

# LRC

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JONATHAN KAY

## Sickening wealth

*Why rising inequality hurts even the rich*



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# Through a Windshield Darkly

*Canadian writers drive in search of the American identity.*

MARK FRUTKIN

**Breakfast at the Exit Café**  
*Wayne Grady and Marilyn Simonds*  
Greystone Books  
317 pages, hardcover  
ISBN 9781553655220

A FIELD GUIDE TO THE AMERICAN CITIZEN

**Range and Behaviour:** Found from sea to sea. Tend to nest in suburban homes and highrise apartments. While abandoning city cores throughout the continent, they can be found in big box malls shopping for useless trinkets to bring home to the nest.

**Appearance:** From dangerously thin to grotesquely obese and everything in between.

**Voice:** Male gives a booming “thump, thump, thump” while female’s cry includes chattering and rattling notes. Seldom silent, given to expressing opinions forcefully. Known by Grady and Simonds as “assertive extroverts.”

**Status:** Found in varying numbers all over the world, quite often in military uniform; not yet endangered.



**M**OST CANADIANS WILL ADMIT TO CONSIDERABLE ambivalence in their feelings about America. As a former American (I became a Canadian citizen in 1976), I share that ambivalence. A complex nation, America is also a land riddled with contradiction. In *Breakfast at the Exit Café*, an engaging travelogue by two of Canada’s esteemed writers, we gain a front-seat view, literally through the windshield, of those contradictions. Wayne Grady and Marilyn Simonds begin their journey in Vancouver, deciding to return to their home in eastern Ontario by driving their Toyota Echo through America in a 15,000-kilometre U, passing through 22 states, taking in much of the western and southern and some of the eastern United States.

*Mark Frutkin’s novel, Fabrizio’s Return (Knopf, 2006), won the 2006 Trillium Award and was a finalist for the Commonwealth Award (Canada/Caribbean Region). His most recent book is Erratic North: A Vietnam Draft Resister’s Life in the Canadian Bush. He was born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio, but his mother was from Toronto.*

Anglo-Canadians travelling in the U.S. gain a distinct advantage over other foreigners—they can remain completely invisible if they wish. They can travel in disguise by being careful not to say “eh,” “veranda” or “chesterfield.” They can choose to reveal their foreignness, or they can easily pass as Americans. Americans from much of the U.S. (without the Southern or East Coast accents) have the same advantage in Canada. This allows the traveller a unique perspective. To be inside and outside at the same time. To take part in everyday life, seemingly, and yet have the observational opportunities afforded to the visitor.

Grady and Simonds take full advantage of these opportunities. They hand the pen back and forth throughout their journey, each taking a few pages to comment on the passing scene before turning it over again to the other. They are not recording a conversation but sitting side by side, looking out the car window, commenting on the passing scene. This unusual structure works surprisingly well.

There is no doubt we are travelling with writers. The first twelve pages alone include references to

Gary Snyder, Madame Bovary, David Suzuki, Alice Munro, Cicero, Emerson, John McPhee, Steinbeck, Larry McMurry, William Least Heat-Moon and many others. In every hick town, they stop to check out the local bookstore. As Grady says, “good travel is like good reading. It sucks you into a world and holds you there.”

And what a complex, fascinating read America continues to be. We learn from Grady and Simonds that profound differences exist between the northwest coast and California (the authors tended to avoid large cities), between the Southwest and the deep South. Nothing new in these revelations, of course, but seeing them through the eyes of two insightful visitors provides an intriguingly fresh perspective. Even as our guides contemplate the differences among these regions, they note the recurring sameness of American monoculture—ubiquitous sprawling suburbs and empty town cores, cookie-cutter Walmarts, identical hotel chains, throughways that could be slashing across any landscape in North America. With this in mind, the authors tend to travel on smaller highways and stay at rural

motels, where the distinct flavours and markings of the local habitat and its denizens have not yet been erased and replaced.

Regionalism can cut many different ways. Although the drift of history and political culture in North America tends to run east to west, there also exist “vertical countries,” or pockets of similarity that ignore borders. Residents of British Columbia and Washington State share many common interests and problems. Persistent rain and omnipresent Starbucks, for example. Simonds writes as they zip across the tidal flats of the northwest that “the landscape refuses nationality.” An Ohioan and an Ontarian often have more in common with one another, in terms of cultural identity and natural environs, than they do with an Inuit, a Newfoundlander, a Texan or a Hopi Indian. Montrealers and New Yorkers, Torontonians and Chicagoans all share similar difficulties: traffic congestion, noise and air pollution, crime, high-priced real estate. They also share the same advantages: high-paying jobs, good schools, access to culture, excellent restaurants and so on.

Despite these similarities, Simonds and Grady point out that Americans manifest one distinct difference—many tend to remain blind to the rest of the world, which neatly dovetails with their belief that the U.S. is the centre of the universe, the only remaining great power, the world’s saviour. Manifest destiny is still the guiding spirit of America. It is God’s country, after all. Why would anyone ever want to live anywhere else? Isn’t this, they insist, not only the greatest nation in the world, but (as I have heard it expressed) the greatest in the history of the world?

At the same time, there exists a kind of political unity in America that we do not experience in the same way in Canada. In the U.S., the major questions do not threaten the actual existence of the country (at least since the Civil War). In Canada, it seems that every major political question implies possible catastrophe, the existence of the nation hanging in the balance: the status of Quebec, provincial versus federal power, Native rights, Western separation.

Despite this ongoing sense of unity, power and privilege in the U.S., the recent global financial earthquake appears to have shaken the foundations of American security. It is hard not to stare in disbelief when the U.S. national debt is more than \$11.5 trillion and annual military expenditures in 2010 hover between \$880 billion and \$1.03 trillion, approximately equal to what the rest of the world, combined, spends on military junk. The decline of the American empire, as a subject of discussion, is suddenly on the radar.

And well it should be. There appears to be a distinct wobble in the American juggernaut, glaringly obvious in the background during the Grady and Simonds journey. This is most apparent in the inability of the country to solve certain intractable problems. The American addiction to oil is one, the decline in educational standards another. It covers an incredibly wide range of obstacles from rampant obesity to cities and towns rotting at the core. They cannot even manage to close Guantanamo, a seemingly simple task compared to other problems, although that infamous prison stands as a symbol to the world of American hypocrisy, the abject failure of American ideals, a negation of a concept of justice shared across the western world. (Concerning Guantanamo, one cannot resist quoting Georges

Clemenceau: “Military justice is to justice what military music is to music.”) In any case, it is clearly a complex country with a deep malaise. Meanwhile, a hardening of political stances between red and blue states is leading to paralysis. There are no simple answers, and yet little will exists to join together to solve the many intractable problems.

In *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire*, the respected author and thinker Niall Ferguson has warned of America’s decline. Because complex systems are fragile systems, he says, the decline could be precipitous rather than slow and steady. Our governments and our societies would

## Certain untouchable subjects must not be broached: religion, race, politics, sexuality. And one must never question the place of America in the world.

have little time to react to the new reality. Of course, no one can safely predict when or how this might happen.

In another sense, America (and the rest of the globe for that matter) is fragile because it is so connected. Grady and Simonds were 21st-century travellers, using the internet to find lodging in the next town, staying in touch with writing students back home on their laptops from a Louisiana cafe. Incredible power as well as astonishing fragility characterize our technological systems: the internet, linked power grids, interconnected financial services, and so on. In a multi-point to multi-point system, pulling the plug brings everything down in one tangled heap. In that scenario, I doubt the U.S. Marines or unmanned drones will be any help at all.

Americans—so like us Canadians and yet so different. We learn that simple fact over and over as Grady and Simonds stay at mom-and-pop motels or familiar hotel chains, or discover a fine restaurant or are stuck eating whatever they can scabble together in the car. And, of course, Starbucks everywhere. Just like here. And the land, so vast and so varied. The authors are able to share their wonder at the overwhelming beauty of the Grand Canyon while commenting with insight on the dispiriting Disneyland that surrounds it.

Grady and Simonds prove particularly adept at describing the landscape and the environment (Grady has written a number of books on environmental issues and the natural world): “We drive between red canyon walls that loom above us, looking almost sculpted in the way their crenelated tops resemble chimneys and battlements, their crowns and lower talus approaches fringed with evergreens.” They also pay close attention to the local birds. They are not the kind of birders who make a religion out of it, but they are quick to grab the binoculars and report on who is still afloat in the avian environment.

If one is to travel well, one wants good travel companions. Travellers who arrive with their eyes and hearts open, acute observers with the skill to separate the steak from the sizzle. Virgils with wit. A Bill Bryson or a Redmond O’Hanlon. Grady and Simonds share a sense of humour with these others and the ability to realize (and bare) their own foibles and failings.

Some of the most affecting sections of this journey explore the state of race relations as they

exist today in the southern United States. From the authors’ perspective, not much has changed. This subject is particularly pertinent because one of Grady’s ancestors was a slave and he delivers a fair amount of fascinating information on this scourge.

In one particularly telling anecdote, Simonds describes attending the Martin Luther King Jr. Day parade in Selma, Alabama, the largest in the United States. After two hours of watching high school bands marching past and politicians tossing candies, Simonds turns to leave and realizes hers “has been the only white face in the crowd.”

A subtext, a dark undercurrent, informs their meetings with Americans. This is something anyone can notice travelling in the U.S., especially in the South. A hearty friendliness is apparent on the surface, and a genuine generosity tends to prevail. However, certain untouchable subjects must not be broached: religion, race, politics, sexuality. And one must never question the place of America in the world. Touch on these subjects and the smile dissolves. They are not up for rational discussion.

Near the end of the book and their journey, Grady writes:

Partly, I still think what I thought before we made this trip, because those thoughts were based on the image America projects to the outside world: its overweening sense of its own rightness, its casual assumption that it can buy or sell whatever it wants, its ability to proceed as though everything were on the table, its refusal to learn from its own history.

I cannot forgive America for what it forced my great-grandfather to do. Or for what it has done to its rivers and forests and mountains and deserts, which seems to me to be almost on a par ... Am I still anti-American? No, and I suspect I never really was. It is not anti-American to wish America had been better than it was, or to want it to be better than it is.

The Grady-Simonds journey took place in the last days of the Bush administration. In a strictly political sense, it feels as if we are back in prehistory. When Simonds reads about the presidential campaign in a newspaper, she mentions to her partner that the United States could end up with a black president. Grady comments: “America would be another country.”

One senses a great disappointment across the political spectrum that it has turned out to be, in fact, the same country. The very fact of the election of a black president seemed so unlikely at the time that it felt like a new age was upon us. Hope blossomed in a thousand dark corners. But Obama came into office with impossible expectations weighing him down. America’s problems are profound. The rest of the world shares or will share many of those same obstacles, so we have an interest in seeing how America fares and wishing them well. Yet there appears to be a lack of good will, a kind of paralysis, in trying to deal with them. To use a particularly apt metaphor for the age, is the American empire running out of gas?

In the early 20th century, Clemenceau also said: “America is the only nation in history which miraculously has gone directly from barbarism to degeneration without the usual interval of civilization.” An exaggeration, of course, but one with a disturbing modicum of truth. LRC