

The Lincoln Highway journey sets the stage for examining goals and conscience

I must confess that *The Lincoln Highway* is one of the most unsavory novels I have read in a long time.

In the guise of a road-trip adventure narrative, the novel reveals a bleak, violent world populated by broken characters who either exploit others or have been exploited by them.

Despite the number of cars, trucks, trains and boats that dominate the novel's imagery, the travelers in the story do not get anywhere. Cars get stolen, hijacked or run out of gas; the novel's characters hop railway cars in secret, while legitimate trains operate on schedules and legitimate passengers have tickets; and boats are set adrift without oars.

For the figures in this journey narrative, life offers mostly dead ends.

Homecoming

At the outset of the novel, Emmett Watson returns to his family home after serving time at a work camp for



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accidentally killing someone in a brawl. His father has died, and now Emmett plans to take his 8-year-old brother Billy on a cross-country trip to a place where they can start a new life.

Billy, in contrast, has planned an alternate trip to San Francisco, where the boys can search for their mother, who had abandoned them years earlier. Both of these plans are detailed, logical and carefully prepared – they have all the necessary components for success.

However, they do not have room for the disruptive, sinister forces that pervade the world Emmett and Billy must navigate.

The novel's opening sequence presents a microcosm of the narrative as a whole. Emmett is being driven home by Warden Williams, who gives him an encouraging talk about starting his life over on the right foot.

All the ingredients for this new life await Emmett: his loving younger brother, a small bequest left by his father, an old Studebaker ready to take on the open road and even the suggestion of a

budding romance between Emmett and his reliable friend Sally.

Unbeknownst to Emmett, however, Duchess and Woolly, two boys from the work camp, have escaped by stowing away in the trunk of the Warden's car, thus turning a vehicle that seems to carry hopes of a new beginning into a Pandora's box where discord is hiding.

Once Duchess and Woolly emerge, they literally hijack Emmett's car and his narrative, and they replace Emmett's goal-oriented quest with a meandering journey characterized by chaos, violence and death.

The negativity and disappointment of Emmett's experience are highlighted by almost constant references to famous narratives that validate charity, endurance and ultimate victory.

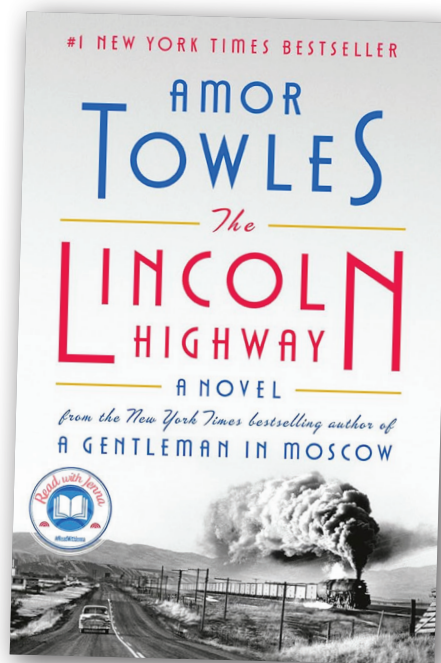
Once the novel invokes these well-known stories, hope enters the narrative equation — only to be crushed by the reality of the novel's main plot and characters.

Harmful disruptions

For example, early on their journey, Duchess persuades Emmett to stop at the orphanage where Duchess lived as a child. What looks like a sentimental moment turns into chaos, as Duchess breaks into the orphanage, barricades the nuns who supervise it into their rooms and wakes all the children in order to feed them jars of strawberry preserves and let them run amok.

Emmett understandably responds in anger. Yet Sister Agnes, who remembers Duchess from his days at the orphanage, encourages him to respond charitably — invoking both the parable of the Good Samaritan and the parable of the Prodigal Son in her instruction.

This reference to scripture inclines both Emmett and the reader to embrace a perspective of forgiveness and to hope for a good outcome. The contrast to how events actually unfold is startling: Duchess fails to benefit from the charity of others and his disruptions become more and more harmful (theft,



violence and other serious malfeasance), until they eventually lead to his death.

References to other adventure tales

The *Lincoln Highway* also makes many references to Alexandre Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo*, a novel young Billy loves to talk about.

Dumas' novel is an epic tale of wrongful imprisonment, escape and revenge. It explores the depths of human suffering and the psychological trauma of losing one's rightful place in the world.

On the surface, the story resembles Duchess' own experience. He's framed by his own father and sent to the work camp, abandoned and exploited by a parent who should have offered him protection.

However, Duchess' own journey of revenge is marred by the violence he perpetrates and the danger he imposes on Emmett and Billy. Duchess wins his victory, if we can use that term loosely, on the backs of innocents.

Finally, the story of the great Greek hero Ulysses (Odysseus) figures into the narrative on multiple levels.

First, Billy frequently reads from a volume of *Hero Stories*,

which reminds the reader about the perseverance, dangers and successful homecoming Ulysses achieves. Similarly, Billy's heart is set on reintegrating his family and repairing the damage caused by his mother's departure.

In his mind, heroes suffer in order to heal and in order to bring about a greater good. However, when Billy and Emmett actually meet a war veteran named Ulysses riding the rails, they see in him someone who has lost his family and now wanders without direction or purpose.

When "fact" meets "fiction," we hope for the possibility that life will imitate art, but, unfortunately, in *The Lincoln Highway*, life falls short time after time.

Yes, I found *The Lincoln Highway* quite unsavory, but did I love it? Absolutely. It brought me a wonderful opportunity to see how stories intersect and overlap — how the heroic and the ordinary speak to each other.

It humbled me with its accurate picture of human weakness. It inspired me to examine my own behavior and the goals I have set for my own journey. I hope it will do the same for every reader. ■



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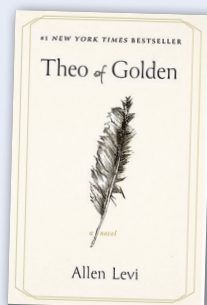
By Allen Levi

One day, an elegant elderly gentleman appears in a small town in Georgia.

He is vague about his past and non-committal about his plans.

Before long, however, he becomes an agent of happiness and light in his community.

Please read along as his quiet power unfolds.



SAINT ANSELM ABBEY