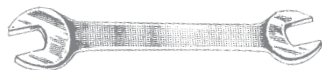


ZEN AND NOW

ON THE TRAIL OF ROBERT PIRSIG
AND THE ART OF MOTORCYCLE
MAINTENANCE



Mark Richardson



Copyright © 2008 Mark Richardson

Published by arrangement with Alfred A. Knopf Canada,
a division of Random House of Canada Limited.

Published in Australia by
UWA Publishing
Crawley, Western Australia 6009
www.uwap.uwa.edu.au

UWAP is an imprint of UWA Publishing
a division of The University of Western Australia.



THE UNIVERSITY OF
WESTERN AUSTRALIA
Achieving International Excellence

ISBN 978 1 921401 29 9

This book is copyright.

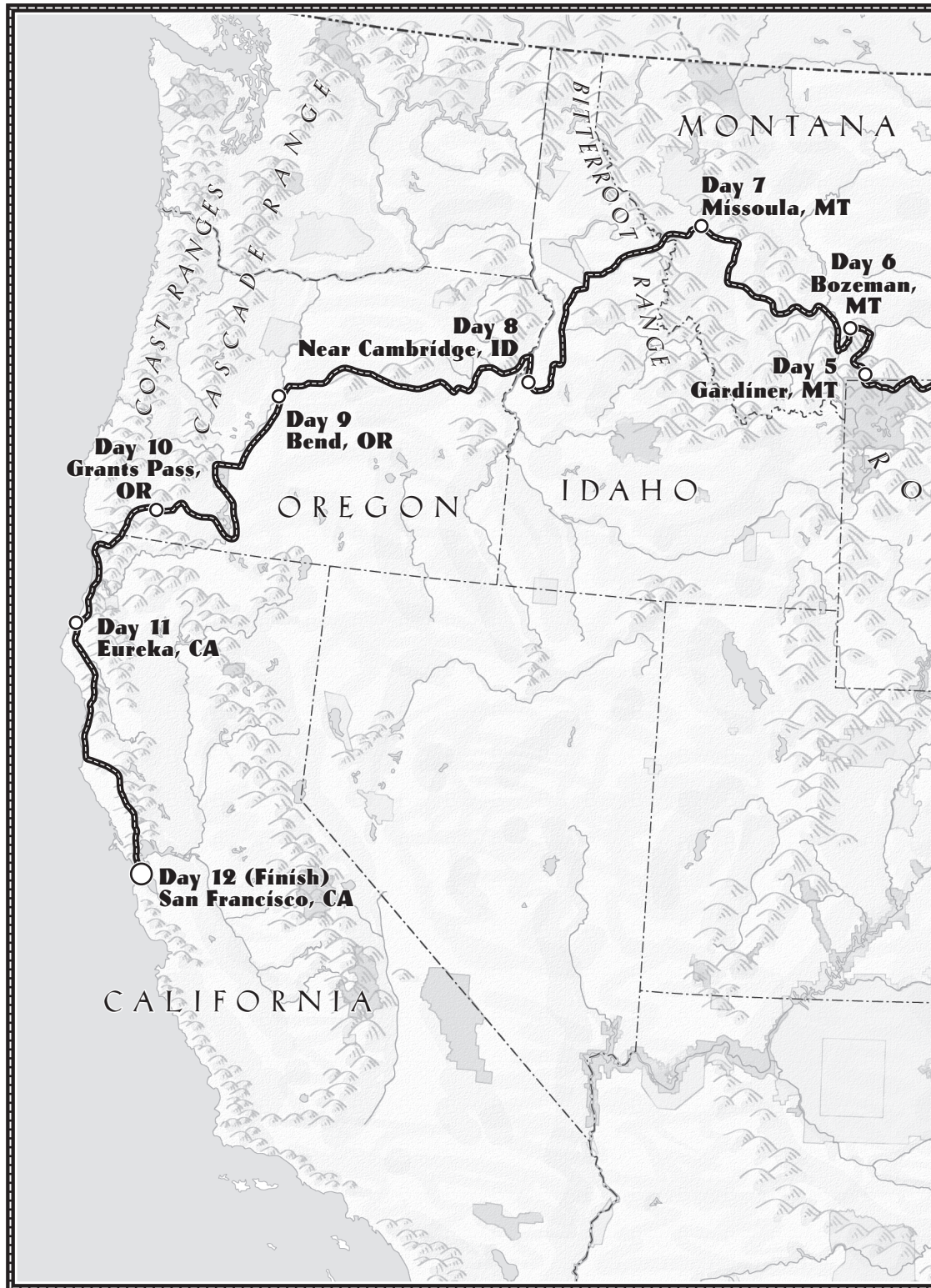
Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the *Copyright Act 1968*, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission. Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

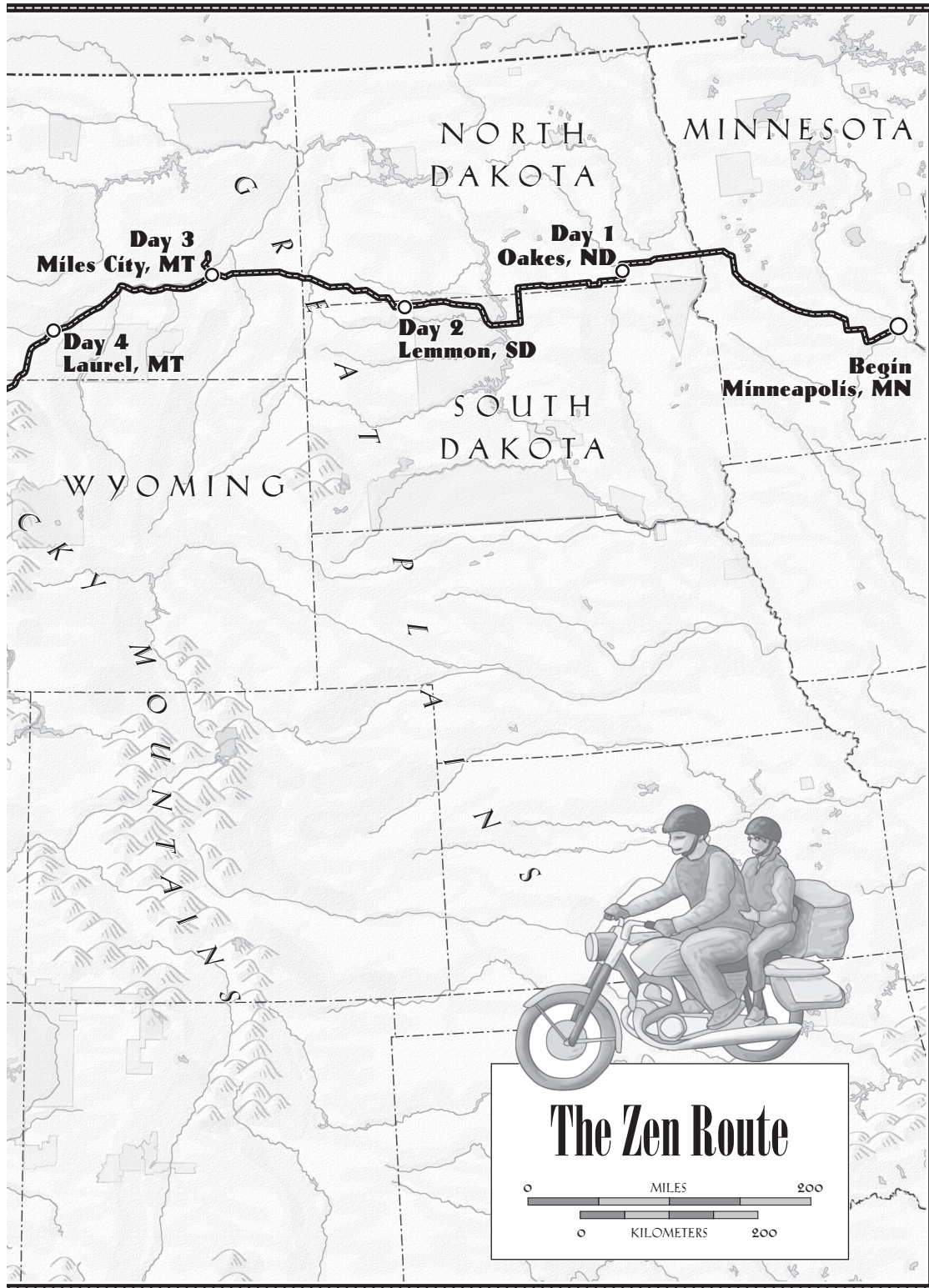
The moral right of the author has been asserted.

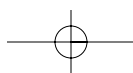
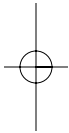
A full CIP record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

Cover image by Dave King © Dorling Kindersley
Cover design by Peter Mendelsund
Typesetting by Creative Graphics, Allentown, Pennsylvania
Map by David Lindroth, Inc.
Book Design by Robert C. Olsson
Printed and bound in Australia by Griffin Press

For RMP,
who started it all,
and for Wendy,
who never stopped believing







CHAPTER ONE



Minnesota

I CAN TELL from the sign by the bank, without turning my head from the road, that it's nine thirty in the morning. The sign flashes to show it's 80 degrees, and the heat's already coming through my jacket. It's going to be hot today. That's okay—on a motorcycle, heat is always welcome.

The small town passes, and I'm back among the fields. The bike's running well this morning, and both of us are stretching out a little, starting to relax on the road now that this trip's finally under way. You'll have to excuse me if I think of her sometimes as if she's a person. It's just me now, me and my old bike.

I'm on Highway 55, the original road that runs up from Minneapolis toward Minnesota's northwest. This is an old road, made from concrete with flattened stones in the mix for hardness and ridges every few dozen feet that set up a *clickety-clack* sound like a locomotive on its tracks.

There aren't many cars on this stretch of highway because anybody who's really trying to get somewhere is on the interstate that runs alongside a couple of miles away. Sit on the interstate and you don't need to stop till you run out of gas. In fact, on the interstate, if you didn't have to pull over every few hours and pay at the pump, there'd be no reason to ever slow down or even speak to anyone. Truckers do it all the time. Stay awake for long enough and you'll be at the coast by Wednesday.

Not on this road, though. Trucks stay off this road. *Clickety-clack*. There's been a track here for centuries, paved sometime in

ZEN AND NOW

the 1920s or '30s to better link farmers with their markets, Bible salesmen with their customers, children with their schools. This is the kind of road on which life happens, connecting other roads and streets and driveways and communities, not a thruway that picks you up here and throws you off there. It meanders around properties and makes way for the marshes that breed the ducks and red-winged blackbirds that take flight as I ride past. *Clickety-clack*.

The only way to truly experience a road like this is to be out in the open—not shut up in a car but riding along on top of it on a motorcycle. It's tough to explain to someone who's only ever traveled behind a windshield, sealed in with the comforting *thunk* of a closing door. On a bike there's no comforting *thunk*. The road is right there below you, blurring past your feet, ready to scuff your sole should you pull your boot from the peg and let it touch the ground. The wind is all around you and through you while the sun warms your clothing and your face. Take your left hand from the handlebar and place it in the breeze, and it rises and falls with the slipstream as if it were a bird's wing. Breathe in and smell the new-mown grass. Laugh out loud and your voice gets carried away on the wind.

At least that's how it is on a warm, sunny day like this Monday morning. Some rain a couple of days ago was a struggle, but I won't think about that now. There'll be plenty of time for that later.

Clickety-clack. Somewhere beside the road near here should be a rest area with an iron water pump. Nearly four decades ago a couple of motorcycles stopped here, and their riders took a cool drink from the pump. Should be coming up on the left and—here it is. Just like in the book. This road really hasn't changed much at all.

There's a place to park the bike near some picnic tables under a shelter, and the grass drops down to a stream behind the trees. To one side is the iron hand pump that's mentioned in the book. It still draws cool water. The spout is opposite the pump, so I have

Minnesota

to dash around with my hands cupped to catch the gushing water. I capture just a trickle—I have no proper cup. The Zen riders would have brought a cup. Besides, there were four of them—enough for one to pump and another to drink. I’m on my own today.

Those Zen riders—they’re why I’m here. Robert Pirsig and his eleven-year-old son, Chris, on Pirsig’s old 28-horsepower, 305-cc Honda Superhawk CB77, and Pirsig’s friends John and Sylvia Sutherland on their new BMW R60/2. They were making a long summer ride back in 1968, and then Pirsig went and wrote about it and his book became a best seller. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* is still in bookstores, and of the five million copies sold, two are in my saddlebags.

One of those two books is an early edition, liberated from the bookshelf in my aunt’s living room years ago because it had a picture of a motorcycle on its pink cover; the other is the twenty-fifth-anniversary edition, larger and a little revised. And now here, at the first stop mentioned in the book, it’s the pink edition I pull out and read awhile, lying back on the grass.

I’ve always been curious about this book, although it took years for me to read it all the way through. I pulled it from that bookshelf one quiet afternoon, settled on the sofa, and was captivated by its first pages, by the evocative description of these ponds and marshes and the riders’ gentle progress. It tells the story of a man and his son, ostensibly Pirsig and Chris, on a vacation trip to San Francisco by motorcycle from their home in the twin cities of Minneapolis/St. Paul. This is the framework for a multilayered, intricately structured narrative that is far more about their personal struggles with inner demons than it is about getting to the coast. It’s also the platform from which Pirsig explores and explains his philosophy. Only a few pages in, the narrator wanders from his road trip to lament the lack of quality in his modern-day America, and that’s when my teenage attention tuned out. I

ZEN AND NOW

took the book home anyway. There was something about that illustration on the back cover—a guy standing with his son, beside a motorcycle, looking away to the horizon.

A few years later, halfway through Philosophy 101 and getting nowhere, I found the book again and gave it another try. Reading slowly but steadily, I made it to the mountains of Montana before the term ended and other courses overwhelmed me. Something had clicked, though. Maybe it was Pirsig's luggage list, his rhyming off of the same sweaters and gloves and rain gear that I'd grown accustomed to packing for frantic weekend trips to the mountains on my sport bike. More likely it was the items on the list that made us different: rope when I carried bungee cords; goggles instead of a full-face helmet; a cold chisel, a taper punch, and point files for those mysterious workings inside the bike's engine, when I carried just a pair of Vise-Grips. Both of us were looking for the same thing from our travels, just using different tools.

It wasn't until last summer that I picked up the book for a third time, looking for something to read on the first vacation in five years during which I could relax from some of the responsibilities of parenthood. That time, reading with a whole new perspective, I sailed right through. The guy *got* it! He wasn't just looking for a nice vacation; he wanted to figure out "quality" as a thing in itself, not just a description—a noun, not an adjective. He wanted to learn what's needed for his life—my life, everyone's life—to move up a notch, to be the best it can be, truly harmonious in a world swamped by so many improvements that they buckle under the weight of their time-saving intentions. As a busy parent juggling work with family, that perspective struck close to home.

But it's showing its age, this book. It's written in a folksy style that reminds me of my parents, and it refers constantly to the paraphernalia of a previous generation. Just a few pages in, reading now on the warm grass of the travelers' pause at this exact place, I come to Pirsig's description of Sutherland going through his luggage here and finding a pair of shoelaces and their joking about his overpacked bike. Shoelaces! These days, in 2004, my

Minnesota

kids don't even know how to tie shoelaces—their footwear uses Velcro.

If I want to update the journey, I must find out more about the people who forged it and follow their tire tracks for myself. The ultimate truth about the world is biography, wrote Pirsig much later, and while my tools will be different, the reward could still be great. Perhaps some of its lessons will rub off along the way.

Beyond the rest area the road is straight and predictable, rising and dipping through fields and swamps, bordered by blue and yellow wildflowers in the uncut verge. Every small pool I pass seems to have a heron at one end, eyeing the fish or the frogs and waiting to see which of them can stay more still, and ducks at the other end, paddling softly around the shoreline's reeds. Such slow and lazy movement, while on the road itself the concrete stretches on and on, *clickety-clack*, as I ride steadily northwest and the hot sun slips across the sky.

At the side of the road up ahead there's a dead animal, well picked over by predators and no longer recognizable for whatever it used to be. The road may be hot and sultry, but it is not kind. It's hard and noisy and can kill anything in a blink if it's not understood and treated with respect.

Back in Wisconsin a couple of days ago, riding to Minneapolis to start this journey, I passed through a national forest, and there, lying beside the road, was a bald eagle, huge and glassy eyed, its neck twisted. The bird's feathers were scattered across the lane—a vehicle must have struck it as it swooped down for prey. I rode past, then doubled back and looked more closely, peering into its unseeing eyes and studying its sharp talons and perfect beak. Even in death it was intimidating.

A few miles on, as I was half watching wakeboarders on a river that flowed alongside the highway and was heading into the curves a little faster than usual, the tires hit a series of expansion joints filled with lines of slippery black bitumen. The leaning bike

ZEN AND NOW

slid into the oncoming lane before I could correct it. *Whoa!* There was no one else on the highway and it was no big deal, but this anonymous roadkill here in Minnesota is a reminder of the road's potential treachery.

After a while now there are railway tracks on the left and a train up ahead. The bike's moving at maybe 60 miles an hour while the train is pressing along at ten less than that, so in a few minutes I catch up with it and begin to pass. The boxcars are covered in graffiti, and it's tempting to watch every carriage as it slides by, reading the graffiti artists' names. Eventually I reach the front and look across to the driver, who's looking across at me. We wave to each other. Looking back, I see a blackbird flying alongside on the right. Its red-tipped wings blur against the blue sky.

I take my feet off the pegs and skim them along the road, stretching my stiff legs. Holding the handlebars for balance, I lean into the wind, and it's as if the bike is flying. The bird soon goes away and the train soon drops behind, but the feeling stays there as the miles roll on, *clickety-clack*, reluctant to fade.

At its heart, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* is a simple tale that praises basic values and decries ugly technology. Pirsig tells his story while riding the secondary roads across the Dakotas to the mountains, touching Yellowstone National Park before a pause in Bozeman, Montana. From there, he crosses into Idaho and over to Oregon before dipping down into California and reaching the Pacific coast and San Francisco. Pretty good trip, really.

In keeping with the theme, Pirsig's bike was a simple one that he maintained himself along the way. He was a capable mechanic who had made his living writing technical manuals for computers and military hardware, and who took great pleasure in doing a precise job properly. He'd strive to achieve excellence—*quality*—in everything he did, applying exactly the correct amount of measured pressure to a nut to ensure it was tight without

Minnesota

becoming burred, or spending those extra few minutes dripping oil on the bike's drive chain to make certain it was properly lubricated. He couldn't bear machinery that was not well tuned, be it an engine or a faucet, and he'd spend as much time as necessary to make sure a problem was fixed properly. Like my bike, his was a simple machine that responded well to simple care. For a man able to explain guided missile launch systems to their operators, the dissection of a two-cylinder motorcycle engine came easily.

Mind you, everything he learned came through trial and error. He tells of breaking down on a motorcycle trip with Chris up to Canada when the boy was probably about eight. It was raining hard, and the bike just stuttered to a halt. He checked all he could think of on the engine, shook the bike to hear the gas sloshing in the tank, pulled out the plugs, and eventually gave up. The two of them hitched home and returned with a trailer for the bike. Two weeks later, checking it over at home, Pirsig found the problem: he'd run out of gas. The sloshing was in the reserve tank, which he hadn't switched on because he'd assumed he had plenty of gas and the rain was the cause. From then on, he didn't assume anything and took the maintenance of his bike very seriously.

Most certainly he didn't trust that others would invest the time and care that a problem deserved. There's a lengthy diatribe in *Zen and the Art* against the mechanics who failed to diagnose the reason his bike's engine seized and who butchered the motor in the process, rounding the bolts of the tappet covers with a wrong-size wrench and smacking a hole through the aluminum cover with a chisel. These were guys who listened to the radio while working, and Pirsig would have none of it. He eventually found the cause himself through a painstaking disassembly, and used the example to demonstrate the lack of concern for quality in many people's lives—and, by extension, how a job's worth doing properly.

Back then there was often a simple solution. If the bike broke down somewhere, you'd just unwrap the Honda tool kit and pull the engine apart to the piston rings right beside the road. If the electrics were flickering, you might wrap some foil from a ciga-

ZEN AND NOW

rette pack around the contacts and be on your way; if the suspension collapsed, you could hike to a nearby farm and barter with the farmer for an old length of tractor spring to do the job till you got home. Maybe you'd even stay the night in the barn because it had gotten late and the farmer's beautiful daughter would keep you company.

Not today, though. Today's machines are filled with wizardry so that they're more powerful, more responsive, and more reliable—so that they get you wherever it is you're going even faster. They still break down, but their high-tech parts often can't be fixed without a software patch; all you can do is hope a nearby shop will be able to replace the piece. You never get to search for a strip of foil from a cigarette pack or for a tractor spring, and you never meet the farmer's daughter.

He's well into his seventies now, Robert Pirsig. He lives in New England and works hard to remain a recluse. He's written only one other book since *Zen and the Art*, an autobiographical novel called *Lila*, which delves even more deeply into the modern search for quality and morals, and which some, including Pirsig himself, consider the superior work, but although it's sold more than half a million copies, it has not been a blockbuster.

I wrote to him and asked for a meeting, and he wrote back right away. "The best place to meet an author is on the pages of his book," he wrote kindly, turning down the request. "Anywhere else is a disappointment, believe me."

After all, the narrator of *Zen and the Art*, who is not Pirsig himself but a character who shares his name and many of his foibles, is ultimately quite unpleasant. Pirsig admits at the opening of the book that "although much has been changed for rhetorical purposes, it must be regarded in its essence as fact." As he tells it, in making the ride to Bozeman in 1968, he was reliving a part of his life that had been erased several years before. For he had once taught there, at Montana State College. With an IQ of at

Minnesota

least 170, he was a tortured genius whose intellectual restlessness drove him insane at age thirty-three; he spent Thanksgiving of 1961 in a mental hospital and fluttered in and out of schizophrenic madness for two years. Finally, his wife and father had him committed to a psychiatric ward, where—according to the narrator—his memory was damaged by electric shock therapy and from which only fragments of his former self could be recalled.

“He was dead,” wrote Pirsig.

Destroyed by order of the court, enforced by the transmission of high-voltage alternating current through the lobes of his brain. Approximately 800 mills of amperage at durations of 0.5 to 1.5 seconds had been applied on twenty-eight consecutive occasions, in a process known technologically as “Annihilation ECS.” A whole personality had been liquidated without a trace in a technologically faultless act that has defined our relationship ever since. I have never met him. Never will.

Pirsig called his former personality Phaedrus, and much of the conflict takes place between Phaedrus and the narrator as they struggle for control over the father’s mind and, in turn, for control over the son. Young Chris Pirsig is caught in the middle, remembering the affectionate father he once knew and the father who now wears that man’s face. But he rarely sees the face. For the many hours that they’re riding on the little Honda, the narrator is in front, with the sun and wind and rain on his chest and the controls at his fingertips, master of the motorcycle, while Chris is behind, unable to see much, unable to speak or be heard, alone with his thoughts, sometimes crying, yearning for the father he lost six years before, who has been replaced by the broad back of this tyrant.

I could not write to Chris. In 1979 in San Francisco he was stabbed to death outside the Zen Center, where he had been studying. He was about to turn twenty-three.

ZEN AND NOW

. . .

It's getting even hotter now. The farmland is widening, and the ground is drying—fewer trees, and the few there are have been planted to protect the farm buildings from the wind. The bike's going to need gas soon. She doesn't go that far on a tank.

When I first began planning this trip seriously, I traded a few brief letters with Pirsig, and later with Nancy, his wife at the time, and his surviving son, Ted. It didn't take long to find addresses for two of the other characters in the narrative: John Sutherland of Minneapolis, who rode with his wife, Sylvia, alongside the Pirsigs for the first week of their journey to Montana, and Gennie DeWeese, who hosted the Pirsigs and Sutherlands for a few days in Bozeman before the travelers split up to complete their vacations separately.

Both Sutherland and DeWeese wrote to say they'd be pleased to meet with me. They're used to such requests, for each year several "Pirsig's pilgrims" make the same trip and seek out the elements of the book.

Arriving in Minneapolis just a couple of days ago, I called John Sutherland, and we met up yesterday morning. He's separated from Sylvia, although they remain close friends. I asked if she'd speak with me about the book, and he was emphatic that she would not. She didn't like the book and wants to forget about it, he said.

That is because the two of them come across as shallow—they're supposed to represent the carelessness and sloppiness of modern life. Pirsig's acknowledgment that he's taken some liberties in his portrayals must be small consolation to Sylvia. Sutherland, though, says he's not bothered about being portrayed as an affable drunk who can't fix his bike or even a dripping faucet. Worse than that, in Pirsig's view he doesn't *care* about the dripping faucet. He lives now in a bungalow near downtown Minneapolis (with all the faucets tight) and was pleased to talk about

Minnesota

the good old days, although he has no souvenirs from the '68 trip. It wasn't that big a deal at the time, he explained.

Sutherland later became a pro photographer, but he hadn't taken any pictures back then—the few that survive are from Pirsig's camera. They're on the Internet now, those dozen pictures, and I'd printed some copies for just such a meeting as this. Sutherland has no computer and was pleased to accept the prints, even if he was none too sure of their primitive color. "Color photos give you exactly what you see," he said. "Black-and-white still has a mystery about it." Here he is with Sylvia, posing with young Chris at a mountain pass and again somewhere on the prairie. Here he is with Bob Pirsig, hoisting Chris between the bikes. The three of them leaning against a hay bale. You've probably got family pictures just like them.

I showed him some of the photos I'd taken on the road to Minneapolis, and he peered into the little digital screen on the back of my camera and muttered something about today's technology. There were a dozen photos just of the dead eagle, and I flipped through them quickly to find the best. "It's a lot easier when you don't have to develop them all, isn't it?" said Sutherland. "When you don't have to pay for all the paper and chemical?" But there was no good photo of the eagle; every picture just showed a dead bird, ants crawling through its feathers.

Sutherland's favorite photographs are framed and presented on tables throughout his small home or stored in flat boxes on the bookshelves. He looks good in his old pictures, as he does in Pirsig's photos from the trip. These days his dark hair has thinned, his gut has filled, and his hearing requires a visitor to use a loud voice, but he seems fit for a man in his late seventies and keeps active. Most days he heads over to his wife's apartment, or visits one of his four daughters. So after some coffee we drove around awhile to see the Twin Cities and to take a look at Pirsig's old house in St. Paul.

It's a good-size family home on a quiet, leafy street, with white siding and green-shuttered windows and a large sheltered front door. A thirtysomething woman was tending the flower garden in

ZEN AND NOW

front, and we introduced ourselves. Her name was Susan Nemitz, and she was thrilled to meet us.

“John!” she called to her husband. “We’ve got visitors interested in the Pirsigs!”

For Sutherland, stepping through the front door on that sunny Sunday afternoon into the shade of the dark wood hallway, it was the first time he’d been back in the house since his friends had moved away.

“These people know about the Pirsigs and are interested in the house,” Sue said to her husband as he came downstairs. “And this is John Sutherland, the same John Sutherland who’s in the book and who rode with them for a while.”

John Curry, her husband, knew all about *Zen and the Art* and was impressed to meet Sutherland, who in turn was rather tickled to receive the attention. We were offered Coke and Fresca and Welch’s grape juice, and Sutherland’s memory was tapped for his recollections of the trip. After all, Sue and John had each read the book before they bought the house and were pleased to move into a home once lived in by a famous genius and his family.

“I remember cocktail parties in here,” said Sutherland, looking into the paneled living room. “Bob was the quiet one, but Nancy was much more lively and was such a great host. Always plenty to eat and always plenty to drink. The kids were upstairs in their rooms, and we were down here drinking and eating. Those were great parties.”

Looking up the dark wood stairs, he remembered his girls going up there to hang out with the Pirsig boys while their parents visited.

“The boys had guinea pigs, and my girls, who were a few years younger, loved to come over to see them and play. We stayed down here and talked about politics, the university—all kinds of things.”

“And how would you describe yourself now?” asked Sue.

Minnesota

“Well, I’m a social worker, a jazz musician, a photographer, and a recovering alcoholic.”

“Ah,” she exclaimed, and then, to lighten the suddenly somber mood, “a Renaissance man!”

Sutherland smiled at her graciousness. He hasn’t had a drink since his family surprised him with an intervention in 1979, but alcohol runs through the *Zen and the Art* journey. Sutherland’s probably the worst of the travelers, always propping up a bar somewhere, stopping for beers at lunch and a nip of something in the afternoon, followed by late-night liquors, but his wife and friends aren’t too far behind. One of the things that date the book is all the breaking for booze before getting back on the bike.

Sutherland took another sip from his Fresca, and Sue asked about the Pirsig boys. Like me, she’s been in touch with the surviving younger son, Ted, who lives in Hawaii and maintains no contact with his father but has fond memories of the house in which he grew up.

“Ted and Chris really didn’t get along,” Sutherland said more quietly.

“If one boy was in a room and the other walked in, that boy would get up and leave. On the trip, Chris was kind of a drag, always whimpering. But I think we helped Chris, helped him to get away from the whole father-son thing. They tried—Nancy would do something with Ted one year, then Bob with Chris—but there wasn’t too much emotional togetherness in that whole crew.”

The room was quiet. None of this was news to Sue and John, for they’d corresponded with Ted, but it was hard to hear it in this house, in which they’re now making a life with their own young daughter. Before they’d bought the house eight years ago, with Sue pregnant and the two of them looking for a happy family home, they’d almost purchased a property that seemed perfect, but it was being sold because of a divorce and they eventually shied away from its “bad karma.”

“We thought this would be a happier place,” said Sue, “but we

ZEN AND NOW

learned afterward that they weren't really all that happy here. So now we think of it as a creative place. And we've made it happy."

The rooms and layout are still as the Pirsigs would recognize them. The original workbench remains in the basement, well constructed and solid, its drawer still sliding reliably on the wheels from the boys' roller skates. When Ted wrote to tell them of a secret walled-up room under the front stairs, where he and his brother would hold up a mirror to look through a gap high in the paneling to see only blackness, John Curry had gone down there to look for himself.

With mirror and flashlight in hand, he took me downstairs to see it. There was a small hole in the wall above where a mosaic of his daughter's artwork had been pinned to the panels. John shone the flashlight through the hole and angled the mirror beside it to show me the interior. The reflection on the silvered surface was dark and unclear, and the space there, probably five feet square, remained obscure.

"I think there are skeletons in there," he said with only a half smile. "Lots of skeletons."

After we left the Pirsig house, Sutherland drove us past the house on Clarence Avenue in Minneapolis where Maynard and Harriet Pirsig had lived most of their days, raising their son, Robert; their younger daughter, Jean; and later, an adopted daughter, Wanda, whose unmarried mother had lived next door. Harriet had cared for Wanda as a baby while her mother went to work; when the mother went to California to find a better job, she left her eight-month-old behind, planning to return for her when she became established, but she never reclaimed the child. For the rest of their lives, Harriet and Maynard considered her their own.

We passed the campus where Sutherland had met Pirsig in the mid-'60s while attending lectures on Eastern philosophy. Robert had been involved with the university from early in his life. In kindergarten, being already able to read and write, he was

Minnesota

promptly bumped up to the second grade, where, as the smallest child in the class, he was bullied and picked upon. It didn't help that his teachers made him write with his right hand when he was naturally left-handed and that he developed a stammer. So his parents enrolled him in a school for the children of university faculty, where his classmates were his own age and he was allowed to write with his left hand, and he excelled. From there he went on to the university high school and then to the university itself, studying chemistry when he was just fifteen years old. He was an otherwise normal teenager, enjoying chess and keeping a wild squirrel in his bedroom; he called it Gus, and the rodent chewed on his wooden chess pieces. But at eighteen, with the rapid academic progression being all too much too soon, he was expelled from the university for failing grades, inattention to his studies, and overall immaturity.

"Here I am a child prodigy," he told a journalist many years later, "and I'd like to discover—I know this is a childish dream—the secret of life, to know everything there is to know, to be an intellectual master of things. And they're trying to seal me into Wrap and Wax for the rest of my life." And as he also once wrote, pure science should be a search for truth, not for profit.

Unwilling to go to work for the local waxed paper manufacturer with the university's chemistry grads and unsure of his calling, Pirsig joined the army and was sent to Korea for fourteen months; in Asia he discovered ways of thinking that went far beyond the rigid rationalism of Western tradition. "I told the Koreans one time the most marvelous thing about the English language is that in 26 letters you can describe the whole universe. And they just said, 'No.' That was what started me thinking."

After his discharge he returned to the University of Minnesota to study philosophy and pursue a why-are-we-here ideal that he called "the ghost of reason," but it eluded him. On earning his bachelor of arts, he went to India with money from the GI Bill and enrolled at Banaras Hindu University to study Eastern philosophy, but he spent more time traveling around than poring over

ZEN AND NOW

books; in his own words, “nothing much happened,” and he returned to Minnesota to take up a more practical pursuit—the study of journalism.

His parents expected a lot of him, for they had both risen from a poor midwestern farming background to affluent success through a combination of intelligence and sheer grit. Maynard had spoken only German until he went to school and then became the first person in his town to go on to college; at the University of Minnesota Law School he earned the highest grades ever recorded and eventually became its dean and one of the most respected—and toughest—lawyers in the region. “I used to have many enemies in this state,” he once told an audience. “I’m pleased to report to you that now they’re all dead!”

Harriet, the oldest child in a large Swedish family in northern Minnesota, had it harder. Her mother died when she was twelve years old. Her father, a simple man who needed a wife to care for the family and his own needs, claimed a version of Swedish tradition and took Harriet into his bed. Within a year she bore him a child. When the authorities found out, they were horrified: her father was committed to an asylum and the seven children were placed in foster homes around the state. Not Harriet, though, who was devastated to lose the father she still loved. She moved to Minneapolis, where she found room and board in exchange for reading to an old, blind scholar and put herself through high school and then college, where she met Maynard.

Harriet eventually found all her siblings, but the illegitimate baby was lost, its fate never recorded. “It doesn’t matter to me,” Maynard told her, “but don’t ever tell anyone about it.” Which she did not—until the day more than thirty years later when Robert Pirsig was visiting his parents’ home and answered the ringing telephone; a state official was on the line, asking permission to perform surgery on Mr. Sjobeck, the grandfather he’d always believed was dead. The sordid story came out when he confronted his parents, but it would still not be spoken of outside the family.

. . .

Minnesota

On the way home we drove by the house of one of Sutherland's daughters, and when he saw her out walking with her children, we stopped for a chat through the car window.

"I told them about how you'd go upstairs and play with the guinea pigs," he said about the day's visit.

"Dad!" And she grinned. "We hated those guinea pigs. We thought they were creepy!"

I left from outside the Pirsig house this morning. John Curry came out with a cup of coffee for me and a pat on the gas tank for the bike to wish us both well. This journey had to start somewhere, and the place might as well have been accurate. Whenever possible, I plan to stick to the same route and the same rest stops and see how much remains. Pirsig was sometimes vague about names but always precise in description, so I expect to find the way. He left in July, and today's July 18; the journey should take two weeks, ending in San Francisco on my birthday.

As a guide, I have a GPS unit fixed to the bike's handlebar—worth more than the old bike herself—and it's been loaded with waypoints that were sent to me by a tech-savvy Pirsig fan. I'm not the first to travel this road and sure won't be the last, but all that really matters right now, as the heat bears down and the landscape begins to flatten, is that the front tire stays true to the west. The rest will follow.