

BEHIND THE BOOK - BREAKFAST WITH BUDDHA

Sometime early in 2006 I had a call from Chuck Adams, my editor at Algonquin. Chuck told me they'd done well with *Golfing with God* and he asked if I'd be interested in writing another book along those same lines. Not about golf, but a 'quirky spiritual' novel.

"Sure," I said, "I'd be happy to."

"Great. Do you have any ideas?"

I thought for all of five seconds and said, "Yes. I love to drive. And I've been to 45 states. One of the states I haven't been to is North Dakota. I picture it as stark and somehow spiritual, beautiful, empty. I think I could drive to North Dakota and write an interesting book about it."

There was a long pause on the other end of the line and then Chuck said, "Can you be more specific?"

"Not really. I don't work by outlines. I don't plan much. I think I could just get in the car and go and something good would come of it."

Chuck sounded politely unimpressed, and the advance Algonquin ended up offering me - given the healthy sales of *Golfing with God*-reflected his and his colleagues' modest hopes for the project.

But I still thought it was a good idea, so over the next few weeks I sat down and wrote twenty or thirty pages, just to get a feel for the characters. Then I rented a car and drove off. I went first to Bronxville, where my agent at the time, Marly Rusoff, had her office. She chauffeured me around the town a bit and I took a few notes. I went into New York City for a meeting and then started my drive to North Dakota.

Unfortunately, as my family well knows, and as readers of *Taking the Kids to Italy* will understand, I am not the best person in the world when it comes to directions. On my way to North Dakota I somehow ended up in Paterson, New Jersey. I got off the highway there and just wandered around for a while, jotted down some more notes, and decided it would be a good place for Cecelia to have her house and past-life-regression business.

From there, after I got lost again, briefly, I finally figured out I should be headed west. In order to make the book more interesting, I did some things I wouldn't ordinarily do: made a tour of the Hershey's Chocolate Factory, for one good example. I tried for a mix of interstates and back roads, I kept my eyes open, took a lot of notes in a lot of rest areas, and sometimes spoke into a tape recorder as I drove. I tried to find the most unusual eating places I could, and never stayed at chain hotels. At night, I wrote scenes based on the day's travels-conversations between Otto and Rinpoche, mostly.

When I got to Chicago I handed in the rental car and flew home. Over the next month or so, while waiting for the girls to get out of school, I wrote up a more polished version of that first part of the trip, a hundred pages. Then Amanda, the girls (seven and four at the time), and I flew back to Chicago, rented a van, and just headed out. We knew we were going to North Dakota, but I didn't want to have a planned route. I saw a numbered highway leading north and took it. We ended up at Lake Superior, then we cut across the top of Minnesota (one of my favorite parts of the drive) and angled down southwest into The Peace Garden State.

I'd assumed, since Otto's family were farmers, that they'd be living in the fertile eastern part of North Dakota, and so we spent a little time checking out various towns and properties there. But I had an assignment to write about Dakotan golf, and one of the courses was in Williston, up in the northwest corner. On route to the Links of North Dakota (highly recommended by the way, for my golfing friends), we decided to pull off the interstate and have ourselves a family picnic. Completely by chance, we found a beautiful, unfenced stretch of land near Dickinson, and the day was so perfect, the family hour so memorable, that I moved the Ringling family farm to that hillier and less fertile landscape.

It took me the better part of a year to finish and polish the novel and when it came out it at first seemed to justify Chuck's lack of excitement. *Breakfast* sold just under 11,000 copies in hardcover - considerably less than *Golfing with God* - and even the first year of paperback sales was decidedly modest. But then, maybe because it got into the book club circuit or maybe just thanks to the magic of word of mouth, it kept selling and selling and selling.

The book is an odd mix of fact and fiction: all the roads in the novel are ones I actually took; all the restaurants are places I actually ate; even the radio broadcasts (with one exception, which I transferred from something I heard on a drive to Florida), aren't made up. Onto that skeleton I put the flesh and blood of characters, ideas, and conversations.

Now, ten years after that first phone conversation, *Breakfast with Buddha* is in its nineteenth printing, and it's been translated into Chinese, Korean, Croatian, and Turkish. It still sells several hundred copies a month in paperback, audio, and eBook format, and it's no exaggeration to say that with those sales, and accompanying speaking invitations, the story of our crooked drive to North Dakota has kept me in the writing business, kept a roof over our heads and food on the table. I'm grateful to the people who've bought the novel and its younger cousins, *Lunch*, and *Dinner*, and especially to those who have recommended the books to friends and/or taken the time to write me some of the most beautiful emails any author could ever hope to receive.

Where the idea for this book came from, I don't know. I've always been someone who lives - and writes - on intuition, without much of a plan, eschewing outlines. That strategy gets me lost, too often, and sometimes leads to trouble on and off the page, but it has also brought me to some fine green pastures, and the three family "*Buddha*" road trips are memories we will keep close to our hearts until we pass into the next adventure.