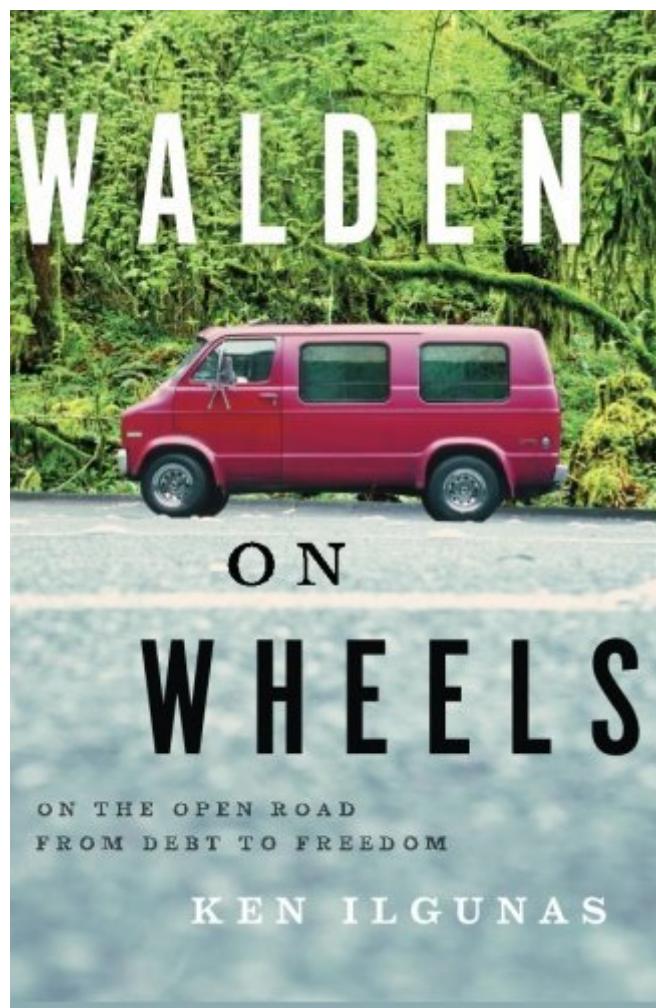


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Walden On Wheels: On The Open Road From Debt To Freedom



Synopsis

In this frank and witty memoir, Ken Ilgunas lays bare the existential terror of graduating from the University of Buffalo with \$32,000 of student debt. Ilgunas set himself an ambitious mission: get out of debt as quickly as possible. Inspired by the frugality and philosophy of Henry David Thoreau, Ilgunas undertook a 3-year transcontinental journey, working in Alaska as a tour guide, garbage picker, and night cook to pay off his student loans before hitchhiking home to New York. Debt-free, Ilgunas then enrolled in a master's program at Duke University, determined not to borrow against his future again. He used the last of his savings to buy himself a used Econoline van and outfitted it as his new dorm. The van, stationed in a campus parking lot, would be more than an adventure—it would be his very own "Walden on Wheels." Freezing winters, near-discovery by campus police, and the constant challenge of living in a confined space would test Ilgunas's limits and resolve in the two years that followed. What had begun as a simple mission would become an enlightening and life-changing social experiment. *Walden on Wheels* offers a spirited and pointed perspective on the dilemma faced by those who seek an education but who also want to, as Thoreau wrote, "live deep and suck out all the marrow of life."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

With the advent of the e-reader, I know exactly how far along I am in a book at any moment. I kept telling myself "I'll read until I get to X% and then go to bed." Well, 50% comes and goes; 65%, 80%, and I'm done before I realize it's 5 in the morning and I have to get up in a few hours. Is the book always politically correct? No. Is it sometimes crude? Yes. But if the author had censored himself, we would have lost out on what makes the book so appealing -- its honesty. The author isn't trying to be anyone other than himself. He lets us experience his weird, idiosyncratic thoughts and feelings, some of which we can all relate to (even if we would never admit to it). And we always feel like we're right there with him, mosquito bites and all. The book is about so much more than living in a van. As others have mentioned, the vandwelling is only covered in the last third of the book. And, for me, it wasn't just about getting out of debt either. Though I understand his circumstances and adventures were all tied back to the debt, the choices he made seemed to stem from something much deeper. Had he not had that debt, I imagine he still would have felt that same need to break free from the life he sees so many people living -- a life of staticness. While reading this book, I was overwhelmed by an urge to do more than I'm currently doing. To travel, to fall hopelessly in love without any expectations it will last, to rid myself of excess material goods, to be better than I am. And isn't that what we want in every book we read? To feel something, anything, that we weren't feeling before we picked the book up? I would highly recommend this book to anyone and everyone, and I look forward to more stories from this author.

I was interested in the author's *Walden-in-a-van* experience, but he didn't even have wheels until 3/4th of the way through the book. Lol. Interesting, but not what was expected from the title.

This well-written book tries to do many things. There's a personal finance book in here, telling young people how to get out from under their student debt. Better still, avoid that debt in the first place -- maybe by living in your van while going to grad school. Those two ideas give us half the title and half of the subtitle - but what's *Walden* doing in the title? And what does he mean by the "freedom" of the subtitle? Those topics take us to the more interesting parts of the book. It's all well and good not to have any debt, but obviously most Americans take on debt for their college

education, for their home, their cars, and (unfortunately) for various consumer goods. Ilgunas uses debt to talk about consumerism, and how both debt and materialism trap people in a life they don't really want and never intended. That concern brings him to a central theme in his memoir: the importance of autonomy in life. At first, autonomy simply means not having any debt. But Ilgunas slowly comes to see, as have many wilderness writers before him, that autonomy is a form of wildness. Ilgunas learns this in wild nature, when working in Alaska's Brooks Range and other places. Appreciating wildness brings him to a different critique of consumerism. That's a lot to hold together in a memoir, and Ilgunas mostly pulls it off. I think his writing about autonomy, wildness and civilization work better than his musings on debt and consumerism. Each are familiar ground some ways, but criticisms of consumerism lend themselves to stock treatment, while writings on wilderness tend to be more personal. That said, the connections he makes from debt to the freedom of the hills give him a novel spin on these topics. Well worth a read.

This was a different read for me. I am usually reading mysteries, etc. This young man did accomplish good things in his life and kept his focus throughout the hard times. It was amazing to read how he "found" himself and what he really wanted to do with his life. He was able to accomplish his goal in life through very trying times.

"He was many things -- a surveyor, a naturalist, a handyman, a pencil-maker -- but I thought of Thoreau as a writer more than anything else. And his greatest story wasn't one of his essays, or 'Walden.' His greatest story, I thought, was his life. He knew that anything is possible when you wield the pen and claim your life as your own. . . . [F]or those of us who can, should it not be our great privilege to live the lives we've imagined? To be who we want to be? To go on our own great journeys and share our experiences with others?" It's interesting that Ken Ilgunas describes himself, repeatedly, as a slacker: apathetic and indolent throughout his high school and undergraduate career, he finished college with a degree he didn't particularly care for (though he had found some inspiration in the last year or so of college, some thirst for knowledge, some interest in writing) and \$32,000 in debt. But a slacker would never have done what Ilgunas did: he found work during a recession and despite the enormous surfeit of college graduates with degrees but little passion, he worked at crappy jobs in ugly circumstances, worked extra hours (60, 70, 80 a week) as much as possible, he saved every penny he could, he bought almost nothing for himself -- and he paid off his debt. And then, he went back to school. But to ensure that he did not go back into debt -- a promise

he had made to himself while chipping away at the mountain of his first batch of student loans -- he chose to live in a van. Ilgunas calling himself a slacker reminds me of a favorite quote from Lech Walesa, the Polish union organizer who brought his country from communism to democracy in the 1970's and 1980's: "I'm lazy. But it's the lazy people who invented the wheel and the bicycle because they didn't like walking or carrying things." And just like Walesa, who couldn't rationally be considered lazy, Ken Ilgunas cannot rationally be considered a slacker. What both of these men are -- and, arguably, Henry David Thoreau before them, who served as Ilgunas's primary inspiration for his simplified life -- is dedicated. Because Ilgunas is dedicated, focused only on what was really important, he didn't spend time or effort, or money, on things that were unnecessary -- and Ilgunas has a very definite and narrow idea of what was necessary. It was only one thing: freedom. To achieve that, first he had to escape his suburban boredom, which he did by going to Alaska, and visiting one of the last truly wild places left in America; and then he had to escape his debt. Then he had to go back to school, where he discovered a new purpose -- and the answer to that new purpose was this book. Mr. Ilgunas succeeded in this last purpose as well. Because he has inspired me, and, I have no doubt, many others, too. It's a good story. It's an Everyman's memoir, though Ilgunas does what most of us never bring ourselves to do, to our own loss. I thought it would focus more on the actual vandwelling that features so prominently on the cover, but the first two-thirds of the book is not: it tells the story of his war with his debt. It's a good story, and a necessary one to understand the vandwelling. It's an especially good story for people today to read. I'm glad I did. I will be sharing this book with my college-bound students (I teach high school) and I will go on my own great journey, and I will share my experience with others. Yeah. I'll go for it.

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