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Zen and Now: On the Trail of Robert Pirsig and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance

By Vince Darcangelo, Special to the Rocky
Published September 11, 2008 at 7 p.m.

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Zen . . . and now

It's been more than 30 years since *Zen* took the world by storm. Need a refresher? Critic Vince Darcangelo assesses the original and the update.

Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values

* By Robert Pirsig. Harper Perennial Modern Classics, \$16.95.
Grade: A

The story line: In 1968, Pirsig, a former professor and journalist with a history of mental illness, took his 11-year-old son, Chris, on a motorcycle trip from the Twin Cities to San Francisco. Joined by friends John and Sylvia Sutherland, Pirsig used the trip as a launching pad for his philosophical exploration into the nature of quality.

The book worked on three levels: It recollected the road trip itself, a journey in which Pirsig and his son worked to overcome a strained relationship; it detailed Pirsig's struggle with mental illness, which involved electroshock therapy and the "death" of the author's alter ego, Phaedrus (a reference to the 1st-century Roman fabulist); and it served as a platform for Pirsig's philosophy, including his observation that technology had isolated people from their natural environment and each other.

Where the characters left off:

The Sutherlands: As the trip concludes, the Sutherlands, whom Pirsig set up to symbolize modern culture, are long gone, having turned back nine days into the 17-day jaunt, as their vacation had come to an end.

Chris: Is warming to his father, but showing signs of his own impending mental illness.

Pirsig: Is optimistic, feeling a communicative breakthrough with his son. He declares, "We've won it. It's going to get better now. You can sort of tell these things."

Final word: Intellectually deep and emotionally haunting, this richly textured book earned its status as an American classic with its thoughtful life lessons and poignant tale of fathers and sons

Zen and Now: On the Trail of Robert Pirsig and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance

* By Mark Richardson. Knopf, \$25. Grade: A

The story line: In 2004, *Toronto Star* journalist Richardson hopped on his motorcycle and, with his 42nd birthday approaching, retraced Pirsig's route. Richardson traveled alone, but like Pirsig he was going through some family difficulties. He suffered no mental illness but faced many roadblocks along the way, including a malfunctioning bike, marital issues and an evening of bad behavior with a motel clerk named Lacey.

Like its inspiration, *Zen and Now* functions on three levels: It documents Richardson's route, which is mostly faithful to the original, including a treacherous jaunt over Wyoming's Beartooth Pass; it summarizes *Motorcycle Maintenance* through the landmarks Richardson encounters (whenever possible he visits the same restaurants, hotels and campsites as Pirsig); and finally, Richardson delves deeper into the life of Pirsig and key characters from the book .

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Where the characters are now:

The Sutherlands: Have separated. Sylvia won't discuss the book with Richardson, but according to her husband, she didn't like how they were portrayed in the original *Zen*. John is more willing to talk about the old days, recalling the parties thrown at Pirsig's old house and the struggles Chris endured.

Chris: Eventually succumbed to the same mental illness as his father and led a troubled life that involved physical violence against his mother and brother, Ted. Amazingly, Chris had, for the most part, turned his life around in 1979 - only to be murdered while being mugged at knifepoint on a San Francisco street.

Pirsig: Didn't find the happiness he had hoped for. Separated from his wife, he lives reclusively in New England. Pirsig is estranged from his other son, Ted. The author, who declined a meeting with Richardson but read the manuscript before it was published, has penned one other book, *Lila: An Inquiry into Morals*.

Richardson: In a more upbeat ending than Pirsig's, Richardson is back on good terms with his wife and two sons, and his life honestly echoes Pirsig's own words: "We've won it. It's going to get better now."

Final word: Richardson's strong narrative thread results in a page-turner that does right by the original. *Zen and Now* is sure to inspire a new generation of riders and readers to pick up Pirsig's book and take to the open road in search of quality.

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Forty years ago, Robert Pirsig - a troubled journalist and academic - and his son, Chris, hopped on a motorcycle and headed west from Minnesota to San Francisco. The resulting 1974 book, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, would become one of the era's most popular and influential books: a philosophical quest for "quality" in a hyper-accelerated, technology-driven culture. It has sold 5 million copies to date.

A few years ago, Canadian journalist Mark Richardson retraced the route on his bike and has documented the journey in *Zen and Now*. In it, Richardson revisits the people and places that figured prominently in Pirsig's book and offers a more complete picture of the author, a recluse whose life has been filled with tragedy and mental illness. His ultimate hope is to introduce the

classic work to a new generation of readers and riders.

Today, we offer a look at both the original and Richardson's book, as well as an interview with the author, who appears in Denver today.

How did you go about deciding how to write this book?

I never intended to write this book. I originally intended to re-create the road trip and see if the book's lesson rubbed off on me. I needed to have a road trip and get away at that time. I made the trip. I met up with John Sutherland and other people (from the original book) . . . Everything in the book is absolutely as it happened . . .

I wrote what I would call the first manuscript and sent it off to Robert Pirsig. Pirsig wrote back - he said it was missing something, perhaps an exploration of *Zen* . . . I had purposely left *Zen and the Art* out. You don't mess with this book . . . But I suppose if there was any hope for this book, I needed to have a more serious critical analysis of the book and the man.

I read the book over again and again . . . about 20 times now. I started to chip away at this guy and found that he had this fascinating story, much of which he hadn't told or didn't want to be told. The breakthrough came when I tracked down his ex-wife, Nancy Jones, and his son . . . I realized that I did have a hell of a book.


How did you determine the balance between the original and your narrative?

With the original *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, people expected it to be a nice road-trip story or a book about Zen. My own belief, which is based on nothing, is that 90 percent of people who picked up *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, picked up the book and stopped at a certain point because it wasn't the book they were expecting . . . I hope people will read my book and want to pick it up and understand it a lot better.

It's easy to fictionalize the characters from *Motorcycle Maintenance*, and buy into Pirsig's happy ending, but reading *Zen and Now*, it's apparent that there was more tragedy than even Pirsig let on.

Until the publication of my book, the only story that's ever been out has been the story that Pirsig has told. He's lost interest in telling it as time goes on. The people in the book are quite remarkable, what was thrown at them and how they dealt with it.

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Did Robert Pirsig read the final draft?

Yes, he's read the final draft. He wrote back to say that he has no comment on it, which doesn't surprise me. He just wants to be left alone. Much of what is in (*Zen and Now*) is known to various people, but it's never really been made public. It doesn't have information that he would want to suppress. It's just information that he hasn't wanted to tell.

Why is it important to introduce this story to the next generation?

The philosophical lessons of Robert Pirsig never change. They are as valid today as they were 40 years ago, and as valid 40 years ago as they were a thousand years before the birth of Christ when they were discussed by the ancient Greeks. . . . I like to think that my book will spark a renewed interest in it.

Vince Darcangelo is a freelance writer living in Boulder.

Mark Richardson

* **What:** Appears at 7:30 p.m. today at the Tattered Cover in Highlands Ranch, Highlands Ranch Parkway at Lucent Boulevard.

* **Cost:** Free

* **Information:** 303-470-7050

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