

The Lincoln Highway, An American Road Trip

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The Lincoln Highway is a propulsive and multilayered joyride about a group of young friends setting out to create their futures in 1950s America. From the onset it seems obvious that our heroes, Emmett and his brainy sidekick brother Billy, are survivors; while our anti heroes, the stowaways Duchess and Woolly, were destined to come to no good end. Nonetheless, Towles hitches us onto this wild ride in this engaging tour de force of storytelling.

Like his first two novels, The Lincoln Highway is masterfully constructed and compulsively readable. Again, one of the ideas that Towles explores is how evil can be offset by decency and kindness across his characters. They include: male and female, black and white, rich and poor.

The saga of this ten day madcap road trip is told from the perspectives of multiple characters. This allows for insightful individual character exposition and development, but presents the challenge of a disruptive shifting of gears. Occasionally various chapter conclusions can leave the reader in a state of confusion.

Throughout the novel, an array of stories is recounted - drawn from Professor Abernath's Compendium, from the Vaudevillian world of Duchess's father, from Shakespeare and movies. These stories help shape the different characters' lives and personalities. Billy's well-thumbed compendium of adventure stories featuring 26 heroes from Achilles to Zorro. From his cherished book, Billy puts forward the characteristics of specific heroes that further and reinforce the progress of the novel. The novel progressively reveals the "Y" chapter of the compendium - "Y" for You as the reader's adventure.

This novel makes use of the description of legacy. Emmett's father leaves Emmett a quotation from Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance" as part of his legacy. Emerson argues that potential within the individual is new to nature, and that we have no idea of what we can achieve until we

have tried. This quintessentially American optimism on the potential of upward mobility motivates Emmett as he hopes to achieve success in the scheme of buying and flipping homes. "Self reliance" for Duchess involves a motivation to settle scores. "Self- reliance" for Sally focusses on her escaping her father.

There are other smaller legacies in the novel. In addition to the Emerson quotation given to Emmett, there is the officer's watch handed down in the Wolcott family. This was a lifeline for Woolly, which he gave away to Billy when he resolved to end his own life. Billy's St Christopher medal was passed on to Ulysses to give him protection on his odyssey. Sally's handed-down recipes gave her the means to cook amazing food.

Through this novel, we travel via a circuitous route from Nebraska to New York's Adirondacks by way of New York City's landmarks. Over a compressed ten day period, the action-packed novel unfolds. Beholding to Huckleberry Finn, The Lincoln Highway revisits coming of age and American myths with a mix of good-hearted humor and darker outbursts of violence, recalling Doctorow's work such as Ragtime.

In this novel, the chapters count down from Day Ten to Day One as they build to a knockout climax. Spanning these ten days and told from the perspectives of multiple characters, Towles third novel is a multilayered tale of misadventure, retribution, and self discovery. Our intrepid young travelers encounter an eclectic cast of characters including drifters who make their homes riding the rails to larger-than-life vaudevillians to aristocrats of the Upper East Side. Through this novel, we have been taken on an absorbing and exhilarating ride, rivaling Mr Toad's Wild Ride from Wind in the Willows. Throughout this road trip, Towles creates distinctive, unforgettable characters through their own voices composed of their language, syntax, and poetry. The Lincoln Highway transports us on a vivid sweeping epic journey, which we have come to expect from Towles's work.