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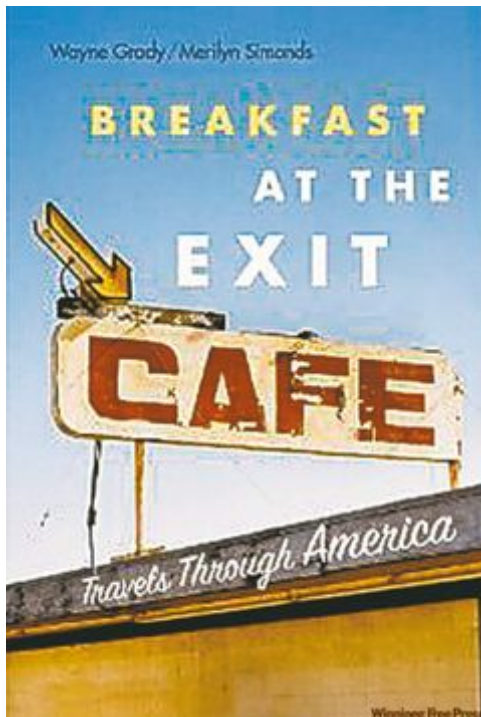
BREAKFAST AT THE EXIT CAFE, by Wayne Grady and Marilyn Simonds (GS, 9781553655220, \$32.95)

Their back seat an entertaining place

Reviewed by: Douglas J. Johnston



Grady and Simonds take turns as trip narrator.



Breakfast at the Exit Café

Travels Through America

By Wayne Grady and Marilyn Simonds

Greystone Books, 308 pages, \$33

Wayne Grady and Marilyn Simonds are a couple. They're also a couple of writers -- very good ones on the evidence here.

Grady, a science writer, and Simonds a fiction and literary non-fiction author, make their home near Kingston, Ont. Their book is about a six-week journey by car through the United States, headed for that home.

But that nutshell description doesn't do the book justice. This is travel writing that aspires to being travel literature, and largely succeeds.

In late December 2006, Simonds finished a stint as writer-in-residence at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, where she was joined by Grady.

To avoid driving home across the Rockies and Canadian Prairies in the dead of winter, they decided to detour south through the U.S. By the time they got home, they had driven more than 15,000 kilometres through 22 American states.

Grady and Simonds take turns as trip narrator. And they seamlessly transition from one writer's voice to the other's.

There's nary a duplication of events nor a chronological disconnect in the hand-offs from husband to wife, and vice versa. Even their meditations on people and landscape are complementary without being repetitive.

Each likes to lecture a little bit, but never pedantically.

Between the lines of travel narrative they provide potted but interesting histories of places, musings on stuff they buy and the restaurants they eat in, and analysis of the politics and culture of regions.

They steadfastly avoided staying in chain motels and dining in chain restaurants, in order to escape homogenization and capture local colour.

Swaths of the American South, in particular, stirred their intellects to astute reflections on its past, near past and present.

Often they convey a state or city's complexities by emphasizing its locals' customs and habits. Intentional or not, this adds a lustre of romance to places, especially small towns and lesser cities, otherwise bereft of it.

At core, the book presents a series of slices of Americana, as considered and portrayed through Canuck eyes.

Not unexpectedly, at times both Grady and Simonds come off as reflexively anti-American, a Canadian trait not singular to them.

Grady, in particular, has a legitimate ancestral axe to grind. His forebears were refugee American slaves, "who worked their way up from Kentucky into Indiana and Michigan in the 1800s, marrying whites and slowly turning from black to mulatto before arriving in Canada in 1880."

But by journey's end it's Grady, not Simonds, who's second-guessing his biases.

"Could it be that my nervousness at crossing the border was unfounded?" he writes.

"No one has turned me in to Homeland Security for having uncharitable thoughts about George Bush. This isn't Stalinist Russia. Everyone we've met has been friendly and helpful.

"I liked being in Seattle, and Fairhaven, and Eureka. I really liked being in Santa Fe, and I didn't even mind being in Selma. And all those places were America."

Grady and Simonds have a shared esthetic.

It mandates that the reader be entertained even as he or she is being educated -- a technique easy to describe, but tough to pull off. But pull it off, Grady and Simonds do.

This is a travel book that travels well.