

# ROAD TRIP

by Roland Merullo

EDITOR'S NOTE: According to Roland Merullo, his new novel, *Breakfast with Buddha*, had two distinct origins: his love of travel (and maps), and his abiding interest in what he terms "The Big



Roland Merullo,

author of

*Breakfast with Buddha*



**M**y idea of fun is to take out my family's dog-eared Rand McNally and stand over it for half an hour, inspecting the Oklahoma panhandle or the northwesternmost corner of Washington State and wondering what the land looks like there. I'm especially attracted to places where there are no roads, or where the roads are so small and untraveled that the big map does not show them. At certain points in my life I've developed odd fascinations with various parts of the Lower 48: Michigan's Upper Peninsula, the outer banks of North Carolina, that pointed part of Texas that tucks itself under the bottom of New Mexico. And for the last decade or so I've nurtured a mild obsession with North Dakota. Until this past summer it was one of only five states I hadn't visited—it is, in fact, the least visited of the contiguous states—and my imagina-

*Questions.*" To write this book, he took both a literal journey and a literary journey, and in the process found a few answers—and even more big questions.

tion made it into a place of huge, unpeopled vistas haunted by the ghosts of slaughtered buffalo and extinct Indian tribes.

Why such a place should be connected, in my mind, with questions about the meaning and purpose of our lives here on earth I'm not sure. I guess I believe that answering those questions requires a partial or intermittent turning-away from the busy world. A little quiet time. North Dakota, or my fantasy version of North Dakota at least, seemed like a quiet place. Chest-high snowdrifts on vast plains, wheat fields stretching to the horizon—that type of thing. It drew me in much the same way that a quiet, empty interior moment does: It's not true to say there's nothing there, not true to say it's boring.

So I had this idea: drive to North Dakota and write a book about it, a book in which the landscapes, restaurants, and ra-

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dio reports were true to life and the action and conversations were made up, a book that entertained and amused while at the same time saying something about America, and about the Big Questions. I wanted to write about the *getting there*, not just the *being there*, partly because I'm enthralled by the surprises of the American road—visual, culinary, linguistic, cultural. Since I was a boy I've also been fascinated by the different ways people explain the mystery of life to themselves. Sometimes these explanations are codified into an organized religion; other times they stray off on their own, a religion of one, quirky, crazy-making, helpful. It seems to me that there is a real hunger for spiritual guidance in contemporary America. But it also seems that the discussion is absolutely lacking in a humorous dimension, as if the Holy Ones must be somber, studious types who never laugh. My own experience with spiritual masters has been just the opposite: the physical world seems funny to them, often hilarious.

Out of this stew came *Breakfast with Buddha*, a funny road-trip novel that begins in New York and ends in North Dakota and that tackles questions about meaning and purpose along the way. Beneath the humor are some important questions that have been raised since the beginning of recorded history: What are we doing here? What should we be doing here? Where are we headed after we're done here?

The danger, of course, in writing about such things is that you can end up sounding like you believe that you know the answers. But the less obvious danger is writing as if

there *are* no answers and can't be. It's obvious to me that there have been—and are—ordinary human beings who know something extraordinary. I've done a vast amount of reading across the different religious traditions, and I've seen people—ordinary people—

who seemed to embody this great wisdom, in the way they speak to their children, or wrap a sandwich for you at a deli, or drive a bus. So I've given those traits and that wisdom to Volya Rinpoche, a monk of no particular denomination, and bounced them against Otto Ringling, a decent, straightlaced guy with

not much tolerance, at first, for ways of thinking about the world that have not come from his own tradition.

When I took an actual road trip from the suburbs of New York to North Dakota, I made the journey in two parts: in May and then August 2006, the first part alone and the second with my wife and two young daughters. In the book, I tried to be faithful to the facts of the route: the landscape, the lodging, the restaurant meals, what I heard on the radio and saw in the newspapers. My hope was that this factual material would act as a ballast and keep the boat on keel as I sailed into the wilder, uncharted, very personal waters of spiritual questioning. Those interior sailing trips into the uncharted worlds should, I think, be embarked upon from a more solid, better-known territory, dry land as it were. Maybe that's where my love of maps and road travel comes from, that need for a secure, known place, a point from which to venture off into the North Dakotas of the imagination. ■

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—ROLAND MERULLO

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