

This issue, we take a different approach to our book reviews. For one thing, we're no longer simply calling them "reviews"; we've changed the heading to "book club". Why? Because we hope to inspire discussion and community around the ideas in the books we suggest, whether or not we agree with them 100%. To get things rolling, *Carbusters* contributing editor Robert Zverina and frequent writer Sarah Kavage, being a carfree couple since meeting eight years ago, look at a couple of books about carfree couples. This is a transcript of their conversation, conducted via instant messenger between bedroom and home office. Ah, 21st century love!



Urban Camping: A Testament to Living without a Vehicle

Peter and Andrea Tombrowski
www.urbancamping.ca, 2006
ISBN 0-9735649-1-1

Better Off: Flipping the Switch on Technology

Eric Brende, Harper Perennial, 2004
ISBN 0-06057-0059



Urban Camping: Peter and Andrea Tombrowski lived in rural Canada where their carpentry business was in the red. They sold their truck, paid off their debts, and moved to Calgary, a city of 1.1 million where they choose to continue living without a car or bicycles. This book is a detailed guide to how and why they do it.

Better Off: Eric Brende was a graduate student of technology at MIT who with his new bride decided to live for 18 months without electricity or motors as part of what he calls a "Minimite" community — a discreet Amish-like people living an agrarian life of traditional Christian beliefs and minimal technology.

- zverinar: One thing which struck me as we tried to set up this messaging session is how frustrating technology can be. Duh. It made me want to run away, which got me to thinking how both these books concern couples who relocate: Peter and Andrea move from a rural setting to pursue a better life (financially) in the city; Eric and Mary leave the city in search of a simpler life, one without electricity or gasoline.

- skavage: What stood out to me — when I think about the stories of these two other couples and compare them to our own — is that it's not just left-wingers thinking about these things. I mean, who knows what their political leanings are, but both of these other couples seem fairly socially conservative — religious, family people. But the whole examination of a technology-dependent lifestyle doesn't seem to be the exclusive provenance of ELF-style anarchists.

- zverinar: People are always searching for a better life, it's just now that more people are realizing that not only is technology not the answer, but maybe it's hindering their happiness. Both the Brendes and Tombrowskis are thoughtful and aware of their surroundings, which include technology, specifically the automobile. Reducing the stuff around them is seen as a means to a higher, perhaps more spiritual way of living.

- skavage: The Brendes in *Better Off* were, I think, really questioning the value of technology and so for 18 months moved into a very strict Amish-like community with no motors of any kind [*both couples do borrow cars occasionally - ed.*]. In their case, it was less financially motivated. The writer of the book, Eric, was working on a doctorate in

technology and so there was some academic motivation as well as just the personal desire. But after the 18 months they ended up in St. Louis where he pedals a rickshaw now. Not exactly an academic career, but as he notes in the beginning, his professors and fellow students were critical of his views. The Brendes were quite influenced by their experience with the Minimites; they transitioned to a simpler urban life — which,

“ ***The authors here not only examine the roles of technology in their lives, but they also act on those observations.*** ”

although they don't articulate it so bluntly, seems to be heavily focused on reducing car dependence. They also grow a lot of their own food, although they do use electricity and computers now.

- zverinar: Peter and Andrea concluded that living with debt was more burdensome than living without a car, so they sold their truck, paid off their bills, and moved to the city. Their apartment is small so they become very selective about what things they let into their lives. And it seems all their choices stem from the decision to make time with family a priority, so having no car and less stuff in general gives them time to nurture family relationships. They're offering their practical

experience for others who might find themselves in a similar predicament. I say predicament because they seem to have been pushed into the carfree lifestyle.

- skavage: They were sort of pushed into it, but I think a lot of people wouldn't have embraced that lifestyle change the way they did — or never even questioned the huge expense of maintaining a car and the sacrifices made to that kind of mobility.

- zverinar: They're definitely troopers. They sort of lucked into the joy. Getting rid of the vehicle was a practical step, a means to eliminating debt. But it also offered them opportunities they hadn't anticipated. Framing their lives as a sort of ongoing camping trip shows their positive outlook, and the book itself is styled after hiking guide books. It's a charming perspective. But I was a little disappointed by how Calgary as portrayed in this book. It could be Anyplace, an anonymous nowhere defined by the chain stores and restaurants which form the landmarks and destinations by which the authors navigate their needs and leisure.

- skavage: *Urban Camping* is almost like folk art — they have none of the standard vocabulary or connections to the larger environmental or carfree community, as far as I can tell. They seem to be an island. That's why I feel that, despite its shortcomings (like you said, they do a lot of chain store shopping and ignore how those places perpetuate the car-dependent lifestyle — but maybe they just don't see it) this book is a great carfree survival guide for suburbanites or people in areas that don't have cute, walkable neighborhoods.

- zverinar: And they're not preachy about being carfree. They're less concerned that others follow their example than they are with sharing their values and practices, take 'em or leave 'em. It's really practical in its approach, getting right down to the nitty-gritty of their clothes, packs, strollers. What's also amazing is they don't use bicycles. That heightens the book's appeal — a family of four getting by without vehicles of any sort (besides public transport). It shows it can be done. And besides its practical value and human interest (I was fascinated to hear the details of lives so different from my own), the book offers at least one really powerful observation: "Things take time." Any one thing you bring into your life now has a claim on your time — whether it's maintenance, cleaning, or just mental clutter, the things we think we possess possess us.

- skavage: In both books, the families really

consider their participation in the modern world seriously — whether it's the amount of stuff and where it comes from or how they get around. The Tombrowskis make a lot of their own clothes, equipment and furniture; and obviously, the Minimate community does that too in the case of the Brendes in *Better Off*. The one interesting difference between the two families is that the Tombrowskis just don't seem to really be part of a community — they made this whole transition without any kind of larger support network — and they still seem to exist without that. The Brendes had their neighbors coming over and saving their asses every other day, it seemed.

- zverinar: Maybe we are all tested to our abilities. The Brendes were like the Mayflower pilgrims, relying on the generosity of the natives to help them adjust to a new way of life. The Tombrowskis seem to relish their self-reliance. But I think that difference (community support or lack thereof) is really telling. The Tombrowskis have Internet, a proxy for community. And they have each other, a rather tight nuclear family. Some people just make that choice.

But I think capitalism uses technology to divide and conquer consumers. If 10 families use a washing machine collectively (as in an apartment or co-op), the manufacturer sells one machine. But if he can convince each family to get its own, sales increase by 1,000%. So, divided consumers buy more technology, and once the technology is bought, it divides people. Cars do this. Just look at any freeway and count the percent of single occupancy vehicles. So perhaps it makes sense that the Tombrowskis, in the technologized city, seem to meet fewer people and have less community connections than the relatively technology-free couple in a remote farming community.

- skavage: I do agree that technology is inherently isolating — by allowing you to be “self-sufficient” it undermines those relationships and any sort of sufficiency as a community.

I just read about a grad student that as part of her thesis is going back to 1950 technology — typewriter, rotary phone, etc. As technology careens along there will be likely more people writing/talking about how they use it or not — from a larger variety of perspectives and points of view. These two books just highlight that, perhaps?

- zverinar: One hopes so. The authors here not only examine the roles of technology in their lives but also act on those observations. If humanity is to strike a sustainable balance with ecology, more people need to notice the technology they've been taking for granted and shift their lifestyles to reduce their impacts. Books like these serve as inspiring examples of that and more would be welcome. 🐾



Walking the Beach to Bellingham

Harvey Manning, Madrona Publishers, 1986
ISBN 0-88089-018-5

Harvey Manning was a writer and editor of hiking guide books in the Pacific Northwest of the US. He was an outspoken advocate for preserving natural habitats and reserving them for pedestrian use only (no bikes or motor vehicles to disturb the peace with their rapid pace). In 1960 he was editorial lead for the textbook *Mountaineering: The Freedom of the Hills*, which is still in print more than 40 years later. The success of that book launched Mountaineer Books, the gold standard for outdoor guide books in the region. He died on November 12, 2006 at the age of 81.

While the guide books he edited and helped write were utilitarian in their approach, his personality comes through most vividly in his only autobiographical work, *Walking the Beach to Bellingham*, an intimate account of two years spent walking the shoreline between Seattle and the city of Bellingham 150 miles north on the Puget Sound. An amalgam of many short walks collected into a continuous narrative, the book combines acute observation, local history, and even geology into a memoir and manifesto in praise of nature, soft travel, and a slower way of life. Plus it's funny.

The aboriginal peoples of Australia are known for their songlines, lengthy walking routes crisscrossing the continent in which the history of their people is stored, the landmarks signifying specific stories of their 50,000-year-old culture. In a sense, Manning here attempts to trace his own songline, revisiting the sites of his youth and the region's history while always bearing a reverence for the decimated indigenous tribes who occupied those shores for 12,000 years prior to white invasion. And beyond that he leaps across geologic time to ponder forces which shaped the land itself.

Without covering much distance he takes a very long walk indeed.

A Backwoods Bukowski

He also shares a little something with Charles Bukowski. Is it the beard? Is it the beer? No, the similarity is in the attention to detail and clarity of individual voice. Manning was not a granola-crunching new ager spouting spiritual platitudes. He was a straight-talking *hombre* who packed candy bars, Pepsi, and beer into his rucksack, saving the best (the beer) for last at the end of the day's journey, when he would meticulously log his rapid consumption of a six-pack or so while simultaneously taking notes on his surroundings, painting the scene in simple but evocative language laced with strong opinion.

In *Walking the Beach*, he is as thorough as Thoreau, itemising the minutiae of his backpack, his surroundings, and internal states. And as Thoreau claimed to have “traveled widely” in the small town of Concord, Manning's quest was “to learn a lot about a little.”

At journey's end he asks, “Was the end of the trip the sum of it?” It's a rhetorical question, of course. Manning knows the answer. It's worth reading the book to find out what it is. - **RZ**

Walking the Beach to Bellingham (excerpt)

The sport of peasant boys in the days of my youth was counting the cars of freight [trains] and waving to the engineer and fireman in the mighty black engine and the brakeman in the cozy red caboose. Passenger trains were our drama, windows flashing by with a blur of faces, the golden people of Hollywood movies, the mysterious East, skyscrapers, taxicabs, penthouses, night clubs, and luxury liners, the bright lights of the permanent party.

When I at last was invited east to join the fun, the nation had been Boeinged, Douglassed, and Lockheaded. The airplanes that filled the sky with their noise had shrunk the planet, giving the historical specious adventures, the ageographical false perspectives.

Through the window
Of the big tin pot,
See the world
As the world is not.

A plumbers' convention in Schenectady, Aunt Sally's goiter operation in Fresno, steak sandwiches with a fertilizer salesman in Houston, a swim in a heated pool in Omaha, a slot machine in Carson City, a fruit salad in Honolulu are solemnized by the passage through air. Thinking by altitude to achieve significance, by massing of miles to fill lives, the mobs herd into airports and are swindled. Train stations were exciting and docks thrilling; airports are simply saddening.