

Journey Stories

Stories of journeys are found in the myths, religions, literature, and history of every culture. Some journey stories explain the origin of a people as they emerge from underground to live on the earth, as in Jicarilla Apache legend. Physical journeys are often undertaken to facilitate a spiritual journey inward, as in the “vision quests” of many cultures, or to symbolize a transition in status, as in the “walkabout” that transforms a youth to a man in aboriginal Australian culture. Both the old and new testaments of the Bible feature stories of journeys, from the Exodus to Jesus’s wandering in the desert. Underlying all of these stories is the conception of life as a journey.

Recorded human history also depicts the movement of people. Marauding Germanic invaders descended upon the Roman Empire in the 3rd and 4th centuries. The Diaspora of the Jews from their homeland beginning in the 6th century resulted in Jewish colonies all over Europe. Napoleon’s armies marched across Europe in the early 1800s. The history of the United States consists of numerous journeys as well: the ocean voyages of the first colonists, the journey known as the Trail of Tears that forced members of the five civilized tribes from their homes in the southeastern United States to Indian Territory, and the opening of the western territories to settlement in the late 1800s among them. Even natural history has its journey stories, such as the annual migrations of birds and butterflies and the arduous upriver journey of Pacific salmon to spawn.

In western literary tradition, the grandfather of all journey stories is the *Odyssey*, so we begin this reading and discussion series with Homer’s epic poem. Even those who have never read the *Odyssey* are familiar with some of its contents. The poem is so much a part of our culture that its very title is now an English word meaning a difficult adventure-filled journey. We know that the Cyclops is a one-eyed giant blinded by Odysseus, that we should close our ears to the song of the sirens (unless they are attached to emergency vehicles), and that navigating between Scylla and Charybdis is to be between a rock and a hard place.

Poets, novelists, film makers, and others have drawn on the story of the *Odyssey* for centuries to create new works or to reinterpret the old one. Alfred, Lord Tennyson imagines Odysseus in his old age planning yet another journey in his poem, “Ulysses.” James Joyce, in his seminal novel *Ulysses*, recreates the *Odyssey* as a day in the life of his protagonist, Leopold Bloom. The Coen brothers’ 2000 film, *O Brother, Where Art Thou*,

draws on the *Odyssey* to tell a tale set in the American South during the Depression. *The Penelopiad* by Margaret Atwood imagines the story from the point of view of Odysseus' wife, Penelope. In *No-Man's Land*, Scott Huler does his best to retrace Odysseus' actual journey and to learn the lessons of the *Odyssey* first-hand. Like so many of us, Huler believed that he had read the *Odyssey* until his wife presented him with a copy and he discovered that he had never read it before. Upon finally reading Homer's epic, he found that "(t)his was a book worth more than a simple reading. This was a book, at long last, worth the return. I read it again, then again. I came to see the passage of Odysseus from Troy to Ithaca as a metaphor, a series of adventures in which Odysseus demonstrates what he needs to learn—or unlearn—to live his life" (Huler, p. 8).

Although Odysseus' journey was harrowing, the reader is enthralled by his adventures. Americans in particular have been lured by the siren song of the open road, and many of us have deliberately set out on a journey in search of adventure rather than a destination. *On the Road*, *Travels with Charley*, and *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* all describe journeys of this kind. With the final reading for this series, *The Life of Pi*, we return again to the realm of myth and fantasy, although the onset of the journey—from India to a new home in Canada—is presented in realistic terms as a true story.

The Odyssey **by Homer**

When first written down, around 700 B.C., whether by the author himself or by a scribe to whom he recited the poem, the *Odyssey* was recorded on papyrus scrolls—perhaps twenty-four of them, one for each book—as the poem is too long to have survived intact on a single scroll. The *Odyssey* as we know it represents a culmination of an oral tradition and contains within it echoes of that tradition in its epithets and repeated passages—mnemonic devices to help the bard or reciter and to remind the audience of which narrative they are hearing. The poem is a *nostos*—the root of our word “nostalgia”—one of many tales of the homecomings of heroes of the Trojan war and the only one still existent in its entirety.

After ten years of war, this particular hero Odysseus, because he has offended the sea-god Poseidon, is delayed from his homecoming for another ten years. The structure of the narrative is intriguingly complex, beginning with Odysseus near the end of his journey and including his son Telemachus's journey in search of news of his father. Odysseus himself is the narrator of most of his journey, telling his tale to his hosts, the Phaeacians, before they assist him on his final voyage back to Ithaca.

On the Road
by Jack Kerouac

The most famous manuscript of *On the Road* was, like a modern version of the *Odyssey*, typed on long pages taped together to create a scroll. Kerouac began trying to write a road novel in 1948, making several attempts before the scroll of April 1951 when he realized that the story should have the immediacy of a first-person narrator, finally named from a misreading of a manuscript poem by his friend Alan Ginsberg as “Sal Paradise” (Charters, p. 86). The novel’s material came from Kerouac’s travel journals of various trips across the United States and to Mexico, and its characters are his real friends and acquaintances given fictional names. The scroll version was never presented to a publisher, but it was edited and retyped at least twice. The novel in full wasn’t published until 1957.

Kerouac himself compared his work to Joyce’s *Ulysses* and expected it to be treated as seriously (Charters, p. 154). The novel is filled with Whitmanian exuberance for the experiences of the road, and as with Walt Whitman, for Kerouac the journey is more important than any destination, although—like Odysseus—Sal Paradise ultimately comes home. John Leland in *Why Kerouac Matters* describes Sal’s journeys as “encounters with myth” that “are part of Sal’s education in the postwar landscape As Sal moves horizontally around the country, he moves vertically through the America of Hollywood, Wild West Week, Whitman, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Moby Dick*, bebop, and his own romantic imagination” (p. 16).

The seeming aimlessness of Sal and his friends came to symbolize for reviewers and readers the anti-establishment free-spirited Beat generation, but Kerouac is describing characters who are “beat” in the sense of being tired, seeking something they cannot define except as “IT,” and being stalked by death.

Travels with Charley: In Search of America
by John Steinbeck

Steinbeck begins his memoir-travelogue, published in 1962, with this definition of a journey:

A journey is a person in itself; no two are alike. And all plans, safeguards, policing, and coercion are fruitless. We find after years of struggle that we do not take a trip; a trip takes us.

Yet the trip on which Steinbeck embarks is carefully planned, including the design of a vehicle in which to make it: “a three-quarter-ton pick-up truck” with a fully equipped camper attached to its bed, which Steinbeck dubs “Rocinante” after Don Quixote’s horse. His only companion on the trip is his standard French poodle Charley, who proves to be a good conversation starter for strangers encountered on the road.

A little more than a decade after Kerouac made the journeys that were the source of *On the Road*, in 1960 Steinbeck sets out with a similar motive: “to rediscover this monster land” and to discover what real Americans are thinking. What he encounters is often dismaying—the ubiquity of trash that symbolizes for Steinbeck our wastefulness or the racism he encounters in New Orleans. He is also amazed by the offerings of vending machines at truck stops and fascinated by mobile home parks.

In travelling the periphery of the United States, Steinbeck visits family and friends in California. With his sisters, he finds that “The main purpose of this homecoming seemed to be fighting over politics.” After revisiting old haunts and seeing old friends, he concludes, “Tom Wolfe was right. You can’t go home again because home has ceased to exist except in the mothballs of memory.”

Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance

by Robert M. Pirsig

In *Travels with Charley*, Steinbeck says, “I am in love with Montana.” In *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Montana is the immediate destination of Pirsig, his son, and their friends John and Sylvia, but “plans are deliberately indefinite, more to travel than to arrive anywhere.” They are travelling by motorcycle, choosing back roads and eschewing the Interstates, extolling the immediacy of their experience as compared to travelling by car:

In a car you’re always in a compartment and . . . through that car window everything you see is just more TV. You’re a passive observer and it is all moving by you boringly in a frame. On a cycle the frame is gone. You’re completely in contact with it all.

In addition to the physical journey that covers seventeen days from the Twin Cities to San Francisco, Pirsig takes the reader on an intellectual journey that he describes as a Chautauqua—the “Inquiry into Values” which is the book’s subtitle—while Pirsig himself undergoes a spiritual journey. Although *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* is generally shelved with books on philosophy, several early reviewers described it as a novel, and the book has been compared to both *Moby Dick* and *On the Road*. And though Pirsig never cites the *Odyssey*, his Chautauqua takes him back to the ancient Greeks in his search for the roots of the irreconcilable dualities that he sees as characteristic of Western thought.

The Life of Pi
by Yann Martel

Yann Martel’s *The Life of Pi* won the prestigious Booker Prize for fiction in 2002. Presented as if it were a true story, only the frame of the “Author’s Note” that begins the novel reflects Martel’s actual experience. He did visit India in 1999 with the idea of completing a third novel, he did study philosophy in college, and his concluding statement is the core of his belief as a writer: “If we, citizens, do not support our artists, then we sacrifice our imagination on the altar of crude reality and we end up believing in nothing and have worthless dreams.” Martel’s novel is very much about the relationship of reality and story. As he says in an essay on how he came to write *The Life of Pi* (Powells.com), “the theme (is) that reality is a story and we can choose our story... so why not pick ‘the better story’ (the novel’s key words).”

The book begins at the end of the story, and its protagonist Piscine Molitor Patel, like Odysseus, is the narrator of his own story. Pi (as he renames himself after the Greek letter in order to avoid being teased) is an Odysseus-like character in many ways. Both Pi and Odysseus experience shipwrecks, build rafts, encounter cannibals, and visit magical but dangerous islands. However, although Odysseus is kept from home for ten years, his time at sea is relatively brief, while Pi spends 227 days in a lifeboat. Like Odysseus, Pi must rely on his ingenuity to survive the dangers of being adrift on the Pacific Ocean with a Bengal tiger, ironically named Richard Parker. The novel also contains a defense of zoos and explores humankind’s relationship with animals.

For further reading:

Atwood, Margaret. *The Penelopiad*. New York: Canongate, 2005.

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