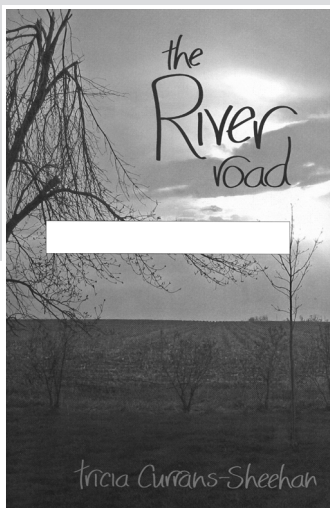


The River Road: A Novel in Stories

by Tricia Currans-Sheehan

New Rivers Press, 2008

Price (Paperback): \$14.95



Reviewed by Kelly Meyer

Currans-Sheehan's *The River Road*, the follow-up to 2004's *The Egg Lady and Other Neighbors*, presents an episodic look at life for a young girl in rural Iowa. Brigid's first-person narration is all at once introspective, sensitive to the environment, and rubbed raw from the general pain of adolescence and her personal burden of growing up without her mother.

Set in the 1950s and 60s, the novel is far from nostalgic. Through Brigid's voice we hear the often-discordant rhythms of childhood and adolescence and see the blurred lines in between. The chapters, set across a span of 11 years, make a narrative patchwork of stories as Brigid learns how to use her voice and places these episodes of memory into the pattern of her life. They are her possessions, as much belonging to her as the photo of her mother in a kitchen band and the lipstick-stained cigar butt of a woman she saw shot to death as a seven-year-old girl.

Central to *The River Road* is the crisis of identity Brigid faces as she looks for some kind of mutual recognition with the female figures she encounters, yearning for entry into a sisterhood she feels excluded from without her mother to lead her in. These interactions with the novel's near-mythic characters—the painfully beautiful beauty queen sisters, the sisters who are almost burned alive, her own troubled half-sister—are sometimes subtle and sometimes forceful. No less significant is Brigid's relationship with her ever-grieving father. Their often-stilted communication and angry confrontations ring true to an upended family.

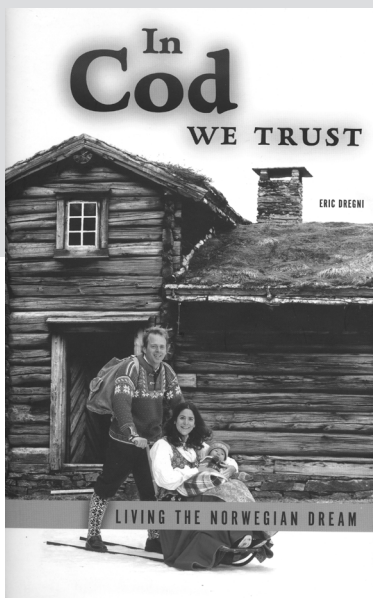
With fertile imagery and carefully unpacked observations, the novel explores the natural and social spheres of Brigid's world. Against the background of the Iowa fields, the small towns, the river, and the river road, Currans-Sheehan crafts a novel that simultaneously engages with and transcends regionalism.

In Cod We Trust: Living the Norwegian Dream

by Eric Dregni

University of Minnesota Press, 2008

Price (Hardcover): \$22.95



Reviewed by Nancy MacKenzie

Eric Dregni's combination Scandinavian travel memoir and narrative of his search for family roots will entertain and delight any reader, even those without Norwegian heritage or any particular desire to learn about Norway. *In Cod We Trust: Living the Norwegian Dream* recounts Dregni's and his wife Katy's year in the small Norwegian village of Trondheim where their son Eilif (named in honor of his great great-grandfather Ellef) is born and where Dregni studies Norwegian while he seeks to discover why his great grandfather left Norway to eventually settle in Minnesota.

Dregni's writing is understated yet vivid and very funny as he portrays himself and Katy adapting to life as new parents of a colicky baby in a place where they don't know the language, where during *Mørketid* (the dark time) the sky is light for only four hours a day, where the streets and sidewalks are so icy that people attach cleats to their shoes, and where *Janteloven*—the law of Janta, which dictates that one cannot act superior to one's neighbors—makes everyone appear quite unfriendly.

Dregni describes himself as eager to become submerged in living the Norwegian dream, which appears to consist of eating dinners with porridge as not just the main course, but the only course; getting away from it all by going to a *hytte*, which is a spartan cabin with no electricity or running water that one must

hike three hours to reach from the closest road; and riding the meat bus to Sweden where meat can be purchased more cheaply than in Norway (where a Burger King Whopper costs approximately ten dollars).

The appeal of this memoir stems mainly from the author's humor and sense of irony. The reader is sure to sympathize with first time parents whose baby son sleeps soundly only during a cruise to the Arctic on seas so rough all the other passengers are helplessly sick.

In 1893 at the age of 18 Dregni's great grandfather left an overpopulated, malnourished Norway for the same reason many of his contemporaries emigrated: he could not eke out a living even as a farmer with land so sparse. Dregni returns to his ancestors' homeland to discover that his great grandfather's house is gone, crushed by a boulder so big no one has ever attempted to shift it. Rich natural resources of oil, natural gas, and hydroelectric power have made the Norway that Dregni and his family visit the richest country in Europe.

Solidly researched, rich in information about modern day life in a Norwegian village, and highly entertaining, *In Cod We Trust* well represents the genre of creative nonfiction.

Eric Dregni is assistant professor of writing at Concordia University in St. Paul. His other books include *Minnesota Marvels* (2001) and *Midwest Marvels* (2006).