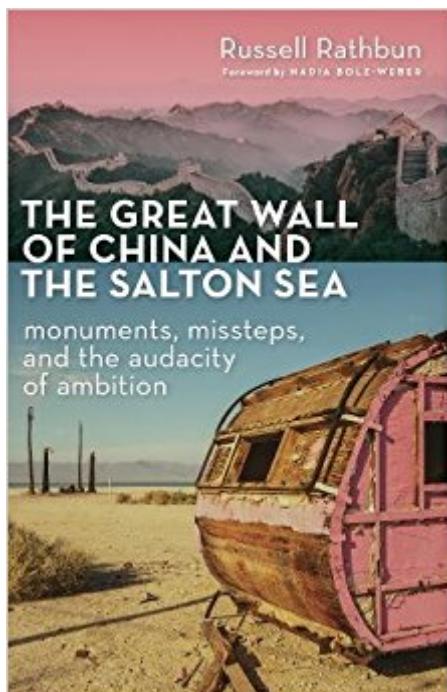


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# The Great Wall Of China And The Salton Sea: Monuments, Missteps, And The Audacity Of Ambition



## Synopsis

We've been building and making things ever since we stumbled out of Paradise. Some of those things are incredible continuations of God's creation, while others are nothing but ambitious catastrophes. We continue making, says Russell Rathbun, but we've lost ourselves in the process. So how do we find ourselves again? •rebuild our connections to each other, the earth, maybe even God? In search of an answer, Rathbun drives cross-country to the Salton Sea and takes a trip to China's Great Wall, interspersing his traveling revelations with engaging musings on Madame Mao's Gang of Four, Grandpa Webb's family secret, the Great Flood and the Tower of Babel, and a host of other subjects that grab his attention. With cheeky wit and sharp insight, Rathbun uncovers a way of finding ourselves and the deep connections we long for in an increasingly complex world.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Gordon Gano's "Violent Femmes" "The Great Wall of China and the Salton Sea" is filled with things I never before had the pleasure of knowing or thinking about. I really like this book!"Publishers Weekly "An explication of the mundane inside notions of the colossal or the grand, and a model of how to truly live and appreciate the world. Rathbun's eclectic book will be enjoyed by a wide readership of seekers."Debbie Blue's "Consider the Birds" "Because Russell Rathbun clearly loves the human race even as he hilariously unravels tales of our folly, you'll come out of this book feeling more hopeful than you thought possible in the throes of environmental crisis and the reign of the machine. In Rathbun's deft and observant

meditations, mercy always wins."Morgan Meis — a contributor to the *New Yorker* "I want to read everything Russell Rathbun has written—he's funny and honest and attuned to the tragic and to the absurd. His prose has made me laugh out loud, and it has made me cry. I cannot recommend *The Great Wall of China and the Salton Sea* more highly."Nadia Bolz-Weber — from the foreword "The way [Rathbun] plays with the Flood and the Tower of Babel stories from Genesis in this book is brilliant. . . . This book will change the way you understand these stories in history, and in the Bible, and most importantly, in the story we're living now."

Russell Rathbun is a writer, speaker, and blogger who brings his irreverent sense of humor and curiosity to often-overlooked subjects. A founding pastor of House of Mercy in Saint Paul, Minnesota (once named "the Best Church for Non-Churchgoers"), he has been regularly featured on Minnesota Public Radio and is also the author of *Post-Rapture Radio*.

I like the flow of Mr. Rathbun's writing style - an unpretentious personal, thoughtful read! A book I would definitely recommend!

Thought it so interesting and informative and loved the humorous observations woven throughout the text and the interesting insights describing onset of the digital age.

A thoroughly thought provoking, funny, inspiring, tragic, and fun read. Rathbun takes the reader along his sacred journeys to the California desert and the congested streets of China in an effort to better understand human beings greed, desires, wants, and compulsions. Throughout reading this book, I was reminded of my need for God's radical love, mercy, and compassion, and my need to extend that mercy and love to people throughout history and our world. Because in the end we are all searching for meaning, understanding, and connection in our own floundering, often failed ways.

I know about the Great Wall of China. I have read about astronauts saying that the only visible man-made object from space is the Great Wall. What about the Salton Sea? What is the Salton Sea? What makes these two objects so fascinating for the author? He sums it up as follows:"There are only two man-made objects you can see from outer space. One is the Great Wall of China, and the other is the Salton Sea. One is the result of the work of hundreds of thousands of laborers over two thousand years, and the other is the result of a gigantic mistake."For over twenty years, these sentences have occupied the author's mind. The key thought revolves around God's creation and

man's folly. God creates man and desires for him to have fellowship, but man bungled it big time. In the process, there is alienation. There is lostness. There is illusion. There are big messes throughout history, and messes that continue to occur. Both the Great Wall of China and the state of the Salton Sea were man-made. The Great Wall was built to prevent invaders from entering China. The Salton Sea was created by accident. The Salton Sea was a result of a failure of a project that tried to irrigate desert lands by re-directing water from the Colorado River. Both failed to achieve the original purposes. Looking from space, while both man-made structures and accidents are visible from the sky, they symbolize the mistakes and vulnerabilities of human intelligence. Moving forward, Rathbun poses a modern dilemma about our technological world: Have we allowed technology to reform us into an image we do not yet recognize? Does the Digital Revolution offer more hype than promise? Are we re-inventing the wheel of disaster? In the tone of "midrash" language, Rathbun invites us to meander along with him as he looks at the paradox of life. Gradually, he moves from seeing earth to seeing oneself and self-examination. That is not all. He moves on to ponder upon creation, the beginning of time as described in Genesis, and wonder about how God sees us. Perspective is key. This is only possible with separation, alienation, and distancing. Yet, with separation, we are reminded that we too are distant from God. The follies of man-made structures and disasters are not isolated from our sinful condition due to our separation from God. The audacity of ambition is clear from these great projects that never hit their intended purposes. On and on, every chapter reeks with observations about the Great Wall and the Salton Sea. Rathbun thinks about China and wanting to make a trip to China so as to see the Chinese country up close and personal. There are lots of movements throughout the book. Movements of time where readers are given a snapshot of the present before being ushered into the historical trail. Movements of reality and spirituality, where Rathbun uses the visible scenes as a launchpad to reflect on biblical narratives, especially the books of the Torah. Movements of humour to see how the wisdom of man becomes trashed and the unintended consequences of the best plans of people. Movements of seismic changes in society from the Industrial Revolution to the Digital Revolution. Movements of the present to the future, and back to the past. The author reads this book using at least three types of lenses. He uses the telescopic approach to see the big picture of the creation of people. He uses the microscopic approach to see life up close and personal. He uses the reflective lenses to shine back truths about us being expressed in the world. All of these never escape the watching eyes of God. The whole book is like a modern lament as Rathbun elevates the vanity of human achievements. He notes the era of lament in the prophets written during the exilic times, and points us to the need to lament in our days as we live as if we are still in exile. We are separated from God.

We are lost people trying to find meaning, significance, and our purpose. Perhaps, the observations and thoughts that Rathbun experience will trigger off lots of reflections in readers that life is deeper and more profound than what our eyes can see. It takes a conscientious individual to notice the ordinary things in life. It takes the sensitive soul to meander back to God. The best thing about this book is this: Our perspective of the world will be broadened beyond science, human structures, technological achievements, and all things created. Hopefully, readers will find this book a springboard to do the same for other "Great Walls" and "Salton Seas." Russell Rathbun is founding minister of House of Mercy Church in St Paul, Minnesota. Rating: 4.75 stars of 5. conrade This book has been provided courtesy of William B. Eerdmans and NetGalley without requiring a positive review. All opinions offered above are mine unless otherwise stated or implied.

I loved this book! The juxtaposition of historical, personal, biblical and current events create such a fascinating overall story, that I could not put it down. The author has a very cool way of bringing you into to his inner dialogue with some big issues. For me, his writing opens up in a way that I could relate on a personal level, which made me want to explore and consider more on these subjects I realize I knew little to nothing about. And in the the same beat, being totally relevant to the times we find ourselves in today. A must read!!

Hard to put down. An important book for our time--full of illuminating, witty, and awe inspiring historical reflections on human empire building and its environmental and human ruins. A cautionary tale to be sure--but maybe more a guidebook for navigating treacherous times as a human among humans on a fragile earth.

I love a book that simultaneously does these things: makes me laugh out loud (the story of visiting an internet cafe in China, the references to Sarah Vowell as the author's role model for comedic-tragic history researching); teaches me a lot I didn't already know or understand (the witty and digestible summary of modern Chinese political history, the genesis of the Salton Sea as told through various interpreters); and stops me in my tracks to consider historical events as an all-too-relevant backdrop to our current realities. Thank you for getting this all in one!

Russell Rathbun ponders God's command to humans to 'be fruitful and multiply and have dominion' over the earth. Tragically, human ambition and audacity have not always produced wonderful results, and Russell explores a number of examples, including the Tower of Babel, a short but

widely known story which Russell suggests might be one of the (probably many) occasions when God is alarmed by the activities of his human creations. His main examples of human ambition and folly are the Great Wall of China and the engineering and environmental disaster that is the Salton Sea of southern California, both of which are said to be the manmade objects "viewable from outer space." This book ranges widely over biblical ideas, the environment, Russell's own family, the alienation of contemporary life, technology, and, warming my heart, librarians. His writing is quirky and personal and very funny, but always with a vulnerability and intelligence that makes it very rewarding.

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