

Travel narratives are found in the earliest American literature across regions, in many genres, using several modes of transport. From pioneer diaries to science fiction, movement has been a central subject and theme of a national literature of exploration and self-discovery. The journey has been central to the mythic dimensions of the quest motif as well as an energizing force of literature of social protest. In this recurring fascination with pilgrimage, picaresque exploration, and the quest romance, the midwestern heartland has been crucial as both a central location and a defining state of mind. While most literary road trips move through several geographical regions, often portraying a cross-country trek, the highways through the heartland are in many books either the major setting of the story or the significant space through which travelers must pass on their way toward their destination.

Along the literary highways winding or zooming through the midwestern heartland, three major groupings have emerged. First, there are books by notable midwestern authors in which most or all of the experiences on the road occur in that region. Because the region is small compared to the wide expanse that beckons for the long trek, and because departures, arrivals, and reentries generally take place elsewhere, books set entirely in the heartland are rare. Second is a grouping of many more books in which the region is a prominent, though nowhere near dominant, setting. More important than mere location, these road narratives emphasize crucial midwestern subjects, themes, or views as major influences on the genre on the whole. Examples include Jack Kerouac's fascination with cornfields, Chicago blues, and the Iowa Pooh Bear in *On the Road* (1957) and Robert M. Pirsig's suggestion that midwestern "nowhereness" is a central ingredient in the American experience of Zen peacefulness (*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, 1974). Finally, a third grouping of books might be thought of as those in which the travelers are just "passing

through”—where the landscapes, people, and values of the heartland are important as a place and a literary theme, but the emphasis in the books overall is elsewhere.

In all three types of midwestern road narratives, the region stands for a place of wholesomeness, friendliness, and paradoxically meditative motion. It is often a place to slow down, to capture lost values and ways of life, and to regroup, recharge, and sort out the complexities of the quest. The Midwest is the literal and figurative place of intersection that recalls Walt Whitman’s “Song of the Open Road”:

I inhale great draughts of space,
The east and west are mine, and the north and south are mine.
I am larger, better than I thought,
I did not know I held so much goodness. (5.6–9)

Midwestern authors created literary road quests long before the invention of the automobile. Mark Twain relates what he calls “several years of variegated vagabondizing” in a famous stagecoach journey from Missouri to Nevada (*Roughing It*, 1872). He also created some of the most unforgettable river journeys of all time in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1865) and *Life on the Mississippi* (1883). (English author Jonathan Raban retraced Twain’s journeys down the Mississippi in *Old Glory: An American Voyage*, 1981). Other early road trips by Midwestern authors include Margaret Van Horn Dwight’s *A Journey to Ohio in 1810* (1912), L. Frank Baum’s famous *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), and Theodore Dreiser’s *A Hoosier Holiday* (1916), the first midwestern automobile road narrative.

More recently, several well-known road narratives by midwestern authors have emphasized the importance of place and celebrated the culture and values of the region. In *Blue Highways* (1982), William Least Heat-Moon begins his circular trip on the back roads of the country in Missouri. Though he circles the country following the coming of spring, Least Heat-Moon’s journey is ultimately inward. The road is

therapy, travel becomes a metaphor for an inner quest, and the highway is sacred space where true inquiry is at last possible. From Black Elk he learns the power of the circle, and from the Hopi evolution through four worlds he learns that “a human being’s grandest task is to keep from breaking with things outside himself” (Least Heat-Moon 186). What began as a quest for order becomes in *Blue Highways* something akin to Whitman’s lesson of reception. The culmination of his quest takes place in New Harmony, Indiana, where the Rappites’ labyrinth teaches him “the Harmonist concepts of the devious and the difficult approach to the state of true harmony” (411).

While the westward journey of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* begins in Minnesota and its midwestern setting is short-lived, the Zen-like meditation along the way is anchored in the acceptance of boredom and monotony that brings peace in the endless grass of the prairies. Pirsig’s quest is not only a travel narrative but a compendium of the history of Western philosophy. In his acceptance of “stuckness” (284) and embracing of a “preintellectual awareness” (272) that allows one to experience Quality, Pirsig’s midwestern values take him very far east: “The Buddha, the Godhead, resides quite as comfortably in the circuits of a digital computer or the gears of a cycle transmission as he does at the top of a mountain or in the petals of a flower. To think otherwise is to demean the Buddha—which is to demean oneself” (17). Several midwestern authors bring this same message to a range of audiences, as in the young-adult book *Grandpa and Frank* (1976), where Janet Majerus recounts the story of twelve-year-old Sarah, who engineers a plot to save her grandfather from the conspiracy planned by her Uncle Frank. Set on the roads from central Illinois to Chicago, Sarah’s escape includes her “borrowing” a pickup truck on a pilgrimage of love in this leapfrog-generation rescue.

Midwestern authors also create gentle parodies or ironic underminings of the quest itself. Charles Dickinson (*The Widows’ Adventures*, 1989) combines the highway quest with a bittersweet commentary on aging in America. Two sisters travel from Chicago to California to visit

relatives. Helene is blind and drives the car with the assistance of her sister, Ira, who cannot drive at all. They travel only between midnight and 4:00 a.m. at low speeds and on back roads. On this trip featuring “you and me bickering across America” (Dickinson 150), they bring 120 cans of beer and \$12,000 in twenty-dollar bills. The book also spends a good deal of time at the widows’ home in Chicago, where Dickinson critiques our culture’s willingness to take advantage of the elderly who try to continue living on their own.

“I come from Des Moines. Somebody had to” (3), quips Bill Bryson in the opening of *The Lost Continent: Travels in Small-Town America* (1989). As soon as he was old enough, Bryson moved to England so he could “*be* somewhere” (7; ital. in orig.). Years later, he returned to America’s Midwest—first to retrace his boyhood vacations, then in search of American popular-culture myths, and finally on a quest for the perfect small town. Subsequently, this transplanted midwesterner has written well over a dozen books, but in the end the Iowan finds staying away harder than he thought. “I could live here,” he concludes, and “for the first time in a long time,” he feels “serene” (299).

The most overly parodic road narrative by a midwestern author, Jim Harrison’s *A Good Day to Die* (1973), follows a group of disinherited antiheroes on their sacred cross-country quest to blow up a dam and save the Grand Canyon from destruction. Following the breakup of his marriage, the narrator travels with a Vietnam veteran named Tim and Tim’s girlfriend, Sylvia, on a wearying and unproductive pilgrimage. It does not matter that their quest fails; their tenacity becomes heroic existentialist angst that follows the conventions of the road quest while parodying them. The bittersweet resolve of Chief Joseph’s words “Take courage, this is a good day to die” (Harrison 139) advances the genre’s hopeful escapism to a new kind of optimism.

The nation’s heartland is also important as both mythology and an actual place, as well as a set of values and beliefs, in many significant road narratives by authors from outside the region. Midwestern prairies, plains, and small towns are prominent in the settings of many

novels. Creative nonfiction authors also spend considerable time traveling through and discussing the region. Many road quests feature cross-country treks in which the Midwest serves as a place for taking stock along a flat landscape that frees the mind for meditation. Often road protagonists enter the region the way pilgrims move into sacred space. For Kerouac in *On the Road*, the area is wild and lyrical; Pirsig recognizes a Zen contentment with “hereness and nowness” (5); Sissy Hankshaw in Tom Robbins’s *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1976) finds in the midwestern prairies the ultimate feminine embodiment of the life force. Common to such accounts is the recognition of a magical expansiveness and a unifying power in the landscape’s simplicity. In *Travels with Charley* (1962), John Steinbeck finds distinctive regional qualities he thought had vanished. Midwestern people are more open and outgoing than people elsewhere, he finds, as they exhibit an electrifying flow of energy. The people are generous and take their cues from a rich and beautiful countryside. He worries that speech rhythms and accents as well as distinctive regional values will become homogenized; against this dystopic vision, Steinbeck finds the Midwest a welcome corrective.

In *Roads* (2000), Larry McMurtry sets out on a nomadic exploration of movement on what he calls “the great roads, the interstates” (12), which have as their predecessors the network of rivers that long formed our nation’s arteries. “What I want to do,” he explains, “is treat the great roads as rivers, floating down this one, struggling up that one, writing about these river-roads as I find them, and now and then, perhaps, venturing a comment about the land beside the road” (19–20). McMurtry devotes one chapter and one winter month to a journey from Duluth, Minnesota, to Oklahoma City, and along that stretch, he philosophizes at length about the culture and values of the Midwest. McMurtry’s openness on things midwestern is varied and provocative. While he bemoans the erosion of family farms—“recent generations of midwestern farmers have to cope not only with the slow failure of their farms but with a sense that they have failed their ancestors as

well” (37)—he acknowledges that “the midwest symbolized by amber waves of grain and large solid families has rarely been the midwest I’ve found” (38). He concludes that midwesterners lead dull lives enlivened by shopping trips and that they are “compromisers” (40) who learn to be resigned to ordinariness and a less-than-exciting life. McMurtry says that in the Midwest, it is difficult to find much of the glamour that has become “part of the American promise” (39) and “longing for prettier things” (40) can even lead to murder. He cites a large number of midwesterners who “go postal,” or “blow one’s stack and murder as many people as possible.” This, he feels, is born of the frustration and repression found in a region that has become “the home, or at least the venting ground, for quite a few of our natural-born killers” (39).

Emphasized often in the midwestern leg of the road pilgrimage is the way seemingly infinite space is defined and punctuated by roadside sculpture, a phenomenon that Karal Ann Marling in *The Colossus of Roads* (1984) compares to the way the pilgrim’s shrine became “a stopping place in time, where the everyday rules of reality are suspended and idyllic dream commences” (101). In this grand scale and sweeping scope, the iconography of the colossus represents the frontier myth and the American dream. Because the East is too small for Paul Bunyan, the midwestern expanse becomes the ground on which to work out what Marling calls the American riddle of “how the finite individual can find his bearings in the infinite immensity of space” (6).

More than in any other road narrative, Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* expresses adulation for the sprawling landscape and heroic values found on the midwestern plains and prairies. Sitting in a gloomy hotel on the plains, narrator Sal Paradise finds that he is “halfway across America, at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future” (15). Alternately expansive and confining, life is slower and the roads faster, capturing what Ann Charters calls “the rhythm of the midwest” (82). Sal celebrates funky Chicago, the openness and expanse of Iowa and Nebraska, and, in Detroit once again, a convergence of the “strange Gray Myth of the West and the weird

dark Myth of the East” (Kerouac 245). In Omaha, Sal celebrates the residual values of the Western frontier, reenergized by “the wild, lyrical, drizzling air of Nebraska” (22). *On the Road* became a benchmark for the evolution of the American road narrative, and over the next half century, many road authors would pause a while in the heartland to take stock and reassess the direction of their quest.

Many road narratives intersect the midwestern landscape and culture only briefly, affirming nonetheless the significance of the region as a place and a network of symbols. In Mona Simpson’s *Anywhere but Here* (1987), Ann August and her mother, Adele, set out from Bay City, Wisconsin, to seek adventure and a better life in Hollywood. Adele wants to escape the suffocation of small-town life; she compulsively runs away from the fear that her daughter will become “a poor nothing girl in a factory town in the midwest” (350). In *This Is My Country, Too* (1965), an African American recasting of road conventions in the direction of the freedom quests found in the spirituals, slave narratives, and poetry of the black oral tradition, John A. Williams first drives in New England and then flies to Detroit, where he purchases a car for the trip south. William Saroyan starts out in London, Ontario, and travels to South Dakota in *Short Drive, Sweet Chariot* (1966), spending considerable time in the Midwest in this book about freedom and the psychological healing that is released in car talk and what he calls “the built-in listener” (42) in us all that brings us closer to “the healing of God” (43) while on the road. In *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* (1945), Henry Miller passes through a Midwest that epitomizes America’s monotonous fabric of life on his way to the Southwest, where “the secret of the American continent” is contained and “everything is hypnagogic, chthonian and super-celestial” (239). Finally, Dayton Duncan sets out from St. Louis in his retracing of the journeys of Lewis and Clark (*Out West*, 1987.) Duncan moves through the edges of the Midwest on a pilgrimage to stir up our settled past for reinterpretation and a regenerative act of healing. For Duncan, the lessons learned are a

corrective history lesson on the facts of our past and the mythologies we substitute for the realities we want to escape.

In addition to works by midwestern authors and adventures set in the Midwest, a considerable body of the literature of the American highway passes through the region in an almost tangential way. Charles Kuralt featured many Midwestern people and locales in his books and videos. Richard Reeves discusses the cementing over of the Saginaw Valley in Michigan in his *American Journey* (1982), a revisiting of Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont. Douglas Brinkley and his students include Springfield, Illinois, and Lawrence, Kansas, among the midwestern stops in *The Majic Bus* (1994). Duncan's re-tracing of Lewis and Clark begins in Saint Louis. Henry Miller touches down briefly in his rental car. Peter and Barbara Jenkins meander through the region in *Walk across America* (1979). Even L. Frank Baum gives Dorothy and Toto a famous chat about Kansas. From Whitman's "Song of the Open Road" to Twain's *Roughing It* (1872) and Lesley Hazleton's *Driving to Detroit* (1998), the Midwest achieves a modest and often indirect but significant place in the overall road-quest pattern. Even tangentially, the Midwest is a literal and symbolic place of great value in the lure of the open road.

Two midwestern authors epitomize the region's central place in the evolution of the American road narrative. In *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Pirsig equates the most admirable elements of "stuckness" and "Quality" with a midwestern peacefulness often found only in Buddhism. In *Blue Highways*, Least Heat-Moon circles around and through the region in an inner quest for harmony. Less peaceful quests, as in Harrison's *A Good Day to Die*, Bryson's *The Lost Continent*, and Dickinson's *The Widows' Adventures*, emphasize the midwestern landscape and values as pivotal in longer and more expressive journeys.

Among works by non-midwestern writers, Kerouac's *On the Road*, Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley*, and Saroyan's *Short Drive, Sweet Chariot* devote considerable time and emphasis to the region. This

emphasis is found in historical predecessors as well, from Whitman's "Song of the Open Road" to Twain's *Roughing It* and *Life on the Mississippi* and Dreiser's *A Hoosier Holiday*.

Most notable among books that pass through the region in meaningful ways are Williams's *This Is My Country, Too*, Douglas Brinkley's *The Majic Bus*, Hilma Wolitzer's *Hearts* (1980), Miller's *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, Mary Morris's *Nothing to Declare* (1988), Reeves's *American Journey*, Bill Moyers's *Listening to America* (1971), Anne Roiphe's *Long Division* (1972), and Charles Kuralt's *My Life on the Road* (1990).

Today, road stories traveling through the American heartland are more popular and significant than ever. Major book stores feature large displays of "travel narratives" located near but distinct from travel guides, maps, and road atlases. Most journeys are still undertaken not in groups but as a solitary escape from routine, an effort to clear one's head, or a quest for meaning in one's life. We find still many adventure tales reflecting the residual values of the frontier and the wanderlust that endures long after there appear to be clearly demarked places to go. Pilgrimages are still prominent; we go in search of personal identity, to seek or clarify a sense of national purpose, or to protest establishment values. The heroic quest now invites more diversity than ever as women and people of diverse ethnicities make their own space in what used to be the privileged terrain primarily of white males. Road literature is also expressed in as many media as ever, with poetry, road songs, film, the visual arts, the blues, and other forms of the oral tradition joining traditional nonfiction prose, road novels, electronic books, and hypertexts as the genre adapts to new readers and travelers. Through it all—in actual vehicles, mythologies, and states of mind—drivers and readers crisscross the nation as the American heartland holds anchor as a departure point, a rite of passage, and a residual mythology of values tied to the land.

The American road narrative is, most of all, absorbing storytelling about exploration and self-discovery. In the quest myth and the hero

journey, we see played out our long-standing negotiation between imperialism and exceptionalism. The former recalls a forced occupation of another's land and homes, a rejection of the robber barons old and new, countercultural protest against McCarthyism, jingoism, and the flight to the suburbs that began in the Eisenhower years—speaking out all the while against the dominant culture's efforts to normalize or naturalize itself to the disparagement of the Other. At the same time, many road quests look to validate manifest destiny, the theory of the elect and the exceptionalist privileging of a nation perceived to have been chosen as a model for how the rest of the world should live. Such paradoxical themes in the genre mirror the complexity of the American heartland, where conservative and activist values have flourished alongside each other and where the restless return seeking renewal, validation, and ongoing exploration.

Further Reading

Robert R. Hubach's *Early Midwestern Travel Narratives* (1961) is an indispensable record of diaries, journals, and other accounts of the frontier and early settlement periods in the Old Northwest Territory. Hubach's bibliographies, summaries, and interpretations are most helpful. My own work *Romance of the Road: The Literature of the American Highway* (1996) includes discussions of midwestern writers of road narratives in several categories: journeys of self-discovery, the search for a national or regional identity, and works of social protest. Cynthia Dettelbach's *In the Driver's Seat: The Auto in American Literature and Popular Culture* (1976) and Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan's *Tourists and Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing* (1998) extend the genre to include not only traditional narrative forms but also virtual places, hypertexts, the hyperreal, and ectopias. Phil Patton's *The Open Road* (1986) also places the genre in a historical framework that includes the emergence of a variety of popular-culture formats.

More recent critical commentary has shown how women have reshaped the American road narrative in crucial ways. In *Through the Window, Out the Door: Women's Narratives of Departure from Austin and Cather to Tyler, Morrison, and Didion* (1998), Janis P. Stout traces “women’s appropriation of the traditionally masculine mode of travel writing and narrative tropes of journey” (xii). Other informative scholarly studies include *The Land before Her: Fantasy and the Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630–1860* (1984) by Annette Kolodny, *Felicitous Space: The Imaginative Structures of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather* (1986) by Judith Fryer, *The Home Plot: Women, Writers, and Domestic Ritual* (1992) by Ann Romines, and *The Feminization of Quest Romance: Radical Departures* (1992) by Dana A. Heller.

Many related studies, though not discussing directly the road-narrative genre itself, contribute significantly to an understanding of the quester in motion. Marling’s *Colossus of Roads* looks at roadside sculpture as important stopping places on the American pilgrimage. In *Driving Passion: The Psychology of the Car* (1987), Peter Marsch and Peter Collett examine the role of the automobile as jewelry, clothes, weapon, and badge of identity. John A. Jakle’s work *The Tourist: Travel in Twentieth-Century America* (1985) provides an important historical perspective on the development of tourism and considerable insight on the structural components of the journey and its evolving literary documents.

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