

BY
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Freewheeling

Roads: a millennial journey along America's greatest interstate highways
Larry McMurtry Orion,

SIGN-UP

Few people would choose to drive Britain's motorway system just for the hell of it: if America's highways promise freedom, then Britain's roads promise little more than ten-mile tail-backs. While America's love affair with its highways has generated iconic works such as *On the Road*, our motorways occupy a less exalted place in the national psyche. My book, *Leadville: a biography of the A40*, was inspired by hours spent stalled in traffic on London's arterial roads, and even J G Ballard's visionary novel *Crash* is a hymn to the lure of the pile-up, not a song of the open road. Yet when the American writer Larry McMurtry says he wants "to drive the American roads at the century's end . . . from border to border and beach to beach", it seems a natural and exciting ambition.

His motive was simple: he wanted to spend days just "looking out of the window". But his travels are not entirely without direction - McMurtry, who was born in Texas, is governed by a kind of "primal geography", which invariably draws him towards the plains: "It's always uplifting to me to watch the opening of the land and the widening of the skies as I drive west." Later, he describes a moment when he "came over a hill and the sky suddenly swelled to infinity" - an image that perfectly encapsulates the romance of the American road.

McMurtry covers no more than a thousand miles on any of his trips - he calls them "little spurts along the interstates", which hardly "deserve to be called travels at all"; but they have yielded a wonderful book. *Roads* is a leisurely homage to the American landscape and the pleasures of drifting along its highways, but it is also a kind of professional memoir, an account of McMurtry's career as an antiquarian bookseller.

Enthusiasts make good travelling companions, and McMurtry's love of books is responsible for many of *Roads*'s best moments; each place he visits prompts memories of trips he made in his book-collecting days, and provides him with an excuse to reminisce about his favourite writers.

In Michigan, for instance, he finds himself in "Big Two-Hearted River Country" - the territory where Hemingway set the Nick Adams stories that launched his career, and on which his reputation was built. "Many who came to dislike Hemingway forgot how good he was; he may have forgotten it himself, or he may have just been unfortunate, over the long haul, to have perfected a style that had nowhere to take him but into self-parody, which is where, as a writer, he resided for so many sad years."

Later, when he reaches Key West in Florida, he decides to visit the house where Hemingway spent his latter years. What he sees disturbs him: the furniture and contents of the library seem "ill assembled, indifferently arranged, mediocre" - an effect that is oddly "suggestive of Hemingway's worst prose". But the conclusion is too glib: subsequently, he wonders whether he has invested too much in Hemingway's "early excellence" as a writer, and resolves to read him again.

McMurtry's encounter with Hemingway is typical of the kind of literary criticism he offers in *Roads* - generous, thoughtful and, above all, responsive to the landscape that inspired the work in question. Even better are the snippets of American history and the introductions to lesser-known writers that punctuate his account of his travels. In San Diego, he reveals that he is reading the "leisurely, tolerant travel books of the English zoologist F D Ommanney" - a man "who knows a lot about fish". I had never heard of Ommanney before, but McMurtry's comments made me want to read his books.

Roads also contains the skeleton of a conventional autobiography: McMurtry revisits his Texas childhood, describes scenes from his career as a screenwriter and recalls the life-changing heart surgery he underwent in December 1991. "I experienced a death that wasn't fatal: my body lived on, but my personality died, or at least imploded, disintegrated, shattered into fragments." It was another factor in his decision to go back on the road: by visiting places he had once known, McMurtry was hoping to reconnect with his lost self, a quest that adds an unexpected urgency to his meandering journeys.

Edward Platt's Leadville is published by Picador (£9.99)



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