

"Roads adds to [McMurtry's] pot of literary gold . . . among the best American road stories ever written." —BILL HOFFMANN, *NEW YORK POST*

As he crisscrosses America—driving in search of the present, the past, and himself—Larry McMurtry shares his fascination with this nation's great trails and the culture that has developed around them.

Ever since he was a boy growing up in Texas only a mile from Highway 281, Larry McMurtry has felt the pull of the road. His town was thoroughly landlocked, making the highway his "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."

In *Roads*, McMurtry embarks on a cross-country trip where his route is also his destination. As he drives, McMurtry reminisces about the places he's seen, the people he's met, and the books he's read, including more than 3,000 books about travel. He explains why watching episodes of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* might be the best way to find joie de vivre in Minnesota; the scenic differences between Route 35 and I-801; which vigilantes lived in Montana and which hailed from Idaho; and the history of Lewis and Clark, Sitting Bull, and Custer that still haunts Route 2 today.

As it makes its way from South Florida to North Dakota, from eastern Long Island to Oregon, *Roads* is travel writing at its best.

"Reflective and appealing . . . the greatest pleasure of this journey is simply to be in the company of a lively and wholly unconventional mind."

—JONATHAN YARDLEY, *THE WASHINGTON POST BOOK WORLD*

LARRY MCMURTRY, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction for *Lonesome Dove*, is the author of twenty-two novels, three collections of essays, one memoir, and more than thirty screenplays. He lives in Archer City, Texas.



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LARRY MCMURTRY
THE PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING AUTHOR OF *LONESOME DOVE*

Roads

DRIVING AMERICA'S GREAT HIGHWAYS

"Roads is a travel narrative of the first order . . . a wonderful journey . . . a compelling invitation to rediscover what is lasting, important, and true."

—MANUEL LUIS MARTINEZ, *CHICAGO TRIBUNE*

When the trail-driving days were over Teddy Blue married one of the half-Cree daughters of the famous—or in some quarters, infamous—pioneer cattleman Granville Stuart, and spent the rest of his life ranching along the Milk River, in north central Montana. I had never been to the Milk River and wanted to see where Teddy Blue chose to live when he finally left the long trail.

The reason Granville Stuart is infamous in some quarters is because of the severity of the justice meted out by the vigilantes who rode under his orders. In the 1880s the vigilante movement that he led resulted in the hanging of some thirty-five men—mainly for rustling in its various forms. The Montana ranchers were more effective than their fellow cattle barons in Wyoming. The latter produced the rather peculiar Johnson County War. Both struggles of large versus small interests in the west have often been treated in movies. The vigilantes in *The Missouri Breaks* would have been Granville Stuart's men; the Johnson County War was, of course, exhaustively treated in Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate*.

The ruthlessness and brutality that were common in the nineteenth-century west have generally been poeticized. It's been turned into pastoral, a transformation in which the landscape itself conspires. It's so beautiful that one's tendency is to forgive it, as a beautiful woman will be forgiven when a plain one won't. The lakes of blood that have soaked into all that fine soil are invisible now—and still the beauty remains.

At Havre, Montana, I turned east on U.S. 2 and was soon in Teddy Blue's home country. The narrow, green Milk River, the northernmost stream of any significance in that part of the west, is with me for almost three hundred miles, looping now north and

now south of the highway. For much of that way the mighty Missouri itself is off my right elbow, its low bluffs always in sight.

Even the smallest Montana towns have something they call a casino now—even the humble convenience stores will have a long, dim room packed with game machines. All of the mini casinos are full. Truckers park their rigs along the curbs and hurry in to play a little keno.

East of Chinook my luck vis-à-vis speeding tickets finally ran out. I was clocked going eighty in a seventy. The irony, of which the nice officer who stopped me was painfully aware, was that until May 28, 1999, Montana had *no* daytime speed limit—one's speed was dependent upon temperament and the capabilities of one's vehicle, a freedom which finally produced an intolerable level of carnage on the highways. It may be that the officer just stopped me out of loneliness—his car and mine were the only cars in sight.

At some point in the afternoon, somewhere between Fort Peck in Montana and old Fort Union in North Dakota, near the spot where the Yellowstone River flows into the Missouri, I realized that I had found paradise. For connoisseurs of prairie travel, U.S. 2 is the perfect road—the road into the spacious heart of the plains. It runs from Spokane, Washington, straight across Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, and Minnesota, all the way to Lake Superior. I had passed its juncture with I-35 not ten minutes into the first of these drives, the one that began in Duluth.

If one's passion is high plains travel, U.S. 2 is as good as it gets. The hay fields were golden, the plowed land a rich brown, the Missouri bluffs bluish, the sky a deeper blue, the thunderheads a brilliant white, the hummocky, rolling rangeland a somber gray.

The colors, all subtle except the thunderheads, were constantly shifting and recombining as the clouds blocked and then released the strong sunlight. Once into North Dakota, tightly packed fields of tall sunflowers alternate with hay fields or the occasional patch of unharvested wheat.

At a stretch of road repair just inside North Dakota I had a human encounter, of an only slightly absurdist nature. As I approached the long stretch of repair a small wobbly man with a very red face crawled out of what had seemed to be an abandoned car—he sternly gestured for me to pull well off on the shoulder. This I did. The small man wobbled to my window and announced that he had yet to have breakfast—it was then nearly 5 P.M. He went back to his car, sat on the fender, and ate a prepackaged sandwich. Then he came back over and announced that the pilot car was due back in only fifteen minutes—there was so much heavy machinery, he said, that it would be suicide for me to attempt to get through without the pilot car.

The pilot car showed up right on time and had guided me only half a mile across the long miles of repair work when it was almost crushed itself by a hurtling dump truck whose driver didn't notice either the pilot car or me. The small wobbly man had certainly been right about the heavy machinery.

East of Minot I began to edge back into the land of the *mille lacs*. Ponds and small waterways were everywhere, some of them fringed with wild rice, all of them speckled with ducks—teal, mostly.

Throughout that afternoon and the next morning the realization slowly grew on me that I had accidentally found something I hadn't really expected to find: the dream road, the good-as-it-gets

road, the ideal path into the heart of the great steppe. U.S. 2 had everything—the widest vistas, the greatest skies, and more history than any one traveler could possibly hope to exhaust: Lewis and Clark, the Missouri, the mountain men, the Cheyenne, the Sioux, Sitting Bull, the Yellowstone, Teddy Blue. Custer, had he survived, could have raced back down the Yellowstone and caught a steamboat home, to glory and his Libbie.

At Rugby, North Dakota—the geographical center of North America—I turned north to drive the northern end of the road of my boyhood, highway 281.

U.S. 281 collides with Canada a few miles north of the small town of Dunseith, North Dakota. Its last stretch borders the Turtle Mountain Reservation of the Ojibwa people, one of whose tribal chairs had been the novelist Louise Erdrich's grandfather.

When I turned around at the northern head of the 281 the view when I looked south was not very different from the view I have looking north from the porch of our ranch house, more than a thousand miles away, down the plain.

That inconsequential spot of the prairie must have been where I had been tending all this time, because by the time I was halfway back to U.S. 2, I realized I had lost my urge to drive. Though the country was still spacious and still beautiful, some impulse had been blunted. My intention, once I had seen the top of the 281, had been to go east to Grand Forks, on the Red River of the North. I had long been interested in the big trouble in that part of the country: the métis secessionist movement led by Louis Riel, who was hung in 1885. There is an excellent book about this interesting revolt: *Strange Empire*, by the now almost forgotten Montana historian Joseph Kinsey Howard. The nomadic peoples

of the Red River of the North had more than a little difficulty accepting the fact that an international border had been created across lands where they had always migrated freely.

But arriving at the top of the 281 seemed to have muted my interest in métis secession. I drifted south, across the lands of the Spirit Lake Nation—that is, the Sioux—and was passing through the small town of Sheyenne, North Dakota, when I saw a comment that had been painted, by someone, on the wall of a building. NOTHING WAS EVER LOST THROUGH ENDURING LOVE OF NORTH DAKOTA, it read. There it was, American creativity bursting out again. I felt an immediate uplift—I don't know that I can claim enduring love for North Dakota, but I was certainly glad that I had come through Sheyenne and seen that sign.

A little later I stopped for breakfast in Carrington, a town evidently named for the rather ineffectual commander who, at Fort Phil Kearny, in 1866, allowed the impetuous Captain Fetterman and eighty men to ride out and get massacred by the waiting Sioux and Cheyenne. It was in this fight that Crazy Horse played the wounded bird and lured the eager soldiers to their doom.

Northern Montana and North Dakota are not heavily settled—people there might be excused for feeling themselves a little cut off from the world. What did they think of Kosovo, I wondered, or of W., as the columnists have begun to call George W. Bush, or of the senate race in New York State?

In the cafe the waitress lent me an already well used copy of the Fargo paper. A big headline said, GUILTY! A child murderer had just been convicted. Seven years before, a little girl had disappeared, presumably killed, her body never found. Possibly it had been weighted down and stuffed in the Sheyenne River.

There on the front page were her grieving parents, her weeping little sisters. Seven years had not dulled their pain—they were awash in what Auden called “the busy griefs.” Inside was a picture of the victim, an exceptionally pretty, normal little midwestern girl whose neighbor just happened to be a sex offender. There was *his* picture too. His lawyer had tried to argue that the little girl had probably just run away, but the jury didn't buy that one for a minute. How much grief could anyone spare for Kosovo when there was that much grief right here at home?

A few miles farther on I happened to pass the Hamlin Garland Highway, which provided an irony almost as profound as my speeding ticket in Montana. The once famous author of *Main-Travelled Roads* now has a road named for him, but it definitely is not main, and it seems scarcely to be traveled at all.

At Jamestown, where I-94 crosses 281, I see a sign mentioning White Cloud, the white buffalo born a few years ago, to considerable rejoicing. There is a buffalo herd just south of Jamestown but none of the buffalo in it are white. Very likely White Cloud has been sequestered for his own protection. A white buffalo would be unlikely to survive two days along the shoulders of the 94. Somebody would probably haul back and shoot him.

South of Jamestown I began to feel a disinclination for sights, or even for food. U.S. 2 had turned out to be the best road, and the 281 had begun to seem, if anything, too long. I had seen a lot and no longer particularly wanted to look.

Long ago I habitually traveled with *Road Food*, a useful book by Jan and Michael Stern that locates good eats within a few miles of the interstates. On their advice I had once visited a cafe in Huron, South Dakota, where I ate the single best piece of pie I've

ever eaten: sour cream and raisin. As I traveled south, Huron lay just a moment off my route, but I did not turn off to seek the ambrosial pie, nor did I journey over to Mitchell to revisit the Corn Palace, a rural performance center that had been the wonder of the prairies back around 1913. Then it had had the appearance of a great bulbous Russian church and was covered in real corncobs.

Gripped by a distinct, if mild, malaise I also passed up a chance to revisit Laura Ingalls Wilder's childhood home in nearby De Smet, where the author of *The Little House on the Prairie* settled with her family in 1879.

Some years ago I had a sobering realization about women, which was that there are just too many nice ones. One simply can't fall in love with, sleep with, or marry all the nice women—even serial marriers such as Mickey Rooney only manage eight or nine. One of the saddening facts of life is that there is always going to be a delightful woman somewhere who, for whatever accident of timing or attraction, simply slips by and recedes, to return only in dream.

As it is with women, so it is with roads. There are too many nice ones. I could go on for a long time, driving America's roads. I could see the sandhills of Nebraska, follow the old Oregon Trail along the North Platte, see the Tetons, dodge moose in Maine, slip down to Salt Lake City and remind myself what an inspired city planner Brigham Young had been.

But I can't drive all the roads. On even the narrowest highways that I've driven on these trips, and in even the smallest towns, there are signs pointing down even narrower highways to even smaller towns, many of which I will never see. There may be no

mute inglorious Miltons in those towns, but there might be someone with simple good taste, like Elmer, who set those lovely fountains in the Bitterroots.

And there might be someone who, now and then, would feel like expressing a noble thought by painting it on a building: the conviction that nothing was ever lost through enduring love of North Dakota, for example.

When I was a boy, one of the first questions I asked my parents and grandparents was, where does the road go? I meant 281, of course, the road along which I was now hurrying home. Curiously, I was only interested in where it went to the north. I thought I already knew where it went to the south: Mineral Wells, Texas, a once-popular spa with two *grand luxe* hotels, where my panhandle uncles came every February with their well-upholstered wives to get out of the wind for a week or two.

When I asked my grandfather—the person assigned to deal with my questions when I was three and four—where the road went, he would merely allow that it went to Oklahoma. An old man then, near the end of his own road, he could see no reason why anyone would need to go farther north than Oklahoma.

In Teddy Blue's book *We Pointed Them North* there is an ignorant young cowboy who thought that north was a place, as Dodge City was a place. The other cowboys didn't disabuse him of this (to them) hilarious error. The ignorant cowboy believed that if one just kept going up the rivers, someday one would arrive at the place called North.

This morning outside of Dunseith, North Dakota, I *had* arrived at North—my personal north, at least. The arrival produced in me that empty feeling that I sometimes get after finish-

ing a long work of fiction. For the moment, a question had been answered: so now what do I do?

Fiction, for all its subtlety and variety—a subtlety and variety more glorious even than the plains along U.S. 2—seems mainly to be asking two questions: Where does the road go? And how is one to marry?

Both in fiction and in person I'm still working on that second question, but I have finally been to where the road goes, and shouldn't need to go looking for a while.