

**Twitchell, James B. 2014. Winnebago Nation: The RV in American Culture. New York: Columbia university Press.**

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[See table of contents](#)

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with a more complete and deeper understanding of the issues that have and continue to face the Canadian national parks system. A common thread found throughout the works is that the service's administrators have always struggled to balance the wants and needs of the public and government officials, all while working to stay true to their mandate. The authors point out that, for much of their history, parks have had to juggle the need to protect spaces and landscapes of national significance while still providing tourism and revenue generation opportunities. Through their discussion of different parks and related issues from across the country, they effectively articulate how officials faced these challenges and the ways in which their methods of dealing with them have evolved over time.

In reading *A Century of Parks Canada*, one key element is missing from the story of Canada's national park service: its national historic sites. With now almost 200 sites across the country,

the Agency's services and vision have been shaped by the need to address the dramatically different demands of Parks Canada places, from Banff National Park to the Wrecks of the HMS Erebus and HMS Terror National Historic Site. By acknowledging the important connection between national parks and national historic sites, the collection would have offered a more complete view of how the current-day parks system came to be.

This does not, however, detract from the quality and fullness of the pieces that are presented, and in the end *A Century of Parks Canada* is a strong and much needed addition to the field of Canadian Studies. The collection sheds light on how we, as Canadians, understand and interact with the public spaces that are our national parks. At the same time, the authors remind us how far Canada's national parks and Parks Canada Agency have come, and what possibilities await in the future.

## DAVID P. STEPHENS

Review of

Twitchell, James B. 2014. *Winnebago Nation: The RV in American Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Pp. 192, 47 photos and illustrations, references, acknowledgements, and index. ISBN 978-0-231-16778-9, \$26.00.

In *Winnebago Nation: The RV in American Culture*, author James B. Twitchell invites the reader to drive into the heart and soul of a central aspect of American highway culture: the tinted-windshield, air-conditioned, modern-day recreational vehicle, or RV. Along the way, he exposes the various underpinnings that gave rise to the American cult-like notion of life on the road.

Each of the five chapters present a unique aspect of RV culture. The book is also filled with photos, diagrams, and vintage advertising images, including two full-colour centre spreads of visionary artist Leonard Knight's powerful Salvation Mountain and his equally colourful art

truck or "RV." Collectively, these various images paint a visual narrative to accompany Twitchell's diverse commentary on RVs. The book is also supported by Twitchell's first-person reflections of living in an RV, travelling highways and back roads like some free-spirited, youthful, romantic nomad. However, as Twitchell points out, he is not unlike the majority of drivers of RVs who are "most often of a certain age—Geritol gypsies" (4). Throughout, Twitchell presents his findings in a lighthearted style, using humour and dry wit to actively engage his audience.

The author suggests that one reason why the notion of existing and travelling within a self-contained home on wheels is "so often

underappreciated by students of popular culture is that the experience inside the box is so hard to get hold of.” Twitchell goes on to suggest that this phenomenon should not be referred to simply as camping, “but what to call it?” (9). Twitchell draws comparisons between travelling in an RV and boating, and refers to obvious overlaps, with one similarity being “the occasional bout of cabin fever.” He concedes that there are areas where the boat and the RV differ, mainly in that the RV is “much tamer,” calling them essentially “boats with training wheels” (10). While the boating enthusiast will often seek out a safe harbour, perhaps a marina, to secure a spot to tie up for the night, the RV enthusiast has numerous options available. These include spending nights in Walmart parking lots, assembling other RVs around in a circle, nose in, like the covered wagons of the Old West. Other places to stay are any of the numerous low-end to high-end RV parks such as the “branded experience” of the Kampgrounds of America (KOA) franchise, and the independent owner-operator mom and pop offerings.

Twitchell also considers the grittier, more unique places for RV’ers to stay, including the not-so-safe but legendary “Slab City,” in the Sonoran Desert of California. Twitchell explains that Slab City came to be formed on the empty barrack slabs of the abandoned U.S. Military base Ft. Dunlap. Not far from Slab City is Salvation Mountain, a colourful, folk-art environment sprouting from the desert. Combining years of labour with packed sand and baled hay covered with thousands of gallons of paint, Salvation Mountain “looks like a child’s ice cream confection with the squirt print of a birthday cake.” Created by the late visionary artist Leonard Knight, Salvation Mountain has become a destination for thousands, many of whom flock there in their RVs (I had the honour of visiting with Leonard and experiencing Salvation Mountain in 2001). Twitchell presents both Slab City and Salvation Mountain as “both on the margins of a culture at risk” (111-15). They exist as folk environments, roadside attractions, and ultimately unique destinations for the RV

enthusiast who seeks out the far reaches of culture and Americana.

Throughout the book, Twitchell also presents many of the numerous individuals who helped to shape and define the phenomenon of RVing. He discusses the pioneers who took to the road, sleeping in their cars as an alternative to camping in a tent, and he explores such notables as Airstream founder Wally Byam and the Wally Byam Caravan Clubbers, who still set out to experience life on the road from the comfort and security of their RVs.

I initially thought this book would be an easy review, persuaded by the relatively compact dimensions of the book—a mere 6” x 9” and a depth of just one half inch. However, once I ventured into the book, I found myself asking more and more questions, re-reading passages, looking up citations, and following up on Twitchell’s stories, anecdotes, and explorations. For such a slim volume, the book nevertheless offers up a broad and deep history of the RV, presenting current and contemporary notions of what it is to be engaged in RVing and to both live and travel in a house on wheels. There is so much information to captivate and challenge the reader, so very much to expand upon. Twitchell has succeeded in fleshing out what is historically and academically pertinent about the culture of the RV, as well as what is just plain fun and adventurous about it.

The size of the book makes it perfect to carry around, perhaps sitting upon the dashboard of your own RV, always at the ready? It’s the kind of book you could roll up and tuck into your back pocket—perfect for a journey. *Winnebago Nation: The RV in American Culture* is engaging, humorous, but also provocative and fascinating. It is academically grounded, yet it also conveys the sense of an oral tradition, as Twitchell the “Geritol gypsy” integrates his academic findings with his own experiences and perspectives of life in his home on wheels. This book really captures the cultural essence of American’s fascination with life on the road, and our desire to sleep under the stars if not always on the ground. I highly recommend it.