

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/great-road-trips-in-american-literature-42769879/?fbclid=IwAR07aXwyqV6PeDHZ6-rr5u2qkXKiG2tjLdRiZCx4FEjvduDx2s361QjqLg>

Great Road Trips in American Literature

From Twain to Kerouac to Bryson, writers have found inspiration in hitting the road and traveling the United States

By [Abby Callard](#)
smithsonian.com
August 19, 2009

John Steinbeck declares in *Travels With Charley* that Americans descended from those who moved: those who left Europe, those who were forced to leave Africa, and those who came in search of a better life. It makes sense that we would be travelers. “Every American hungers to move,” he writes. But most of us can’t just pack up and leave, so here are 11 books about American road trips for those who can’t break away from life’s commitments.

RELATED CONTENT

- [The World’s First Motel Was a Luxury Establishment, Not a Dive](#)
Roughing It and *Life on the Mississippi* by Mark Twain, 1872 and 1883, respectively

Perhaps the standard-bearer for translating the American spirit to paper, Mark Twain wrote two separate accounts of traveling through the country. First, in 1872, he provides a fictionalized account of when he went West to

ostensibly be personal secretary to his brother, who had been appointed secretary of the Nevada Territory. Twain's ulterior motive? Searching for fabled gold. In a somewhat fictionalized account of this period, Twain recounts his time as a frontier newspaper reporter, a prospector, and a writer.

Twain's second memoir recounts his career as a steamboat captain on the Mississippi River in the years before the Civil War. Twain used his rambunctious childhood in Missouri as the basis for many novels, but this book tells his personal biography in more detail. Years later, Twain returns to navigate the same river, and is struck by how industrialization has changed the cities along the river.

***On the Road* by Jack Kerouac, 1957**

When this semi-autobiographical work was published, the *New York Times* hailed it as the "most important utterance" by anyone from the Beat Generation. Though he changed the names, the characters in the novel have real life counterparts. Salvatore "Sal" Paradise (Kerouac) from New York City meets Dean Moriarty (fellow beatnik Neal Cassady) on a cross-country journey fueled by drugs, sex and poetry. The novel's protagonists crisscross the United States and venture into Mexico on three separate trips that reveal much about the character of the epic hero, Moriarty, and the narrator.

***Black Like Me* John Howard Griffin, 1961**

To document the African American experience in the South during the 1950s, John Howard Griffin, a white journalist, artificially darkened his skin using medication and UV lamps. He spoke as little as possible and maintained his name and biography. The only thing that has changed was the color of his skin. He traveled through Louisiana, Alabama and Georgia discovering the nuances of race relations in the segregated South. The reaction was varied: Griffin was hanged in effigy in his Texas hometown, but many recognized the book, which sold 10 million copies and was translated into 14 languages, as an important step in human rights activism.

***Travels With Charley* John Steinbeck, 1962**

Near the end of his career, John Steinbeck set out to rediscover the country he had made a living writing about. With only his French poodle Charley as company, he embarked on a three-month journey across most of the continental United States. On his way, he meets the terse residents of Maine, falls in love with Montana and watches desegregation protests in New Orleans. Although Steinbeck certainly came to his own conclusions on his journey, he respects individual experience: He saw what he saw and knows that anyone else would have seen something different.

***The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* by Tom Wolfe, 1968**

Young writer Ken Kesey led a group of LSD-using hippies called the Merry Pranksters around the country in a painted bus in the 1960s. Wolfe combines original reporting with creative writing techniques to both cover the reality of the journey and the hallucinogenic experiences of the characters. The cast reads like a who's who of counter-culture: Bob Dylan, Neal Cassady, Hunter S. Thompson, Doctor Strange and Jerry Garcia. The book remains one of the most intimate and well-respected testaments to hippie subculture.

***Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* by Hunter S. Thompson, 1971**

What many consider the quintessential drug-induced book of the 1970s was an amalgam of two magazine assignments, one from *Rolling Stone* and the other from *Sports Illustrated*. Reporting on the Los Angeles murder of journalist Ruben Salazar, Thompson decided that the best way to mine good material out of his source, political activist Oscar Zeta Acosta, was to take to the open road and drive to Las Vegas. But when they got there, their intentions turned to drugs, alcohol and gambling. Ever the enterprising reporter, Thompson also took a respite from his highs to take on a caption-writing assignment to cover an off-road desert race for *Sports Illustrated*. Although the loose narrative blurs the line between reality and what the characters are merely imagining, a sharp critique of American culture permeates the pages.

***Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* by Robert M. Pirsig, 1974**

A deep, philosophical book that masquerades as a simple story of a father-and-son motorcycle trip, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* is Pirsig's first foray into philosophy writing. Their motorcycle trip from Minneapolis to San Francisco is also a trip through Eastern and Western philosophical traditions. His friend, a romantic, lives by the principle of Zen and relies on mechanics to fix his motorcycle. Pirsig, on the other hand, leaves nothing up to chance and knows the ins and outs of maintaining his bike.

***Blue Highways* by William Least Heat-Moon, 1982**

After losing his wife and job as a professor, William Least Heat-Moon sets out on a soul-searching journey across the United States. He avoids large cities and interstates, choosing to travel only on "blue" highways—so called for their color in the Rand McNally Road Atlas. Along the way, he meets and records conversations with a born-again Christian hitchhiker, an Appalachian log cabin restorer, a Nevada prostitute and a Hopi Native American medical student.

***Mississippi Solo* by Eddy L. Harris, 1988**

Harris was 30 years old when he wrote his memoir of a journey down the length of the Mississippi River, from Minnesota to New Orleans, in a canoe. His discussion of racial issues, a focus of the book, is shaped by his experience of moving from Harlem to suburban St. Louis 20 years earlier. Along the way Harris meets a spectrum of people, forcing him to reassess his preconceived ideas about whom he would encounter on the trip.

***The Lost Continent* by Bill Bryson, 1989**

Prolific travel writer Bill Bryson returns to the United States after two decades in England to search for the perfect American small town. But Bryson finds an America unlike the place he idealizes. In a Chevy Chevette he borrows from his mother, Bryson drives through 38 states eschewing the big city and luxury hotels befitting this famed journalist.

Read more: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/great-road-trips-in-american-literature-42769879/#L6Sg7W4LY2JKMLLy.99>

Give the gift of Smithsonian magazine for only \$12! <http://bit.ly/1cGUiGv>

Follow us: @SmithsonianMag on Twitter