

Richard Andrews' Key to the Highway

by Angela Leuck

Key to the Highway

by Richard Andrews (2023)
Untimely Books, 202 pp., \$24.99

Author Richard Andrews, astride a gleaming black Harley, roared up to his August 20th launch of *Key to the Highway* at Studio Georgeville in Georgeville, Quebec.

At first glance, Andrews' first novel might seem nothing more than a masculinist fantasy of powerful machines, beautiful women, and the freedom of the road, but the story delves much deeper.

The book grew out of Andrews' master's thesis based on the work of the great mythologist Joseph Campbell. Andrews' passion for myth goes back to his youth in the 1950s when he pored over *The Classics Illustrated* comics. It's no surprise that *Key to the Highway* is chock full of references not only to classical Greek myth, but to Nordic, Asian and South American legends as well.

Like his heroic protagonist, Chris Hunter, Andrews grew up in Australia. Then, working variously as a journalist, foreign correspondent, and diplomat, he spent more than 40 years travelling to the world's most exotic locales. Andrews describes the book as semi-autobiographical, drawing on incidents and anecdotes from his eventful life.

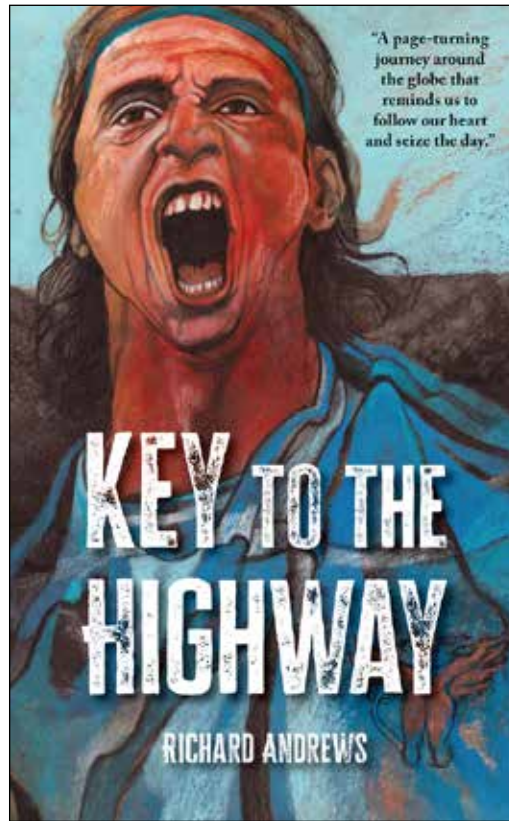
But, unlike his protagonist, Andrews met a Quebecker, Marie Cordeau, at Beijing's Friendship Hotel. They fell in love. Seven years ago, the pair bought a former vineyard near Magog. During the pandemic, they settled there permanently, with Andrews teaching part time at McGill University.

I ask the author how he likes living in the Townships.

"Like other ex-pat Aussies, I find the transition to Canada very straightforward," he says. "Both places like their beer, sport and outdoor activities, have a wary need of America, and share a self-deprecating and ironic sense of humour."

Then he adds, "Canadians are more polite than Australians, though."

Winter proved the biggest challenge. Andrews first visited Canada in the summer and had no idea how cold it could get. Still, he enjoys nature, watches birds year-round, and appreciates the region's vibrant cultural scene. "The living is good," says Andrews. "Magog has everything, from the lake and hiking trails to fine restaurants—even Walmart."



Still, *Key to the Highway* is very much an "Australian book," peppered with Australianisms such as willy-willy (cyclone), ute (utility vehicle), stubbies (short, squat beer bottle), and dole bludger (a person who doesn't want to work and lives on government assistance). I ask Andrews if his book will resonate with Canadians.

He expresses confidence that it will, saying that "an unruly youth, coming of age, playing in a band, the Road Trip, and taking risks are relatable experiences, regardless of the country. Similarly, the perils of messing with goddesses in human form."

"Canadians are great travellers and will recognize many of the places, events, and characters described in the book. I had Canadian shipmates on the perilous ocean voyage from Perth, which was the basis of the section with the pirate attack."

Music, especially blues, also plays a key role in the book's narrative. (It's no coincidence that the book's title

is the same as that of the well-known blues standard.) Andrews explains how, for him, ancient myth and blues come together.

"As a blues fan, I'm intrigued by its early links to African and Christian mythology, voodoo, and mystical themes in Western culture. A big impact was the story that Robert Johnson sold his soul to the Devil in exchange for the ability to play the blues. It reminded me of the Faustian pact in Goethe.... It all comes out in Heavy Metal bands, their Gothic imagery and foreboding lyrics."

Andrews sums up his book like this: "I've tried to write a literary work, a page-turner ... an easy book to read at all levels. The main thing is that people enjoy the Journey."

Key to the Highway is well worth the ride.

The book is available at Black Cat Books, Brome Lake Books, Studio Georgeville, or online from Amazon. An e-book has an added feature: All the references to myths are highlighted and can be easily looked up online.



Angela Leuck is a poet and publisher. She is the editor of *Emergence: Contemporary Women Poets of the Eastern Townships of Quebec* (Studio Georgeville, 2021).