



## ***Hav* by Jan Morris**

Continuing with my red-spined NYRB Classics, I'm halfway through *Hav* by Jan Morris. This is a work of fake travel-writing. It's beautifully done. I wish I could visit Hav. If I had done more traveling myself, I'm sure this fake place would seem eerily familiar and the wry humor she brings to her descriptive language of the people and places of Hav would produce outright laughter instead of simply grins. It's also elegiac, and I find myself in mourning, just a little, for a place that never existed. How weird is that?

For what it's worth, while I was looking up other work by Morris, I discovered that she wrote a work called *Conundrum* that is the story of her transition from James Morris to Jan. I have not read *Conundrum*, and I don't think anyone has a perfect claim on understanding just what comprises a feminine voice, as opposed to a masculine voice, in writing. But from the beginning of this book I was struck by the unusual combination of physical detail, the sense of secret history, a clear love of architecture and design, the male-seeming attention to military rank and uniform, and hierarchy and power and authority in the characters, but also to the details of women's dresses, interior decorating, and a sensibility that constantly delights in describing light, colors, textures, and flavors.

Is it possible that, because the author presented herself at different times in her life, and so interacted with others as, both a man and a woman, her perspective on an imaginary place is somehow wider? Maybe that's just something I've retroactively imagined. In any case, I mean it only admiringly. It seems fitting that the author of such an extraordinary story had an extraordinary life story herself.

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