

## FIELDWORK . . . WITH FAMILY

PAUL F. STARRS,  
with  
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and  
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*The chestnut trees are coated in prickly bobbles, so many that they look like flocks of greenfinches pausing to collect their strength, gathering in the branches ready for great migrations. The traveller is a sentimentalist. He stops his car and picks a spiky sweet chestnut as a simple reminder for many months to come. Now [that] it has dried out, it must be time for him to return and visit the great chestnut tree beside the main road, relishing again the bright morning air culminating in a definite rural promise of chestnuts.*

—José Saramago, 2000

*“What was this graft?” asked Johnny, with the impatience of the great public to whom tales are told.*

*“’Tis contrary to art and philosophy to give you the information,” said Keogh, calmly. “The art of narrative consists in concealing from your audience everything it wants to know until after you expose your favorite opinions on topics foreign to the subject. A good story is like a bitter pill with a sugar coating inside of it. I will begin, if you please, with a horoscope located in the Cherokee Nation; and end with a moral tune on the phonograph.”*

—O. Henry, 1904

No special susceptibility to vertigo is required to feel heart palpitations when two daughters top out the 297 spiral steps of a tower in the Alcázar of Segovia and immediately sprint pell-mell downslope across icy-wet Spanish slate tiles to the parapet, there to balance on their bellies, feet hoisted off the ground, ethereal dangles engaged in looking straight down. A mite grimly I follow, knowing that I’m going to get there, if more slowly and in great measure more carefully. Adrenaline rushes are, verily, one way to banish the traveling field-worker blues.

Fieldwork with family invokes a whole range of experiences. The comfort of worn field khakis, broken-in shoes, tested foreign-language skills, and a certainty that by oneself there’ll always be someplace to stay gives way to uncertainty and far more caution when three or four people are traveling together, especially when that total includes young kids. Inevitably there’s a mix of thrill and chill in going to the field. And let me promise, its brio never burbles faster than when family is along.

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