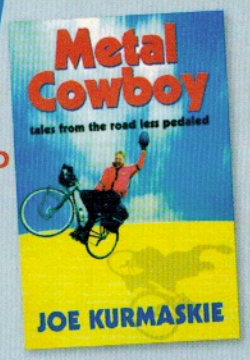
METAL COWBOY: TALES FROM THE ROAD LESS PEDALED



By Joe Kurmaskie
Breakaway Books, 1999
304 pages, $23 USD
REVIEWED BY
TERRY LOWE

METAL COWBOY IS the most entertaining book I've read in quite some time. Joe Kurmaskie tells tales of life learned during solo long-distance cycling trips, in North America and around the world. He is a raconteur of the finest order: optimistic, generous, cheerful, and adventurous.

He is also a fine writer. In 40 short chapters, he tells some memorable stories. Like the one about 78-year-old Gordy, who led him on a merry chase through the Colorado hills, riding a no-name bike with little more than a folded tarp and a skillet for gear.

Or of riding the hills of New Zealand with a 50-year-old Italian barber who once competed in the Tour de France (and may have ruined his hands in the process); of misadventures when he mischievously encouraged a campground clerk who was convinced he was Kiefer Sutherland, and what ensued when the rest of the town believed that, too; of having to sprint for a Greyhound bus in a hail of rocks and bottles because he'd entered a diner in a small town in Alabama "in the company of friends with dark skin."

Of watching a kid named Fez jump off Half Dome Mountain in Yosemite with a BMX (and a parachute) just for fun:

"You only die once," Fez told me. "And while I'm here, I'm looking for big air and a clean ride."

"Even if it's your last ride?" I asked. He answered me with a smile, then pedaled into space.

A night in a bar in the Australian outback found him losing a game of darts for a dollar a point. He thought he'd lost $13. They wanted $1,300. Think fast. He challenged his rival to a bike race the following day to give him a chance to win his money back. To even the odds, he offered to ride with all his gear aboard. Kurmaskie won that race, but only because his opponent crashed, and he kept going. His opponents caught up with him a few hours later, admitted they'd just been having a bit of fun with him, and gracefully allowed that he'd won that race "fair dinkum."

This book is "laugh-out-loud" funny in spots, and sombre and moving in others. Its main lesson is that life is what happens when you keep yourself open to new things, and to the kindness of (most) strangers. Especially on a bike.

ROADSIDE BICYCLE REPAIR: A POCKET MANIFESTO

By Sam Tracy
Speck Press, 2008, 120 pages, $12 USD
REVIEWED BY LAURA BUCCI

I HADN'T EXPECTED to read about taco chips, suicides, or hand grenades, but Sam Tracy has managed to include all this and more in his third book on bicycle maintenance, Roadside Bicycle Repair: A Pocket Manifesto. There is no doubt that he is a radical-minded bike aficionado and an extremely knowledgeable bike mechanic as he delivers step-by-step instructions on major bike components: wheels, seats, stems/handlebars, brakes, and drivetrains. Tracy suggests being prepared, whether you're a commuter, a messenger, or a cycling tourist; appropriately, he starts off with a discussion of essential tools for the road and "Flight Check," a chapter on components to check before you get going.

The book offers how-tos on fixing flat tires, adjusting V-brakes and front and rear derailleurs, replacing spokes, and more. Breakdowns on the road sometimes necessitate improvising, and Tracy does not fall short in offering solutions such as bending spokes and slotting them backward into the hub. All fixes are executed with a minimum of tools.

A nice collection of aesthetic shots taken by Tracy's wife, Kerri Spindler-Ranta, are peppered throughout the book, along with instructional black and white images. While these seem helpful for the most part, beginners may be left wishing for more clarity. A novice at maintenance will find this book challenging. The expert rider may just be at home with the vast array of technical jargon and will find this a handy reference.

But should you take this slim-sized pocket book on the road? That depends on how patient you are. Tracy rambles, creates outrageous scenarios, and often writes in a cumbersome manner. In talking about brakes, he says, "The pads would happily gouge long canyons from the tires' sidewalls, lacking better guidance, through which the pent-up inner tube would earnestly try to escape." He is having fun, but is the reader? If you're lounging back and perusing the book pre-trip, then perhaps you'll warm up to his prose and humour.

Tracy does a good job of helping you familiarize yourself with your bicycle and envision possible breakdowns. But on the road, you may find your frustration mounting as you try to isolate the actual instructions.

An eclectic online resource section wraps up the book and is well worth a browse. Included are links on ice biking, bike culture, bike messenger groups, advocacy, and more.

BOOKS ON WHEELS: FREE BOOKS AND BIKE REPAIRS, TOO

BY SHELLEY BRIGGS

MY FRIEND WARD and I started Books on Wheels in January 2007. We drive around in a bus and give away books and do free bicycle repair. The bus is called the "MobookMobikeMobile." It is filled with books, bicycle parts, and tools. Our mission is to promote literacy and alternative transportation. We provide our services to anyone, but we concentrate on working in low-income neighbourhoods.

I had been working on bikes for a few years, and always liked the idea of mobile bicycle repair, since people who really need their bikes probably don't have another way to get to a shop. I was in a car accident in January 2007, and left with a settlement cheque. I figured I would buy a bus and try it out.

Ward and I were hanging out at my house one day soon after this, and he noticed I had circled a bus in an auto magazine. I told him what I was thinking, and he said he had always wanted to have a bookmobile. Ward owns a used bookstore in Richmond, Virginia, called Chop Suey, and always has plenty of books. We agreed to split the cost and bought the bus the next day. We gutted it, painted it, and started asking for book and bike donations.

We get every type of book, but mostly children's books, which is perfect because those are always the ones in highest demand. The majority of the books are taken to schools that are poorly funded and without a lot of books.

We do bicycle repair at our events. We set up anywhere: parks, street corners, restaurant parking lots. We park the bus and unload our bike stands and tools. We decide on locations based on where people we know live or work and can put posters up in the neighbourhood to let people know where to bring their bike on a certain time and date for repair. The most common type of repair is flat tires. After that, people always need brake work.

www.bookonwheels.com
booksonwheelsrva.blogspot.com