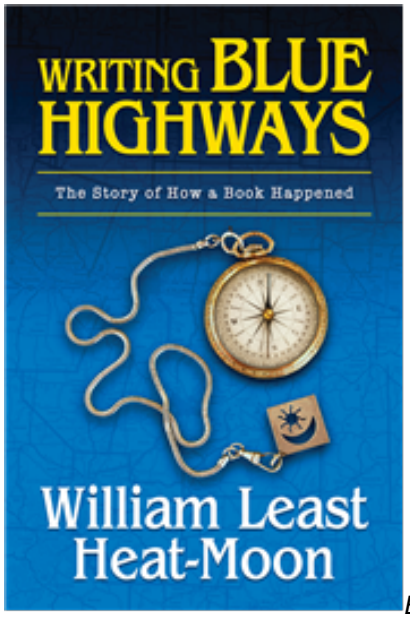
William Least Heat-Moon: "Damnable Speed" [1]

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TW Interview by David Biddle

For this Author of a Modern Classic, Slow Writing Matters

In 1982, the Atlantic Monthly Press and Little, Brown published *Blue Highways: A Journey into America.* It's William Least Heat-Moon's account of a three-month, 14,000-mile road trip he took in a converted mini-van he called Ghost Dancing. Heat-Moon drove the back roads designated as blue lines in his *Rand McNally Atlas*.



Blue Highways surprised the publishing world. It was hard to categorize yet sat on the bestseller list for nearly a year. Part social history, part travel writing, and part spiritual odyssey, *Blue Highways* offers tales of America's forgotten "outback" and the people still connected to that fading world. The writing is lyrical, full of life lessons, and informed by a strong environmental ethic. Heat-Moon went on to publish many other works, including the recent *An Osage Journey to Europe, 1827-1830*, coauthored with James K. Wallace (University of Oklahoma Press, 2013).

His latest project is *Writing Blue Highways* (University of Missouri Press, 2014). It's an autobiographical tale of the trials and tribulations of a then-unknown author struggling through nearly four years to write (and rewrite ten-plus different times) an acceptable manuscript for publication. But more important, *Writing Blue Highways* is also the definitive story of how a work of literary art, from conception to publication, comes to be.

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On a personal note, William Least Heat-Moon and I come from similar stock. He moved to Columbia, Missouri, in the late 1960s after growing up in the Kansas City area. I came to Columbia from Kansas City as well, although I was only two years old when I arrived in 1960. In addition, he and I both claim partial Native American heritage.

I was aware of these connections back in the early 1980s, when I attended graduate school in Philadelphia and trained to become an environmental planner. But at the time, little did anyone know *Blue Highways* would contribute to the more mature environmental sensibility that swept the nation by the end of the decade. The book also helped jumpstart the memoir craze—even if the author himself doesn't call it a memoir.

This TW interview took place in November, with Heat-Moon responding by email to a set of questions I sent him. It's been slightly condensed and edited here.

Don't miss "A Guy in a Metal Suicide-Box," [4] an excerpt from *Writing Blue Highways* by William Least Heat-Moon in TW's Fall 2014 issue.

***TW:* For most writers, watching the success of *Blue Highways* was amazing. Reading the full story in *Writing Blue Highways* of how much effort you put into that book makes your eventual success even more amazing. What do you think was going on in the early 1980s to foster such a strong positive response?**

WLHM: I wish I had an answer to that unknown. I'd bottle it. I've heard critics speak of a kind of depressed spirit among Americans when *Blue Highways* appeared. *New York Times* reviewer Anatole Broyard wrote in 1983 that "one can be forgiven a little flush of national pride [for admiring the book]." Perhaps, but I prefer to believe many of us had wearied of the amalgamations and homogenizations corporations had worked on the country. We were ready to rediscover things more genuinely American: food, people, language, the land itself. Poet N. Scott Momaday wrote of the book, "This is what we, as a people, are about."

***TW:* Ever since *Blue Highways* was first published, some readers have made noise about there not being enough about the narrator in it—even though you make clear you're telling the stories of the back-road people you encountered on your journey. But now we have *Writing Blue Highways*. William Least Heat-Moon is front and center. Are you finally caving in to pressure to get more personal?**

WLHM: Other than John Updike's fatuous review of *Blue Highways* ["A Long Way Home" in the *New Yorker*, 1983], I've not heard readers making "noise about there not being enough about the narrator" in the book. To want more about him is to misunderstand what it's about, and that is the people he encounters along the road. The narrator is only a tool to present those discoveries. I should add here that *Writing Blue Highways* is not about its writer; it's about

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a creative process and ways writers—and painters and composers, maybe even scientists—can be encouraged in the creation of something the world has not before seen or heard.

TW: **At the beginning of *Writing Blue Highways*, you admit you're writing an autobiography, but you never seem comfortable with that definition. It's your own story, but it's also the biography of a book you published more than thirty years ago. Why does your work continue to defy categorization—and what do you think of the standard marketing categories for nonfiction?**

WLHM: I confess to using autobiography to delineate the biography of a book, but *Writing Blue Highways* does not—I repeat—does not belong in the category of autobiography and certainly not in memoir. Why my work seems to defy or escape categorization, I don't know. It's a problem for booksellers and for a writer trying to describe his work.

TW: **There are at least a dozen important lessons for authors embedded in *Writing Blue Highways*, such as learning to deal with rejection, redemption through rewriting, and standing your ground with publishers. This is far from a complete list. For you, what's the most important lesson?**

WLHM: I'd say the most important lesson—but only by the thinnest of margins—has two legs: the refusal to quit and the insistence on rewriting and revising. That's to say, taking the time necessary to let the materials of a story find their way onto a page where the writer can take time to develop them fully, evocatively.

TW: **Getting so many different types of people to open up to you is a rare talent. And yet, *Writing Blue Highways* is in many ways the story of you, the writer, opening up to yourself. In it, you recount how long you struggled to reach a level of honesty that made your final draft of *Blue Highways* work. Do you think it's possible for any serious author to succeed without this kind of personal struggle?**

WLHM: This question is highly theoretical and possibly beyond my capacities to answer, other than to say that honesty with one's self and toward one's work is a prerequisite for the genuine in writing. But is an emotional struggle necessary for every work one might write? I don't think so. Some books just happen to require more than others. However, the struggle to find the *structure* of a book, even the simplest of them, that battle is always in front of me.

TW: **Please talk about your method for creating a successful manuscript. I know you move from notebook notes to a journal-like log and then to a full-blown narrative. You also refer to something you call "layering." Would you advise other writers, especially nonfiction authors and journalists, to use these techniques?**

WLHM: Absolutely. I'd be unpublished today without my slow progression from nothing to something (followed by persistent reworking of that resulting something).

TW: **You write eloquently in *Writing Blue Highways* about drafting with pencil and cheap notebook paper. But a lot of TW readers—young and old—might freak out at the thought of having to slow down to a handwritten pace. No one wants to believe it can take four years to write a book. Is slow writing really necessary?**

WLHM: This is the most significant question here, and I cannot give it enough emphasis. The major force leading to the fall-off in quality in much of so-called literary writing is speed. Damnable speed. Let me explain that my "handwritten pace" matches or exceeds my laptop-entry speed, but then, I'm a worker in cursives rather than the clumsy and laborious "hand lettering" method so common today. But there's another aspect to speed in writing, one more significant, and that's a contemporary unwillingness to grant a burgeoning story the necessary and crucial time it requires to develop, both in concept and expression. The depth I see in much contemporary fiction (and some nonfiction) is pitifully thin, and it needn't be so *if* a writer allows ideas to expand and words to rise into original and evocative patterns. It's toxically lethal for writers to perceive themselves as geniuses able to dash off greatness.

TW: **I need to admit here that I read *Writing Blue Highways* on my iPad. It was cheaper, and I wanted it immediately to prepare for this interview. What do you think about e-books?**

WLHM: E-books have a place now, and I accept that, but I don't read in that manner in part because I love books as artifacts. There's a severe limit to the kind of notations digital books can accept, but the range for paper-between-

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boards is almost unlimited. If I value a book because it has touched my life, then I make it mine with markings—from simple underlining to written notes to diagrams and drawings, all in my own hand. I put my imprint on what another has said in a kind of conjoining of minds. Years later, I'll come across those scribblings among, say, the words of Shakespeare or Dickens or Hawthorne, and I can see a place I've been. The great writers show themselves over time to have been my teachers, and my gratitude enriches the experience of reading them—and, I hope, honors them.

***TW:* One of your big challenges with *Blue Highways* was getting the publishing world to pay attention. In *Writing Blue Highways*, when you describe the call from Atlantic Monthly Press finally coming in, I stopped reading because I was moved to tears. In 2014, though, you might have considered self-publishing much earlier on. Would you have done so many rewrites? Would you have found your voice? I think your story is a very serious cautionary tale about self-publishing.**

WLHM: Had self-publishing been readily available in 1983 when *Blue Highways* came out, I still would have done the dozen drafts the manuscript needed. For me, it was—and remains—a matter of artistic integrity to give my work all that it needs. A drive for quality over quantity. Self-publishing often leads to premature births.

***TW:* What do you think of blogging and the Internet as a new publishing venue for anyone with the nerve to make their words public?**

WLHM: I don't write or read blogs. If a person is truly dedicated to becoming a writer (or remaining one), blogging is too likely to drain off the requisite passion and dedication *and time* that good, significant, and lasting literary expression requires.

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> Every permutation of the nearly half-million words in English has not yet been exhausted, every story hasn't been told—even the remarkably good ones—and, to be sure, never can they be. Everything under the sun, given time, changes to something new. Moment by moment, stories good and true pass away, ignored and vanished forever.
>
> —from *Writing Blue Highways* by William Least Heat-Moon

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