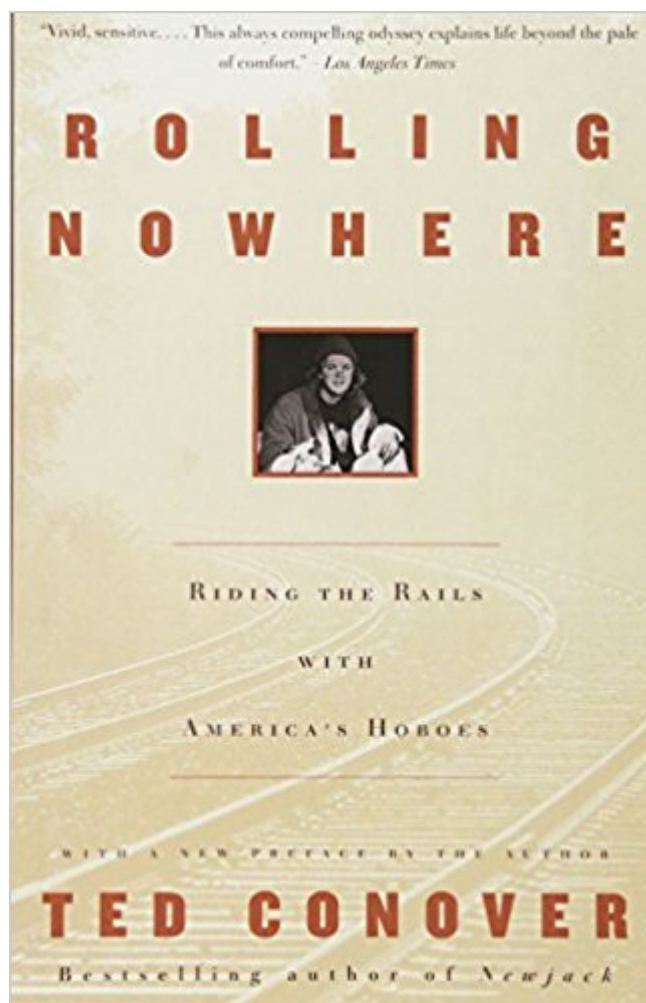


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Rolling Nowhere: Riding The Rails With America's Hoboes



Synopsis

In Ted Conover's first book, now back in print, he enters a segment of humanity outside society and reports back on a world few of us would choose to enter but about which we are all curious. Hoboes fascinated Conover, but he had only encountered them in literature and folksongs. So, he decided to take a year off and ride the rails. Equipped with rummage-store clothing, a bedroll, and a few other belongings, he hops a freight train in St. Louis, becoming a tramp in order to discover their peculiar culture. The men and women he meets along the way are by turns generous and mistrusting, resourceful and desperate, philosophical and profoundly cynical. And the narrative he creates of his travels with them is unforgettable and moving.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Vivid, sensitive... this always compelling odyssey explains life beyond the pale of comfort."--Los Angeles Times
"Rolling Nowhere is so vivid that every few pages the urge to clack the dust from one's own clothes is almost irresistible."--The New York Times Book Review

In Ted Conover's first book, now back in print, he enters a segment of humanity outside society and reports back on a world few of us would choose to enter but about which we are all curious. Hoboes fascinated Conover, but he had only encountered them in literature and folksongs. So, he decided to take a year off and ride the rails. Equipped with rummage-store clothing, a bedroll, and a few other belongings, he hops a freight train in St. Louis, becoming a tramp in order to discover their

peculiar culture. The men and women he meets along the way are by turns generous and mistrusting, resourceful and desperate, philosophical and profoundly cynical. And the narrative he creates of his travels with them is unforgettable and moving.

Riding the rails is a dead art, and hobos are passing into the pages of history. They were becoming rare in 1980 when Tim Conover wrote this book, and Homeland Security and containerized shipping have made hobos nearly nonexistent. This is a detailed and personal experience, written by an Anthropology student with a yearning for learning and adventure beyond daily life. Conover captures the excitement of illicit travel, the gritty details of clothing, food and sleep, the physical danger of massive metal objects traveling at high speed and often unpredictable movements, and the dysfunctional, often pathological, lives of the "Knights of the road". By far the best of the five books I've read on this page of history. A great read for entertainment or education about life on the margins. Hobos still exist but they're no longer riding trains.

Conover writes about a brief time in his life when he succeeded in accomplishing one of his dreams. My feeling is that a lot of people probably have fantasized about doing something like he did, but Conover just took the next step and actually did it. I enjoyed this autobiographical account of a short period in his life partially because it reminds me of a period in my life when I let the wanderlust settle in and determine my future to a degree as well, but Conover takes it to the extreme. He presents his experiences as-is, seeking neither acceptance nor approval from the reader--what you see is what you get. It's not pretty sometimes but it's life experienced for a while in another society. Hoboeing has changed largely over the years even to the point of phasing itself nearly out of existence, and Conover does an excellent job of writing about things as they were in the early 80's. But even then hoboeing had undergone a magnitude of changes so that it seemed to be merely a shadow of itself as it had been during the depression years. Generally I keep something to read near my PC so that I can occupy myself with some worthwhile distraction while my prehistoric computer boots up, but I found that most of the time with this book I was more interested in continuing with the reading even after the PC was booted up and ready to go. If the subject of riding the rails has ever entered your mind, you probably will enjoy this book. Even if it hasn't you probably will enjoy the book--there's a swell map too.

Though this book was first written in the late 1980s, I only recently read it and thoroughly enjoyed learning about more modern-day tramps who ride the rails for work opportunities, passing the time,

escape, or just to learn what it's like. The author rode with them for several months, as another tramp rather than as a journalist, and wove their stories into a well-integrated tale that developed the characters and gave me a peek into a life style that I was surprised still existed. Though 30+ years have passed since the book was first published, I am betting there are still rail riders out there yet today, as the social and economic forces that compel people to make this choice continue to exist. As the most prevalent reasons seem to be homelessness, lack of adequate education, and a paucity of appropriate job opportunities, there are probably more tramps out there than anyone could guess. Conover showed empathy and understanding towards his subject but dispelled any idea that hopping freight trains is a glamorous way of life.

I've always been fascinated by the lives of people who reject society and go on the road to live...nameless, unaccounted for, no permanent place, and free from the things this world embroils us in. I have read several books about these people called "hobos" and have enjoyed them but they were from a far away view by the writer. I have read James Mitchener's account of his rail road years and it was interesting. But Mr. Conover's account is more real because he put his whole life into being what he wrote about. I highly recommend this book and other books by him, namely "Newjack: Guarding Sing Sing" and another one "Coyotes: A Journey Across Borders with America's Illegal Migrants". His writing is precise and very descriptive. He actually causes you to feel as he felt and as the people he writes about feel.

Great read. Ted Conover gets right into the story, going from college student to hobo. One can feel the sense of anticipation and thrill as he hops his first train. Once the initial excitement wears off, one can understand the emptiness and constant insecurity of the life. This version includes an new intro, written in 2001, which explains that most of what he did (riding in boxcars) simply isn't possible today because of changes in railroad technology and increased security in the railyards. I imagine the security is even tighter today, although some still do ride the rails.

Rolling Nowhere was originally written in 1984, so it might not be quite as relevant today. This edition (published in 2001) has a foreword from the author acknowledging as much. Conover took a few months to "ride the rails" as a tramp. He lived the tramp life, talked and rode with fellow tramps, and took notes to share his story. The story has a lot of waiting around and times between train rides. The descriptions of the train rides themselves are better than the descriptions of tramp life, but both are interesting. Conover seems like he really immersed himself in their world - which is

equal parts dangerous, boring and difficult. Conover occasionally gets preachy about how the tramp problem could be "fixed" - at one point he even wanders into the world of illegal Mexican farm workers and explores their plight - but mostly keeps himself under control and doesn't get intrusive about it.

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