

Reviewing William Least-Heat Moon's *Blue Highways: A Journey into America*.
New York, NY: Little, Brown, and Company; 1983. Republished by Back Bay Books 2013.

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For "Books Sandwiched In", Brighton Memorial Library, Rochester, New York

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Thank you to the Brighton Memorial Library for the invitation to review *Blue Highways*, William Least Heat-Moon's story of his road trip around the US from mid-March to mid-June 1978. During those same months I was rambling myself, around Europe and North Africa. Many of you likely relate to one of his central themes - the ability of travel to get outside yourself and renew perspectives. I've been to a few places he visited, while many of his other encounters bring similar place experiences to mind. Perhaps *Blue Highways* also made you think of related travel books, films, and music. I'll try to weave these thoughts in, along with answering insightful questions at the end posed by my older cousin, Brighton Memorial Library patron Diane Resch. Hopefully, this will stimulate ideas as we emerge from the pandemic and think about traveling ourselves!

Luckily, we are not the first to take a retrospective look at *Blue Highways*. From 2006 to 2008, a father and son team, Edgar I. Ailor III and IV, retraced the author's route, often separately in short segments, photographing landscapes and re-interviewing characters. I've included a reference in the presentation, along with my own photos, to add to Heat-Moon's many photographs of people.

Another retrospective comes in the foreword of the 2013 edition, written by author and activist Bill McKibben (*End of Nature, Deep Economy*, 350.org). McKibben lauds Heat-Moon's ability to document diverse locals' conversations (like Alan Lomax's folklore work), turning results into literature, while reflecting on community and personal change. McKibben cites some positive trends since 1983, noting how the number of farms and farmers markets have increased. He cites a sociological study showing an average customer will have ten times more conversations at a farmers' market than at a standard grocery! Wow! I thought I would start with the New York section of the book.

Heat-Moon chronicles the long-term challenges of an Italian family's small farm in the Finger Lakes region. Rochester readers may be familiar with the rise of farmers markets (and more local produce at Wegman's?) since 1978. A quick search today reveals 400 farmers' markets in New York State. Monroe County has a dozen (including one in Brighton!), along with three dozen "curbside" markets. There are also farmers' markets along Heat-Moon's route in Lockport, Batavia, and Canandaigua.

Here is his route through western New York, heading to Cheshire (Canandaigua Lake) from Niagara Falls: “I followed the Niagara River (north) toward Lake Ontario, then picked up New York 93, through Warrens Corners...Lockport...onto state 5 and into Batavia, to Le Roy...and on through the darkness to the west edge of Canandaigua Lake.” After staying with his friend near Cheshire and learning the rich family history of the nearby Masucci farm, he moved on to the birthplace of the Mormon religion near Palmyra, then east on highway 31 along the Erie Canal through Conquest and Cato to Rome. Heat-Moon then drove north into the Adirondacks through Alder Creek, Blue Mountain Lake, and Route 28 by Mount Marcy, dropping down to Lake George and crossing into Vermont by ferry (Figure 1).

Are there particular places or stories from his New York segment that come to mind for you?

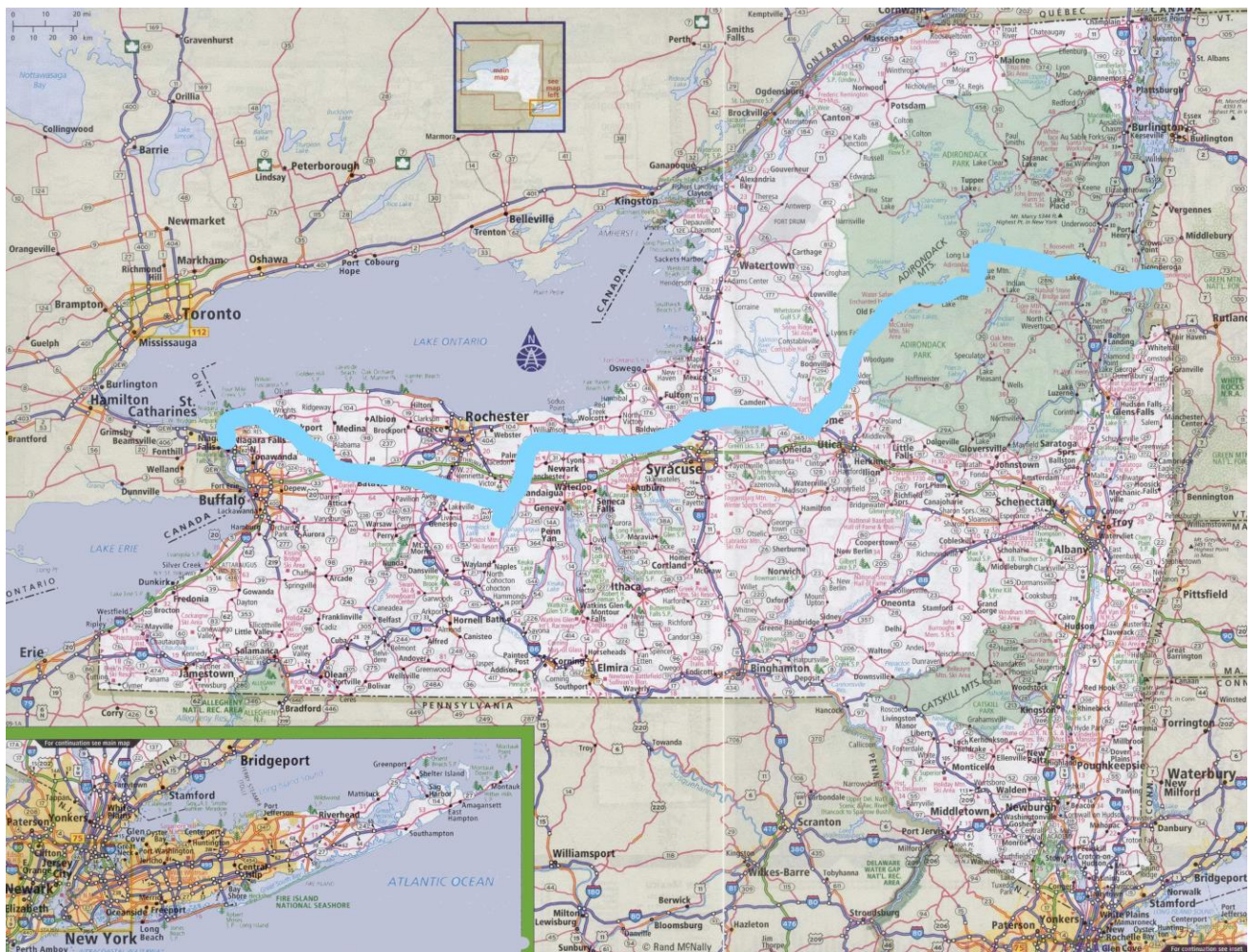


Figure 1. Approximate west to east route of William Least Heat-Moon through New York in 1978.

Common Themes - People, Farms, Food, and Adventure

I'm sure some readers could relate to Heat-Moon's love of diner food, the quality quirkily based on the number of calendars on the wall. Early in the book he uses a term for locally unique meals, "slow food" (as opposed to fast food). An official Slow Food movement started later in 1989, helped in part by Restaurateur Alice Waters of Berkeley, California, who now tells her story with her first book in May 2021, *"We Are What We Eat: A Slow Food Manifesto."*

I especially admired his tales of reaching a hot meal after a vigorous outing, such as the morning after his night stuck in the cold snow at 10,000 feet in Cedar Breaks, Utah. He felt grateful to be alive! Heat-Moon dug into a big breakfast the next morning at a college cafeteria, talking to an astute young Native American (Hopi) student about the Hopi land as a sacred circle, blue corn, spiritual emergence, the four Hopi worlds, and the dangers of materialism. It's funny but my favorite film is another quirky 1983 production, "Local Hero," with Houston oil executive Burt Lancaster and his field man discovering more than material wealth in a village on the northeast coast of Scotland.

A similar experience to Cedar Breaks, Utah happened to me in April 1974, as I biked from the San Joaquin valley up to Sequoia National Park at 6-7,000 feet elevation. Being from "Back East," I did not realize the potential for cold and snow at higher elevations that late in spring. The 5,000-foot climb took a lot of energy. I remember "bonking" on the way up, asking a passing family in a Winnebago if they had anything to eat. They graciously gave me an orange, which made all the difference in getting me up the last 1,500 feet in elevation to park headquarters, where a park ranger let me sleep on his couch as seven inches of snow fell! The coast down to Fresno the next day is still the longest I've ever made!

I especially loved the points in the book when he thinks about turning back (on rough roads in eastern Tennessee or walking in the dark to find his ancestor's grave in North Carolina) yet he kept going and was ultimately rewarded. Some of my favorite memories are bicycling in the dark to a destination (don't try this at home). In preparation for a 1973 summer tour of Scotland at 17, I did a trial run through the Berkshires and back to Route 7 along the Housatonic River in Connecticut. My parents, trying to meet me, drove into a dark Macedonia Brook State Park and asked a scout troupe from New York City if they'd seen a young guy come through on a bicycle. One of the inner-city boys said, "What did he do, escape from an insane asylum?" My more recent, Appalachian version was biking from a Dahlongega, Georgia hostel to the top of 4,000-foot Brasstown Bald. The return included standing on the pedals to get over Neels Gap (the last mountain pass) through a driving rain, lightning, and thunder, slowly navigating the dark descent – a truly epic experience! A bit like the author, I felt grateful to be alive the next morning!

Yet these risks should be selected carefully. When Heat-Moon moved east to west through our locale here in East Texas, he stopped at the Native American Caddo Mounds site thirty miles west of our

university. Heat-Moon wisely came down from a Caddo burial mound as lightning and thunder passed. In April 2019, a small group of Caddo, the public, and university staff were at the mounds when a tornado came through. They had little warning as cars, shelters, and items were tossed about. One person died and an archaeologist we knew was seriously injured. The historic African-American community of Weeping Mary, located right behind the mound, was also seriously damaged.

Heat-Moon drove onwards via Highway 21, the route of El Camino Real (the late 1600s/early 1700s Spanish royal road) from Nacogdoches to San Antonio. The road passes Dime Box, Texas, named after a post box next to the highway/railway, in which folks placed a dime to cover the cost of their envelope being mailed. One aspect of Heat-Moon is a willingness to socialize in bars, which may result in encountering a different type of local than most travellers. Whereas Heat-Moon met some gritty locals in Dime Box, my experience there was helping a young wealthy businessman from Austin think about management options for his ranch nearby on Yegua Creek. Austin has grown immensely since the 1980s, through Dell computers, other service sector firms, and now a new Tesla factory under construction.

Locals here would argue about Heat-Moon's placement of a national boundary between East and West at the Louisiana state line. We are in the "Pineywoods" of East Texas, similar to the deep South that stretches to the Atlantic. The drier transition zone about 2-3 hours west of the state line, where annual precipitation drops from about 50 to 25 inches, and the pines change to oak/grassland, is more logical.

Yet Heat-Moon mostly includes very astute observations of ecological issues in the South and elsewhere, from the role of limestone-leached Ca and P in bluegrass nutrients for Kentucky thoroughbreds, to the dynamic nature of barrier islands in North Carolina, the invasiveness of kudzu and water hyacinth plants in South Carolina, and the straightening and channelling of Mississippi River waters away from Atchafalaya wetlands in Louisiana. The author cites straightening of highways (to interstates and frontage roads) and rivers (to cement channels and levees) as examples of gains in efficiency yet loss of local features, such as downtown local business and sediment-fertilized floodplains. Augmenting facts, perhaps some researched after he returned home, are rich – who knew the Mississippi carries one million tons of sediment downriver every day!

Yet Heat-Moon's best talent is probably mixing stories of natural and human history in with present-day discussions. Particularly illuminating were his insights into Native American history. The twin cities of Roanoke Island, North Carolina, each with a native name, are another example. Manteo was now more touristy (an Olde English theme) while Wanchese retained a more authentic working landscape. Stories of past mistreatment of naturally friendly, advanced cultures such as the Maniwoccs were especially disturbing, both there and nationwide.

My wife and I played in a senior soccer tournament in nearby coastal Wilmington, North Carolina in 2005. We stayed in a classic 1950s style motel, the El-Berta, with an adjoining diner named Whitey's.

It turns out that a young local basketball player, Michael Jordan, got his first job there! Upon checking up on the El-Berta, it was torn down in 2008 to make way for a wider highway. So much for progress!

Along these lines, Heat-Moon seemed to be offering a precursor to James Kunstler's 1993 *Geography of Nowhere*, which humorously laments our national change to a more homogenous, auto-based culture. His encounter with the highly engaged boat builder on the Kentucky River offered an alternative to change, evoking memories of my dad in the late 60s, putting in a surprising amount of work to caulk, sand, and paint a small wooden boat in our backyard each spring. The story's location was just upriver from Port Royal, where my wife and I once stopped in 1992 to talk to a legendary critic of modern materialist efficiency equal to Heat-Moon and McKibben – Wendell Berry (1977's *Unsettling of America*). We found him in the woods, taking a break from *horse logging* to talk to another nature writer.

The accurate recounting of Heat-Moon's many conversations around the country makes you wonder if they were recorded! The interviews with black Selma, Alabama residents and the black librarian in St. Martinville, Louisiana, bring to mind Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "long arc" needed for cultural and historical change, along with policing issues still occurring today. What if everyone had access to phone videos back then? I remember watching television news in recent years cover the Trayvon Martin shooting in Florida. It seemed like an important, yet somewhat distant issue, until I stopped by my friend's house for something. He happens to be an African professor, and the *entire extended family* was in the living room watching coverage of the verdict. It was no longer distant.

The Mississippi-Louisiana-Texas region is home base for some of our greatest travel songs, a few particularly fitting for the *Blue Highways* theme of gaining new perspectives. In addition to legendary Mississippi Delta bluesmen and country singers and country rock bands, Jimmie Rodgers from Meridian, Mississippi offers the early 1930s classic "Waiting for a Train." My personal top backroad travel songs are Lucinda Williams' "Crescent City" and "Side of the Road" from 1988 and the Flatlanders playing Townes Van Zandt's "White Freight Liner Blues" on Austin City Limits in 2017.

Moving from the South to the Southwest, I was a bit disappointed that Heat-Moon took Interstate 10 through West Texas. While he probably came across the giant roadrunner statue in Fort Stockton, the parallel Highway 90 is one of my favorite roads in the country, passing through Alpine, Marathon, Gage, and Marfa, each with historic hotels. He described the Sierra Madre across the river in Mexico as merely having "sharp apexes," but I did my dissertation in those mountains amid beautiful pine-oak forests, expansive green meadows, and above rich, high-elevation grasslands where the continent's largest population of black-tailed prairie dogs still survive. Many large predators such as the grizzly bear and wolf hung on there until the 1970s-80s, many decades beyond their extirpation from the US Southwest.

Heat-Moon immediately redeemed himself for me when he went to Hachita, New Mexico, an extremely isolated desert town surrounded by mountains, not far from the Mexican border. After one of

my trips into Chihuahua I came back across the border at Antelope Wells, 45 miles south of Hachita, which upon reaching looked like a metropolis to me, compared to miles of the wide-open Chihuahuan Desert, complete with bison and pronghorns, mobile species that do not do well with border walls.

Heat Moon moves on through the Chiricahua Mountains into Arizona, then up into its pine forests. I spent 1980-81 as a wildland firefighter in Arizona pine forests near Prescott and Show Low. I especially remember the Bradshaw Mountains near Prescott, where in 1980 a lookout pointed out to me a spot among the lights of fast-growing Phoenix below, about one-third of the way from the city center, which was the outer edge of town in her childhood. We saw some excitement fighting small and large lightning fires there in 1980, but nineteen firefighters lost their lives in the nearby Yarnell Hills in 2013.

My wife and I remember Holbrook, Arizona, on the way to Utah, for its especially filling meals at Romo's, a restaurant Heat-Moon would love. His trip to the Hopi Reservation is important, as it is one of the most unique places in the nation. Eight thousand people live in villages with names like Second Mesa, on their half million acres surrounded by Navajo country. You are now not allowed to visit Hopi villages without a guide, a cultural protection policy normally reserved for countries like Bhutan (near Nepal in the Himalayas), whose "gross national happiness" is their primary measure of well-being. It is not surprising that Heat-Moon, despite his native heritage, had a hard time striking up a conversation there. It makes his cafeteria chat with the Hopi college student in Cedar City, Utah all the more important.

Heat-Moon's reflective trip through the sparse, high desert landscape of Nevada evokes thoughts of the 2020 Oscar-winning film *Nomadland*, starring Frances McDormand, with its quiet look at loss, materialism, memory, and resilience. Heat-Moon then crosses the northern Sierras of California through Quincy, where our friend left her elite national forest district ranger job, with all its politics, for nursing. The nearby foothill town of Paradise was destroyed by the Camp Fire in November 2018. The author then enters Oregon near Klamath Lake. I couldn't help think of my wife and I running out of gas on a "blue highway" on the west side of the lake there in 1989, in our own Econoline van! The gas gauge was a bit off so, unlike the author's near misses, we pattered to a stop on empty. Finding a gas can in a boat, after trying to find the owners, we left them a note with gas money and used enough gas to get us to town.

I worked that year as a forester in an isolated small town of 400, Butte Falls, not far from Crater Lake. The Cascades in general are amazingly rich and scenic. Another renowned author lived in the Cascades near Eugene (in addition to Ken Kesey). I got to chat briefly with Barry Lopez (*Arctic Dreams, Of Wolves and Men*) briefly at the 2005 national geography conference in Denver. He had just received the first standing ovation of any keynote speaker in conference history. He passed Christmas Day 2020.

As Heat-Moon reached the ocean near Newport, Oregon, his story evoked memories of my work as a forester in Brookings on the southern Oregon coast. Working with locals to diversify the economy from fishing and logging, I helped start a large, county-wide ecotourism project in 1993. Locals had

grown up so accustomed to the sea that ocean views for older, local restaurants were not common. One transplanted New York businessman jokingly complained about Brookings... “You know, you can sum up the business savvy of this town with the name of one (actual) business...Oceanview Storage!

The author’s encounter with a banana slug (large, shell-less terrestrial snail) lost in his van overnight was entertaining, particularly as they are harmless. I’ve slept in an open-ended tent in cold, wet Scotland and woke up with five or six of them on the inside tent walls. I also loved Heat-Moon’s admiration for Mount Adams in Washington, an immense 12,000-foot mountain playing second (or third) fiddle to Mount Rainer and Mount St. Helens. Many highest peaks such as Everest or Mount Whitney rise above an already high mountain range, while awesome singular massifs rising from the lowlands can be more impressive visually, such as Mount Kanchenjunga in eastern Nepal and even Denali in Alaska.

Heat-Moon’s recognition of the beaver was also appreciated. Many ecologists trying to reconstruct historical landscapes and watersheds are now realizing that beavers created and maintained many more wetlands and water storage ponds than previously thought. Yet the book became a bit travel weary for me as he moved west to east across Montana and other northern states. The bar conversations, which I rarely partake in, became tedious for me. The vast grasslands of the northern plains, despite important prairie pothole wetlands, must be monotonous to drive across. It seemed to affect the author.

A harder life for some people showed itself when he gave a runaway youth a ride from Northwest Wisconsin to Green Bay. He also encountered bad experiences in Michigan and constant rain driving through Ontario, finally reaching western New York, as we noted above. Woodstock, Vermont provides an example of tourism fused well with town life, although somewhat elite. Heat-Moon then provides glimpses of blue-collar life, historical and present, in New Hampshire (maple syrup farm), coastal Maine (lobstering) and Newport, Rhode Island (a violent past). Greenwich in southern New Jersey shows resistance to industrial invasion to preserve its history. Smith Island, Maryland offers a unique look at remote island life in Chesapeake Bay (nearby Tangier Island is a topic for geographers due to its dialect).

Following the direction home, Heat-Moon encounters a Civil War battle site, then crosses the Appalachians with its clear streams into West Virginia, stopping for the night outside of Franklin. Here, in the van, he sketches a map of his entire journey, a circle much like the circle of life Black Elk refers to. Heat-Moon sees a route of migration (like a Hopi labyrinth) to places and moments of “glimpsed clarity.”

Soon he moves through southern Ohio into Indiana, twelve miles from where he spent his first night on the trip. The town of New Harmony provided a metaphor. The site of two failed utopian efforts in the early 1800s, the failures led to later efforts to abolish slavery, empower women, and fight poverty. Heat-Moon walks the old utopian hedge labyrinth, restored by locals, which strikingly resembles the Hopi “map of emergence.” The author follows a clearly worn path through the maze, then states, “But without the errors, wrong turns, and blind alleys, without the doubling back and misdirection and fumbling and

chance recoveries, there was not one bit of joy in following the labyrinth. Knowing the way made traveling it perfectly meaningless.”

Heat-Moon ends with a Navajo wind chant, across from a map of his journey: “Then he was told: Remember what you have seen, because everything forgotten returns to the circling winds.”

Concluding thoughts

My cousin Diane asked how he got around the entire country on \$428 stashed in his van, but then she also provided the answer – inflation. The \$428 in 1978 is equal to \$1,753.05 today. Those of you who travel know that the highest cost is often lodging, which Heat-Moon mostly avoided by sleeping in his van. The national average gas price in 1978 was only \$0.63 per gallon.

Diane also asks: “The pandemic of 2020 has made many people re-evaluate their jobs and lives. What is important for fulfilment and what are our goals and dreams now?” I would answer that by coming back to Bill McKibben’s *Deep Economy* (2008), in which he cites a now considerable body of research on happiness. He states that once households reach a base point of income, such as \$70,000 a year in the US or \$10,000 in developing nations, their happiness no longer rises with rising income beyond that. This suggests that chasing higher and higher salaries *may* not be the wisest choice for fulfilment.

Other thoughts from Diane: “The book is very philosophical. How much of author’s philosophies come from Native American culture?” I would suggest Native American culture is the most important influence, given that he carries *Black Elk Speaks* in the van along with Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, which he cites far less often. He also turns to the Hopi “map of emergence” and Black Elk as he summarizes the meaning of his trip at the end. For me, one of the most important encounters is with the Hopi student in Cedar City, Utah, after nearly freezing to death overnight at 10,000 feet! The student seems to embody a healthy transition zone between a purely Hopi lifestyle and modern “civilization”, balancing both worlds. The Hopi labyrinth “is an ancient symbol that relates to wholeness. It combines the imagery of the circle and the spiral into a meandering but purposeful path. The labyrinth represents a journey to our own center and back again out into the world.”



“I love that he describes tiny towns which may or may not survive in 2021. Does Dime Box, Texas still exist?” Yes, it does! We also have Cut and Shoot, Possum Kingdom, Peru, and Italy! I last visited Dime

Box about five to ten years ago. It is a bit off the main highway but still an active town or “hamlet.” I can’t say I’ve come across a town that’s disappeared since I came to Texas in 1998. Many (not all) small towns now house remote workers or landowners as the towns shift away from processing physical goods to the service sector. But some very small towns still thrive off of the primary or secondary sectors of the economy (rather than tertiary service sector) through agriculture, agricultural processing, energy extraction and processing, and transportation through their location. I was wondering the same about Rome, New York. The author finds it declining at its core, but many small and large cities have since gentrified their downtowns to varying degrees, with upscale shops and restored buildings. How is Rome faring? Is it benefiting from historical designation, canal trails, downtown restoration, etc.?

“The author converses with many people whose small restaurants/businesses have been ruined by franchises...McDonald’s, KFC etc. Forty years later, what are the repercussions of Walmart, Amazon, and other megastores?” One recent study showed that many counties where Walmart located actually declined economically afterwards. Some smaller hardware, clothing shops, restaurants, etc. adapt and diversify to higher end specialty goods and survive. But those specialty goods are more the domain of larger, more diverse cities, and customers travel to those for more selection. As you probably know, “big box” retailers themselves are now challenged by Amazon, which has thrived during the pandemic. Comic writer Dave Barry joked in his summary of 2017 that Amazon “bought the state of Montana for storage” and later that year bought the Pacific Ocean, but it will remain open to the public “for the time being.”

If readers are looking for more answers to these questions, they may like to segue from *Blue Highways* to a more recent trip chronicle, *Our Towns: A 100,000 Mile Journey into the Heart of America*, by Deborah and James Fallows. Rather than 14,000 miles in a van, the authors moved by small plane, highlighting examples of positive leadership and resilience around the country. Their website has more, including “libraries as second responders” - libraries which offered solace during crises in places such as Ferguson, Missouri. The book has been made into an HBO film, which premiered in spring of 2021.

We have a faculty book reading group here. Most of my recent recommended books have come from watching Fareed Zakaria’s GPS show on Sundays, where he often hosts an author near the end. We read *Our Towns* based on that show, and more recently Rutger Bregman’s *Humankind: A Hopeful History*, which takes a positive view of human nature based on critical thinking about various historical events, such as a New York City murder where bystanders supposedly did nothing (they actually did respond); or wars where bombing was assumed to demoralize an enemy, when it actually galvanized support (Britain in WWII). It serves as a critical look at media and other sources of simplistic thinking.

Thank you again for the opportunity to review this book! I hope this wasn’t too long of a review!

Sincerely,

Bill Forbes, Nacogdoches, Texas