



## Back Roads

*Tawni O'Dell*

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"One day you're that guy who's happy he managed to survive high school and get that almighty piece of paper, and you're thinking you might try to get a job at Redi-Mix concrete where your dad's worked since the beginning of time. And at least you've got a family you can stand even if they are all sisters. One day you're that guy, and the next day you're assigned to a social worker and a therapist and given the choice of either being a LEGAL ADULT with three DEPENDENTS or an ORPHAN with NOBODY." --From *Back Roads*

Harley Altmyer should be in college drinking Rolling Rock and chasing girls. He should be freed from his closed-minded, stricken coal town, with its lack of jobs and no sense of humor. Instead, he's constantly reminded of just how messed up his life is.

With his mother in jail for killing his abusive father, Harley is an orphan with the responsibilities of an adult and the fiery, aggressive libido of a teenager. Just nineteen years old, he's marooned in the Pennsylvania backwoods caring for his three younger sisters, whose feelings about him range from stifling dependence to loathing. And once he develops an obsession with the sexy, melancholic mother of two living down the road, those Victoria's Secret catalogs just won't do the trick anymore. He wants Callie Mercer so badly he fears he will explode. But it's the family secrets, the lies, and the unspoken truths that light the fuse and erupt into a series of staggering surprises, leaving what's left of his family in tatters. Through every ordeal, the unforgettable Harley could never know that his endearing humor, his love for his sisters, and his bumbling heroics would redeem them all.

Funny and heartbreaking, Tawni O'Dell's pitch-perfect characters capture the maddening confusion of adolescence and the prickly nature of family with irony and unerring honesty. *Back Roads* is a riveting novel by a formidable new talent.

## Back Roads Details

Date : Published (first published December 27th 1999)

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Author : Tawni O'Dell

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# From Reader Review Back Roads for online ebook

## Sammy says

Let's just say one thing: this is one fucked up family. If you decide to read this book, brace yourself, seriously, the Altmeyer's are fucked up. But for some reason, you still like them.

There's so much that happens in this story that keeps you reading I can't say much without giving it away. For a first novel O'Dell does an extremely good job. Her writing is raw and real which helps add to the mood and characters of the book.

One thing I liked about O'Dell's style was that instead of constantly describing the overall pictures of things, she finds minute details, idiosyncrasies in characters, flaws in settings, to focus on instead. It's fascinating and beautiful at the same time.

Like I said earlier, there are so many surprises that pop up throughout the book to rehash the plot and what I liked about the story and didn't like would give too much away and probably keep you from reading the story. It's these surprises that really keep the story moving and keep you reading.

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## Jen says

Back roads meet backwards. This is a story of a disturbingly dysfunctional family. 19 year old Harley is a country boy, raising 3 younger sisters on account his mother is in jail for the murder of his father. Hormones running amok, sanity on the edge, an obsession with an older woman, mix in an abusive upbringing and this is formula for self destruction.

The transformation from child to man happens with the delayering of lies that reveal truths: ugly ones. He is in a constant tormented struggle with what he knows is right with what has happened in the past. A coming of age story where good trumps over evil at the cost of self sacrifice.

This was an engaging read. I like O'Dell's writing style and character development. Although her debut, I found it better than her latest release, Angels Burning. 4\*

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## Teryl says

I couldn't put this book down, which is crazy because it is so disturbing. Harley is border line crazy due to his upbringing, but I found myself feeling for him. I highly recommend this book, be warned, it is very dark and disturbing at parts.

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## karen says

i have developed a real taste for literature from this region lately. and that might be the problem; why i didn't love this book the way danaaaaa does. all of the other books i have read (and i am using the term "region" pretty loosely to encompass mostly appalachia, but blurring around the edges of appalachia-proper a little) have followed a pretty consistent speech pattern and tone that this one strays from. am i being sexist to point out that this is the only *woman* i have read writing this kind of material? and maybe the things i admire - the succinctness of the prose and the very barebones dialogue that masks some huge concepts are a regional idiosyncrasy that female writers value less? i would love some argument to this, because i know this can't be true.

this is her nine-year-old:

"but i didn't see bitterness or self-pity or some warped nostalgic wistfulness in his face. what i saw was something like pride but pride without ego, something like acceptance but acceptance without ever being allowed to consider any other options"

this just doesn't ring true as a nine-year-old observation. and - yes - the character is recalling the incident as a nineteen-year-old, but this and some other rather advanced psychological observations are being presented as having been acknowledged by a nine-year-old, and that just doesn't mesh for me.

even as a nineteen-year-old, it wouldn't work, not for this nineteen-year-old. and i am not saying that he needs to be an idiot, but the reality of his situation is that he works two jobs, goes to the shrink in his spare time, and is raising three younger siblings in the wake of his family's tragedy. i just don't buy a boy of his age, background, and situation waxing philosophical about art - from having seen some notecard reproductions - and having such sophisticated epiphanies, all the while experiencing hallucinations and blackouts as well as having his sexual awakening. meditating on the meaning of art is *inessential* - it is unrealistic to have this character speculating on the divergence of gender roles in a post-lapsarian world - this is an intellectual luxury.

were you ever a nineteen-year-old boy living hand-to-mouth mostly concerned with who would pay the bills and why your mom killed your dad?? is this how you spent time thinking??:

"her eyes turned a sandblasted gray as if she had made them ready for me to carve into them whatever horrible image i chose".

"a gray mist had settled over everything, absorbing the weak morning light, and giving the air substance. i stuck my bare arm out into it and brought it back covered in shimmer. i breathed it in deeply, letting its feather weight fill my lungs and roll over my tongue. it tasted sweet and empty like purity should".

and i am not saying that poverty should go hand in hand with inarticulate or unsophisticated speech, but this seems indulgent and inappropriate.

you can have something be poetic and still ring true to the dialect of the region. ron rash, cormac mccarthy, castle freedman jr, daniel woodrell all function perfectly well within the confines of terse sentences that explode with meaning and they make sentences that resonate without sounding forced:

"gun's only good when it's the only gun".

that is one of my favorite sentences ever.

and i could fill the page with mccarthy examples. and even nick cave in *and the ass saw the angel* - an australian, writing in a dialect that is occasionally sloppy, makes it realistic-sounding because of the biblical nature of the narrator's speeches. they are wildly overblown, but the kid is a) crazy, b) full of a mission of avenging angeldom, c) fucking crazy - so the hifalutin' language *works*, especially in a character that, being mute, can only express himself in his head, so the contrast works exceptionally well.

daniel woodrell makes such a believable character of ree in *winter's bone*; in the way she is raising her two younger brothers by herself, in the advice she gives:

"never ask for what ought to be offered".

"don't fight if you can help it. but if one of you gets whipped by somebody *both* of you best come home bloody, understand?"

she is tough and matter-of-fact and she never shrinks from what is necessary. but it is all done, not with resignation, never like she is giving something up; she is simply practical and does what needs doing. and she never once talks about art.

but i have strayed from my point.

i can see why oprah likes it. she loves the dysfunctional, depressing families, with a soupçon of incest. and she thinks women will like it too. and she is probably right, only this woman has been spoiled with too many similar books that hit all my personal buttons.

the book is not at all bad - the descriptions of the landscape are wonderful - i love the coal seeping through the ground to blacken the salt licks, and the deer being drawn to them despite their slowly being killed by them. the author is from the region, and she does a really good job of building the scenery, but the people sometimes seem either like caricatures (slutty, looking-for-love-and-comfort amber) or just too flowery in speech. but i was never bored, and even though i could tell where it was going, it was still a good read.

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## Chip says

I had a hard time believing that Harley would continue to go to see the therapist while working two jobs and not having a dime to spare... not that the therapy was costing anything except time, but it didn't add up other than as a plot device to explain that he was nuts (in case it escaped the reader's attention).

The real story should have been told from Amber's point of view. There were complex issues between Amber, Misty and their mother that Harley would never understand, and that complexity deserved to be explored.

In many ways this felt like another tired reaffirmation of Appalachia stereotypes. The introduction of impressionist art somehow hinted that this book might rise above the jokes, but in the end it wasn't enough. There's Appalachia, with everyone in the country making fun of them, proving again they are worthy of the treatment. That leaves a bad taste in my mouth as a reader, and explains in many ways why the author hasn't been able to follow up her initial success with another (that, and the lack of Oprah's marketing support).

Beach reading at best. Unless someone gives me a compelling reason, I won't read this author again.

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### **Kathy says**

This is my take on Oprah books: really bad things happen to people who are already suffering from other bad things and the end is never a happy one. In fact, they're often icky endings.

Woody loaned me *Back Roads* and I read through it in one sick day last week. The story is told from the point of view of Harley, a 19 year old boy, whose Mother is in prison for killing his Father. Harley's left with raising his three younger sisters.

There's abuse, murder, incest, adultery, mental illness...yep, a perfect Oprah book.

I have to admit I was thoroughly engrossed while reading this. I sympathized with Harley and it was painful to see what was happening to him and around him. Of course, it being an Oprah book, I wanted to take a shower after I was done to get the Ick feeling to go away.

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### **Robert Beveridge says**

Tawni O'Dell, *Back Roads* (Viking, 2000)

I find the whole thing incredibly amusing.

Had a man written this book, word for word, the character of Harley Altmeyer would no doubt be blazoned on the front as "an unstoppable sociopath about to explode" (fill in the correct number of exclamation points, depending on era and author). Instead, the back cover blurb calls him "wonderfully touching." Oh, please.

Thank heaven Tawni O'Dell is a much better writer than her blurbist, because Harley Altmeyer is the least likable hero I've run across since Michael Moorcock decided an anorexic albino with a big black sword sounded like a good idea. Note I didn't say antihero there; Harley Altmeyer is certainly the hero of this book in that, while O'Dell keeps him so unlikable he gets nauseating at times, we never stop feeling sympathy for him.

Altmeyer is on the brink of his twentieth birthday, and as we open he's sitting in the box in the local police station being grilled by three cops for killing his girlfriend-- who just happens to be the thirty-four-year-old wife of the next-door neighbor. Not terribly surprising, the cops muse, given his roots; Harley's mother was convicted of killing his father a couple years previous, and is now sitting in prison in Indiana, PA (I point this out because for the first hundred fifty pages I wondered how they could drive from Pennsylvania to Indiana in two hours-- and I spent over half my life living less than an hour from Indiana, PA. Obviously a truly memorable place). Harley spends about two hundred fifty pages spinning out his tale, and it's a doozy. After his mom iced his dad, he was dead and she was in jail, and the task of raising his three younger sisters fell squarely on his shoulders. Nineteen, saddled with all the bills, working two jobs, and having to raise three sisters, ranging in age from six to sixteen. It's not exactly a Frank Capra film. And Harley, whose love/hate relationship with all women borders on the psychotic, is in no way going to be mistaken for Jimmy

Stewart (actually, I saw Giovanni Ribisi, circa his memorable X-Files appearance, playing this guy).

If you've got half a brain and have read enough books along these lines, you've probably got half of it figured before you open the front cover. But O'Dell's writing is so thoroughly disingenuous, and Harley (the very essence of the unreliable narrator!) is so straightforward and quasi-logical that he's completely believable. And so, despite the general predictability of the plot points, they still hit with a roundhouse.

The tendency, of course, is to compare this with the other novels in the Oprah stable, but it pulls me in a different direction; there's more here that invites comparison with Ian McEwan's weepingly good first novel, *The Cement Garden* (and not just the overall plot, either). While McEwan has turned into something of a washed-out pansy since he hit us over the head with that particular cement block, I still have high hopes for O'Dell. This is stark, simple, minimal, easy to read, compelling, with some of the strongest characterization I've come across in years, and somehow the revelations that just kind of wander through the last fifty pages (no big emotional revelatory scenes here) still manage to surprise, not to mention tug at the heartstrings.

Oprah found a good'un here, that's for sure. Let's just hope O'Dell doesn't end up a washed-out pansy who moves to England for the sole purpose of getting short-listed for the Booker Prize. \*\*\* 1/2

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### **Conniebell says**

Okay so this book...I went into it not expecting anything - it's not normally the book I'd read. It contains some very mature topics so if you're not comfortable reading those then this book really isn't for you!

So I decided to pick this book up purely because Jennifer Morrison is going to be playing Callie in the film adaptation and she's been talking about it for a while. I can't wait to see how the film adaptation turns out and how Jen portrays Callie on screen.

This book honestly made me so shocked, angry, sad and confused (In a good way)! I've got to say the story was messed up aha! I'm still not over the ending honestly I had to drop my book and silently scream into my hands!!

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### **Dan says**

I have to admit that the blurb is deceiving this time. From the blurb, you wouldn't be able to tell how great the book is without at least reading the first chapter, it just pulls you in and you'll wanna find out more. *Back Roads* is about a 19 year old boy named Harley Altmeyer who has to take care of his three younger sisters after their caring mom has been sent to jail for killing their abusive father. The book is not about how he's surviving in life though, but about love as well, as a key point to the book is that he lusts for a mother of two down the road of his home. As the story progresses unbelievable things seems to progress and the shocking truth is revealed at the end, the truth about the father's death. At first to me it seems like the book has no point, it's just talking about some crappy life of a kid who's suffering because he's at lost of parents and that he has to live on his own while taking care of his 3 sisters, yet there is more to it that meets the eyes. This book reminds me of *The Catcher in the Rye* as how the situations are differently yet the main character have the biggest issue with everyone else in the book. Either way i think this was one of the best books i read in my life, I recommend it to everyone.

\*Warning!!\* This book is pretty mature, don't read if you can't handle gruesome description or sex scenes or incestuous themes.

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### **Rebecca McNutt says**

*Back Roads* was an alright novel but there was something a little creepy about it. A teenage boy in love with an adult woman? And he says he could "violate her a hundred different ways"? ...Disturbing. Aside from that, the story of a kid struggling to keep his siblings from falling into the foster care system was very interesting.

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### **Suzanne says**

I don't usually comment on my books, or give a review, but this book was great. Finished it in 2 days because I could not put it down. It's been a while since I was that into what I was reading. It's rough, raw, compelling, heartbreaking and you can't help connecting with the characters. This story will stay with me for some time.

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### **Asghar Abbas says**

Never before I've read characters so visceral, resilient, strong, so brave, and yet so utterly self-destructive; bent on harming themselves when they can forgive each other. This was an Oprah Book Club choice, but I'll forgive that.

This is without a doubt hands down, absolutely one of my favorite, favorite books. Of all Time. In fact, this one here is right up there next to *Fools Die* by Mario Puzo, on the very top. It's so haunting, beautifully written. The characters so real that I feel for them every time I read it. I could pick this up any time, any where, and it will move me just the same, every single time. It is fallow like that. But the emotional impact, oh boy, remains the same.

Devastating.

Let's try a sample of her writing shall we, just a taste. Okay : (SPOILERS DOWN BELOW):

It wasn't fair he got the chance and I didn't. I wouldn't have wasted it. If I had known Mom was going to kill Dad that night as I went off to Skip's house to drink contraband beers and bullshit about horny college chicks, I would've stopped first and cleared some things up. I would've asked him why he didn't like me. I would've apologized for being such a disappointment to him. And I would've told him I loved him- because I did- in some joyless, unsatisfying way that hurt instead of healed, but I knew it was still love.

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In my hands right now, this book feels as vague and familiar as home; comfortable - oh how I love 2006. For a year can be be home, too. But I love Another now and for another. And God, I am tempted to reread this immediately, at once but no, I'll just read one of her newer novels sitting empty on my shelf. I can't recommend this book enough, in fact I would urge everyone to read this pronto. Don't miss out on this. Please feel the urgency.

Tawni O'Dell is a remarkably talented woman in the same vein as Janet Fitch, she is not only a favorite author of mine, but also one of the best people in the known world.

I wish could give Back Roads a thousand stars, but already a thousand suns have gone into making this one.

Let this devastate you. Let it.

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### **Dennis says**

After reading so many women comment about men writing in women's voices, it's now time to admit that women writing as men can completely miss the boat. Harley didn't sound like any guy I knew, nor grew up nor WAS in my life. His sentiments rang completely hollow for me; rather he sounded more like how a woman would like a teenage boy to be. The most interesting character, Misty, went almost completely voiceless and the ending was laughable, as was most of the book. easily the worst of Oprah's Book Club.

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### **Natalie Richards says**

Engrossing, painful and raw.

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### **Patricia says**

I bought Back Roads while I was on vacation in Florida. I bought the hard cover from the clearance shelf at Barnes & Noble for \$5! I started reading it and couldn't put it down! I hadn't read a good book like that in a long time! Tawni O'Dell reminded me why I loved to read! I actually felt guilty that I only paid \$5 for a hard cover version of such an amazing book! I loved it so much that I wrote to Tawni and asked her if she would sign it for me if I sent it to her with return postage paid. She agreed. It so happened that I vacationed not far from where she lives. I asked her if I could meet her someplace so she could sign the books (I bought two more copies, one for my best friend and another for my daughter's teacher). She agreed to meet me at Denny's. When I called her to tell her I was on my way, she invited me to go to her home! I felt humble knowing I would be in the home and presence of such a great writer! She greeted me at the door and welcomed me into her home. We sat and talked over coffee and pastry. She signed my books, personalizing each. I left there knowing that I would read every book she ever writes, and that I would not mind paying full price for her books! Back Roads made me laugh, cry, sigh, shake my head and feel like I was right there as I was reading. The characters are real; you can relate to their experiences. Tawni brings you into the book! Make sure you start reading when you won't have to worry about stopping! Therefore, do not start reading it on your lunch break at work! You will probably be compelled to call your boss and say you had to go home during lunch and can't return! Enjoy!

