
Sharon Pollock: First Woman of Canadian Theatre (as are Pollock’s plays) is relevant for a wide range of readers and academic disciplines: theater and drama studies, of course, but also literature, history, political science, women’s studies, and postcolonial studies. It might also inform the choices made by artistic directors and inspire productions.

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After finishing Tom Sullivan’s Ways to the West I felt I had retired from teaching too soon. His book would have made an ideal required text in my “Automobile in American Life” class for its ability to stimulate lively discussions. A primary theme of Sullivan’s multifacted study is how we might undo the damage done to our living spaces in the American West by too great a dependence on the automobile for transportation during the twentieth century.

Ways to the West operates at several levels. Ostensibly it is a travelogue based on Sullivan’s intent to travel through a vast swath of the West without resort to an automobile. Instead, he depends mainly on his bicycle, Amtrak, and a series of Greyhound bus rides to complete a circular journey that commences in Las Vegas, Nevada, and concludes in Portland, Oregon, the two western cities that have long been regarded as polar opposites in terms of urban transportation and quality living spaces. From Las Vegas he heads north, alternating in yin-yang style between the outback West of southern Utah, Wyoming, and Nevada and the urban West of Salt Lake City, Denver, and Phoenix, concluding with instructive visits to urban Boise and Portland.

As a travel adventure through the modern West, the book works quite well. Sullivan’s bicycle enables him to experience the journey fully, as John R. Stilgoe once urged his readers to do in Outside Lies
Magic: Regaining History and Awareness in Everyday Places (1998), instead of being encapsulated in a modern machine. Sullivan does allow himself to be encapsulated inside grimy Greyhound buses for five different segments of his journey, not one of which he finds a pleasant experience. His Amtrak journey from La Junta, Colorado, to Flagstaff, Arizona, on the other hand, offers him a pleasant respite from the road.

His travels (and occasional travails) provide the narrative thread that enabled a trained city planner and urban designer to assess the modern West with a critical eye. But more than that, he was in search of workable solutions. During his month-long quest, Sullivan interviewed various planners and transit executives engaged in reversing the damage done by our overdependence on the automobile. The result is a well-written book inviting serious discussion of transportation and livability issues (the two are clearly entwined) that currently bedevil much of the West, both urban and rural. The solutions, Sullivan finds, are already in place in various parts of the West. Boise, for example, illustrates how to use a river greenway through the central city to enhance urban living through close contact with nature. He contrasts Boise with Salt Lake City, which capped over much of its urban river.

I can highly recommend Ways to the West to anyone interested in the evolution of the modern West, anyone who enjoys a good travel adventure, and anyone who cares to reflect on workable alternatives to automobile dependency anywhere in the United States. Sullivan, by the way, is not anti-automobile. He simply believes there are better ways to integrate automobiles and other forms of surface transportation to create pleasant as well as aesthetically pleasing built environments.

Carlos A. Schwantes
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