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Metal Cowboy: Tales from the Road Less Pedaled
Joe Kurmaskie
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Joe Kurmaskie is the kind of guy someone would want as an airplane seatmate or at his or her table at a wedding reception. Since that's unlikely, it is fortunate that he has written an incredibly entertaining, vivid account of the people met and experiences collected during his trips bicycling around the world, mostly in the U.S.

Kurmaskie espouses the philosophy that it is the journey, not the destination, that counts. Accordingly, Metal Cowboy is not a chronology of his travels. In one chapter, he is in easternmost Maine, trying to reach the spot where the rising sun first strikes the U.S. In the next, he's in Arizona. He attends a prom in Pennsylvania and mingles with an Elvis impersonator contingent in Utah. He rides with a double lower leg amputee in Georgia and a former Tour de France contender in New Zealand.

Often introspective and insightful, the Metal Cowboy—the title is also Kurmaskie's nickname—avoids delving too deeply into the meaning and lessons of his experiences, and refrains from forcing them on the reader. A good example is the Pennsylvania prom story. As he and his date—whom he met earlier that day at a gas station air pump—do the hokey-pokey, he reflects on the lyrics: You put your whole self in /You put your whole self out/And you shake it all about. "Maybe that is what it's all about," he reflects.

Kurmaskie mixes up food for thought with wonderfully wry writing and vivid imagery. Recounting a stint as a bike messenger, he recalls speed as the only hiring criteria. “This particular business model runs into conflicts with the most basic of traffic laws, good sense and self preservation,” he observes. On cycling in the Pacific Northwest, he says: “When you cycle for days under the big trees of the Pacific Northwest, it begins to feel like everything around you is breathing. Moist, green and fertile, the texture of the land…seeps into your pores.”
Best of all, Metal Cowboy doesn’t flaunt his lifestyle or dismiss members of the majority nine-to-five society as uncourageous dullards. He regards his travels as a privilege.

In an early chapter, he recalls a conversation with the double lower leg amputee, whose disability was at that time unknown: “He let me rant about the injustices of the world while I enjoyed the freedom of being a healthy, young white man on a bicycle in the richest country on earth, during the most prosperous time in history. The irony of the situation escaped me.”

Readers should not let Kurmaskie’s book escape them. It is alternately amusing and touching and always well written. It is particularly appropriate as a gift to someone who will soon graduate or anyone who is considering a change in lifestyle.

Cari Noga