Morocco, these two twenty-somethings decide to go one step further and explore the world together while getting used to each other. Not inclined to cut things short or delay their relationship for years, they endeavor to see the world before deciding what to do with their careers and their hearts. After finalizing collegiate experiences, they pursue foreign exchange, a program typically managed by means of a government grant. Grantors require something substantial of their American "ambassadors," so Scieszka and Weinberg submit individual goals and expectations and then receive approval, followed by a voyage to the Far East and then into undeveloped Africa. Their first stop is China--one place Scieszka has already seen--and so, with little knowledge of the native dialects and cross-cultural expectations, they accept teaching jobs, becoming instant instructors to a large number of Chinese children of varying ages. After an overwhelmingly positive experience, they next venture to Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Morocco--and, of course, a special stop in Timbuktu. The couple's combined experiences take them to strange and desolate places, making the expedition difficult in unanticipated ways. Africa proves a more challenging place to live than the Far East, yet they express little surprise in discovering how natural it feels to be a Westerner in remote parts of the world. Scieszka and Weinberg are both adventurous people with an admirable approach. They are fearless, multilingual, get-out-and-go types, each with considerable drive and determination to tackle experiences with enthusiasm and a positive outlook. They also

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