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Roads : Driving America's Great Highways

Larry McMurtry

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I wanted to drive the American roads at the century's end, to look at the country again, from border to border and beach to beach.... "From earliest boyhood the American road has been part of my life -- central to it, I would even say. The ranch house in which I spent my first seven years sits only a mile from highway 281, the long road that traverses the central plains, all the way from Manitoba to the Mexican border at McAllen, Texas. In winter I could hear the trucks crawling up 281 as I went to sleep. In summer I would sit on the front porch with my parents and grandparents, watching the lights of cars as they traveled up and down that road. We were thoroughly landlocked. I had no river to float on, to wonder about. Highway 281 was my river, its hidden reaches a mystery and an enticement. I began my life beside it and I want to drift down the entire length of it before I end this book. "Other than curiosity, there's no particular reason for these travels -- just the old desire to be on the move. My destination is also my route, my motive only an interest in having the nomad in me survive a little longer. I'm not attempting to take the national pulse, or even my own pulse. I doubt that I will be having folksy conversations with people I meet as I travel. Today, in fact, I drove 770 miles, from Duluth, Minnesota, to Wichita, Kansas, speaking only about twenty words: a thank-you at a Quik Stop south of Duluth, where I bought orange juice and doughnuts; a lunch order in Bethany, Missouri; and a request for a room once I got to Wichita.... "I intend to travel mainly on the great roads, the interstates: my routes will be the 10, the 40, the 70, 80, and 90; or if I'm in themood to go north-south, I will mostly use the 5, the 25, 35, 75. The 95 I intend to ignore. I will, from time to time, switch off the interstates onto smaller roads, but only if they provide useful connectives, or take me to interesting places that the great roads -- whose aim is to move you, not educate you -- don't yet go.... "Three passions have dominated my more than sixty years of mostly happy life: books, women, and the road. As age approaches, the appetite for long drives may leave me, which is why I want to get rolling now.... "The challenge of the solitary traveler is always the same: to find something "out there" that the reader will enjoy knowing about, or, at least, that the reader can be persuaded to read about. Usually, if there is no one but themselves in the narrative, the great travel writers rely on the extremes to which the environment forces them to produce the interest: Antarctica, and the failure of Scott to beat it, in Apsley Cherry-Garrard's "The Worst Journey in the World" or Arabia's Empty Quarter and the ability of the Bedouin to "just" beat it, in Wilfred Thesiger's "Arabian Sands." "I don't think I'm likely to encounter anything so extreme as the snows of Antarctica or the dunes of Arabia along the American interstates. At least I hope not. But I want to drive them anyway...just to see what I see. I merely want to write about the roads as I find them, starting in January of 1999, in Duluth, Minnesota, at the north end of the long and lonesome 35."-- LARRY McMURTRY

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