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BREAKFAST AT THE EXIT CAFE, by Wayne Grady and Marilyn Simonds (GS, 9781553655220, \$32.95)

Looking for America

Canadians' journeys through the uptight United States

By Brett Josef Grubisic, Postmedia News December 5, 2010



Wayne Grady and Marilyn Simonds, husband-and-wife writers from Ontario, take turns telling about their experiences in the U.S.

Photograph by: Image supplied, Handout photo

Borderlands: Riding the Edge of America By Derek Lundy Knopf Canada, \$32

Breakfast at the Exit Cafe: Travels Through America By Wayne Grady and Marilyn Simonds Greystone Books/Douglas & McIntyre, \$32.95

A founding father of a lively cultural institution, Alexis de Tocqueville -- 25 years old, eager to gain distance from his native France and soon-to-be author of Democracy in America -- set out on a

nine-month interviewing expedition in 1831, travelling by horse and rail through the New World's famed social experiment.

Since then, countless travellers, from Borat to Baudrillard, have embarked on road trips, their goals and findings as diverse as their politics.

It's no surprise to see Canadians scribbling notes and contributing to this vibrant tradition.

Complex and absorbing portraits of the anxious, post-9/11 U.S.A., two books -- de Tocqueville-quoting *Borderlands* and *Breakfast at the Exit Cafe* -- also highlight the fact that the friendship between Canada and the U.S. is becoming increasingly strained.

Borderlands, by B.C.'s Saltspring Islander Derek Lundy, is supremely enjoyable -- an artful story, a provocative rumination -- even though the author's experiences are profoundly worrisome.

Primarily a travelogue about "the borders America has drawn, and continues to draw, around itself," *Borderlands* describes a personal journey, as well. Following the deaths of three close friends in their early 50s, Lundy (who was born in 1946) craved "adventure and fast, exhilarating movement" to shake off despondency.

For better or worse, he found what he was looking for. After a near-disastrous start on his new Kawasaki, he began a trip along the Mexico-U. S. border that soon led him into tense militarization -- a Border Patrol zone where suspicion, search and seizure without probable cause, and intimidation were mundane occurrences, and where "prejudices, fears, obsessions, and virtues, as well" were evident to varying degrees.

Lundy -- erudite, reasonable and amusingly self-deprecating -- provides succinct historical overviews throughout, reminding us of what the here-and-now is founded on. "If Canadians want to see the future of their border with the United States, they need only look south to the Mexican," he writes. And in the first chapter of his northern borderland ride, he identifies a growing problem: Canada is perceived to be weak, too liberal and too laid-back; rightly or not, it is regarded as an oasis for terrorists hell-bent on destroying American freedoms.

After the southern travelogue's brilliance, Lundy's account of his journey from Maine to Washington is somewhat less captivating. Although he covers more territory, he dedicates fewer pages to it and appears to spend less time chatting with the locals.

In contrast to Derek Lundy's precise travel strategy, Wayne Grady and Marilyn Simonds's *Breakfast at the Exit Cafe* is the result of a spontaneous, improvised drive through 22 states in a Toyota Echo, beginning in late 2006. The couple, having "no itinerary (and) no agenda," dipped into southwestern British Columbia and resurfaced, two months and 15,000 kilometres later, close by their home near Kingston, Ont.

Rather than proceed with a conventional co-authoring, they take turns, each penning half of the short sections in each of the book's 14 chapters. It's an attractive choice. As they barrel along interstates and winding highways, Grady's smouldering distrust and apparent dislike of the U.S. is literally shoulder-to-shoulder with Simonds's quizzicality and eye for offbeat detail.

Despite the differences in point of view, it doesn't take long for a reader to notice their outstanding commonality: bookishness. Where Lundy pursued conversations with all manner of Americans, Grady and Simonds seem far less inclined to speak with strangers. Their comfort lies in making reference to other travellers' texts -- to what Simone de Beauvoir observed, John Steinbeck claimed, Jonathan Raban wrote, Jack Kerouac saw, and so on.

If one result of this style is engagingly literary (we see how much the authors know about what thinkers have said about the U.S. over the years), the net effect of all the quotation is insularity. Too often, *Breakfast* feels remote, as though the authors filtered their experience through books at the expense of getting out of the car and talking to people.

Both travelogues leave readers with a sense of a familiar American paradox: It is at once a land of generosity, hope and acceptance and a nation of intolerance, despair and paranoid distrust. Circa 2010, however, the cause for fear is that the ugly negative qualities are on the ascent.

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