

Celestial Mechanics: A Tale For a Mid-winter Night (book review)

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A Haunted Walden?

Celestial Mechanics: a tale for a mid-winter night. William Least Heat-Moon. New York: Three Rooms Press, 2017, pp. 385; map, illustrations. \$28.00 cloth (ISBN 978-1-941110-56-0); \$15.00 electronic (ISBN 978-1-941110-57-7).

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The gold standard for the glorious genre of post-World War II American travel literature is a shelf of books written during the final decades of the 20th century by now-famous pioneering scribes of the highways, and back-road adventurer/storytellers. Their distinctive genre began as part of a popular culture phenomenon remembered today as the American love affair with the automobile and -- axiomatically -- as the romancing of the open road. This nouveau romantic movement grew roots and blossomed nationwide during the historic road building tsunami that swept the USA in the wake of the momentous American Highway Act of 1956. Auto-mobility exploded across rural landscapes of American highways and byways as the even the most remote backwaters of America finally became accessible to impulsive excursions and journalistic discursions. Appropriately, that adventurous digression by automobile had mass appeal and gave birth to a new literary movement.

In common, the pioneer authors of the most successful American road travel literature (many now deceased) all seem to have been articulate -- but rarely have let their philosophizing obstruct their storytelling. Exemplars include Jack Kerouac (*On the Road*, 1957), John Steinbeck (*Travels with Charley*, 1962), Tom Wolfe (*The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, 1968), Robert Pirsig (*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, 1974), and William Least Heat-Moon (*Blue Highways*, 1982).

Authors Wolfe and Heat-Moon (a.k.a. William Trogon) have entered the New Millennium still on top of their craft and they remain productive and renowned. Heat-Moon's bread-and-butter writing idiom over past decades has been his informative and endearing non-fiction: his book-length, American travel narratives. His readership -- nurtured on his rambunctious wordplay -- has remained steadfast to the present. Nevertheless, Heat-Moon's newest book titled *Celestial Mechanics: a tale for a mid-winter night* (hereafter *CM*) demonstrates calculated moxie by embarking on a risky new genre of writing -- philosophical fiction, but does this shift in from non-fiction to fiction threaten his fan base?

A fair question because Heat-Moon's dedication page in his most recent prior book, *Here, There, Elsewhere* (2013) subtitled *Stories from the Road* is a straightforward "To the good readers who made these journeys possible." In contrast, the dedication page in *Celestial Mechanics* is abstruse: "For celestial mechanics, wherever they be." But what is a "celestial mechanic?" The odd phrasing of this dedication invites multiple interpretations. For example,

“wherever they be” might be Heat-Moon’s whimsical use of pirate-speak (his readers do rejoice in his humorous prose).

Alternatively (and more probably), “wherever they be” might refer to an existentialist notion of “be”-ing which, in a Sartrean philosophical sense, implies “coping” with an absurd world. If so, prospective readers of *CM* anticipating a travel narrative might want to know more about the nature of Heat-Moon’s philosophical musings before making a purchase or visiting their local library. They might want to know whether Heat-Moon as a philosophical novelist lets his philosophizing get in the way of his storytelling.

He does not. Heat-Moon and his readership have good reason to celebrate the publication of *CM* as his first novel.

Although more than thirty years separate their publication, an enduring bridge links *Blue Highways* and *Celestial Mechanics*. This bridge spans decades of dramatic and uncertain changes in America. Undeterred, the quest of the spirit of those still seeking to discover our nation and their own places within it can cross that bridge and persevere on into the future. Heat-Moon’s trademarks of such a quest persist. The notion that *CM* is a “Blue Highways of the mind” – once Heat-Moon’s loyal readers have interpreted the phrase -- is correct.

The endurance of his work is remarkable and understandable. Those who first became hooked on his writing as college students in 1983, readers about to read *CM* may be long in the tooth these days and perhaps even road-weary – but they remain stalwart.

Some of Heat-Moon’s stalwarts might right now be standing in the aisle in one of the few remaining big-box retail bookstores in the USA and leafing through a copy of *CM*. Others, perhaps the majority, are scanning early Amazon online comments about the book. All these prospective readers of might wonder as they contemplate the dust cover, “Where the dickens is Heat-Moon taking us now?” The cover image is a dramatic Hubble telescope color photo of a spiral galaxy similar to our Milky Way.

CM is not at all a science-fiction fantasy. Nor is it a technical handbook for servicing astronomical instruments. It is thought-provoking story about the empirical realities of the effects of gravitational forces. The forces themselves are not directly observable but still remarkable and worth contemplating -- even if such contemplation seems rare. Isn’t it a common trait to take gravitational forces for granted? Until push comes to shove comes to fall.

Real impacts of gravity are something to both behold -- and reckon with. Gravity operates at all scales in the universe and creates, for example, that awesome spiraling Pinwheel Galaxy image adorning the cover of *CM*. Gravity operating at the human scale is also a powerful metaphor of both attraction and impact, setting objects into motion with awesome, sometimes terrible, consequences. Humans both respond to gravity and exploit its utility. What use the guillotine without gravity? Philosophically speaking – and this is the big “hook” for mindful readers of Heat-Moon’s new novel -- the human condition has a range of emotional, psychological, and, yes, issues of gravity worth exploring through storytelling. Can love be a second gravity?

Thus, the author masterfully merges philosophy and fiction with the concept of gravity to weave a clever and entertaining story for discerning readers in search of a quality reading. In *Celestial Mechanics* Heat-Moon's proclivity for writing soul-searching road narratives forges into new terrain -- this time as a narrative journey - sans automobility – in the guise of a perambulating philosophical novel.

Heat-Moon also avoids pontificating. He has an engaging story to tell involving ideas in conflict, and his readers will encounter both gravitas and humor in *CM* as characters spiral into despair, injury, and possibly even death. Witty banter – some of it mildly titillating – and an intricately unfolding story that begs to be deconstructed are all delicious fare in *CM*. Heat-Moon has peppered his prose with delightfully weird words like *grimalkin* and *ensorcelled*. He challenges readers with page after page of clever phrasing designed to entrap them into thinking they have discovered mistakes or errors in proofreading – when in fact they have not. Consider this vernacular gem on p. 22, “I’ve been cutting the weeds since who laid the chunk.” Ah! Americana!

Darkly humorous passages memorably highlight the banter between Silas and Dominique, two of Heat-Moon's principle characters in *CM*. Consider Dominique's mean-spirited and sardonic responses to Silas's most sincere romantic entreaties; for example, when he proposes a second honeymoon in Ireland and she responds “Ireland! What's to do in Ireland? Brown beer? Rain? Seven Sundays in a week?” (p. 61). Elsewhere Heat-Moon's phrasings in *CM* are so poetically crafted and eloquent that they deserve to be uttered aloud; as when Silas relates how he came to abandon organized religion, claiming he decided "he'd take up *the creed of the canoe* to paddle away from all sectarian religion” (p. 33).

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Heat-Moon's chief character and protagonist in *CM* is an amateur astronomer named Silas Fortunato. He is erudite and cosmopolitan. A bachelor in his early thirties, he aspires to settle down and accomplish one lofty goal: To strive to learn through astronomical observation how to lead a simple life worthy of the cosmos. He admires the skeptical empiricism and stoicism practiced by the Roman “Philosopher King” Emperor Marcus Aurelius (A. D. 161-180). Silas keeps handy the Emperor's *Meditations*, a compilation of Aurelian wisdoms that teaches how to find calm amidst conflict by observing nature as a source of insight and inspiration, while valorizing self-restraint, duty, and respect for others. Deceit is a grave offense.

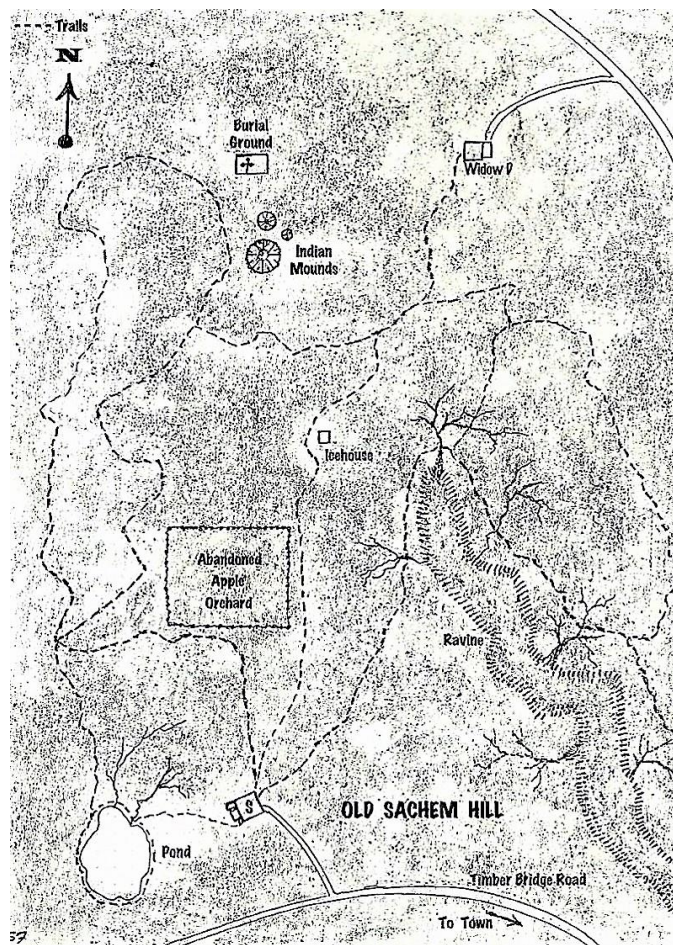
When Silas joined the Navy as a younger man, he learned to hew to the honored motto “Ship Shipmates, Self.” He has a tattoo of an anchor as a reminder to practice its implied ethic, *others before self*. When we first meet Silas, he has recently decided to drop anchor in bucolic seclusion on the outskirts of a rural Midwestern town.

He has come to seek employment and claim an inheritance. An aunt has died and willed him a tract of land not far from town measuring one hundred acres that he calls “The Hundred,” a place where he aims to practice an Aurelian regimen of interpreting what lies beyond him, beyond the limitations of self.

Silas secures work with the local newspaper to write a column on religious topics. He feels qualified because he calls himself both a “Cosmoterian” and an “Othertarian,” (one who tries to practice “Otherosophy”). The central commandment in the Cosmoterian bible is “hurt not others.”

Needing to make basic repairs to his aunt’s house prior to moving in, his initial plan to launch a life in isolation suddenly changes when he meets a woman calling herself Dominique whom Silas finds attractive and enigmatic. Also new in town, she has secured a job at local real estate agency. After an initial chat, he phones her in the hope that further conversations might blossom, an initiative that launches a whirlwind courtship.

To help persuade her, Silas draws her a map of The Hundred (p. 48). His sketch reveals a contiguous acreage of rustic terrain holding two houses, one his aunt’s elegant residence into which he and Dominique will move. The other is a modest frame dwelling remotely located across the Hundred that Silas will soon be referring to as “cat-eyed,” and “a house that watched.”



Source: Silas Fortunato, page 48 in *Celestial Mechanics*.

His home faces a deep sinkhole pond. Silas learns that a child drowned in this pond, one of many grim events in the darker legacy of the Hundred that haunt the couple after their marriage.

The map also depicts convoluted footpaths linking the two houses and a few other landmark features within the property. One trail meanders from Silas's home, past the orchard to an old shuttered icehouse sitting dead center on the Hundred and near the edge of a foreboding ravine. This erosional gash increases in breadth and depth as it ranges away from the icehouse and on toward a creek beyond.

A ghostly legend attached to The Hundred is that Old Sachem Hill, another name the land is known by, refers to a shaman-chief named "Walks-At-Night." His people once inhabited and roamed the property. Local superstition has it that a ghost still walks the Hundred after dark. Silas, the empiricist, professes to have no belief in ghosts until he begins to noctambulate and encounter them himself. Silas in fact carries a silver key chain on a fob inscribed with a diagram he identifies as "The Hopi Maze of Emergence." He claims it is not an amulet but instead a mnemonic device to remind him of the importance and challenge of trying to emerge from blindness into the reality surrounding him.

Dominique proves a poor choice for a wife, apparently betraying his trust and his love soon after their failed honeymoon. Uneasy on the Hundred, she has no interest in Silas's stargazing platform atop their roof and refuses to visit it. Stratagems are her interest.

They no sooner move in when Dominique begins to experience phantasmagoric encounters on the property. These apparitions – if that is what they are -- grow increasingly intense and frightening for her. Initially, Silas cannot comprehend what she claims to witness.

One evening she takes an exploratory hike into the heart of the Hundred, and wanders alone into the steep ravine. She stumbles upon what may be an omen: the head of a half-buried and dismembered ceramic doll. Unable to claw her way up the steep banks, she glimpses above her the inky cloak of a ghostly, silent figure. A feral cat seems to materialize. In fear and desperation, Dominique follows it down the ravine to find her way out.

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Readers could pause to wonder at this point whether *CM* is not more of a dark, psychological drama than an enlightening philosophical story. If so, they might begin with reexamining Heat-Moon's choice for a subtitle, "a tale for a mid-winter night." Is the author making an intentional allusion to Shakespeare's *A Mid-summer Night's Dream*? To something profound about an "awakening" or "emergence" from the false to the real? "Dream" appears in the subtitle of *CM* because it plays an important role in Heat-Moon's philosophical storytelling that bears on what achieving a life worth living actually entails.

An opening broadside of eight quotations titled "An Octet of Postulates" preface the main text of *CM*. What is their purpose? One is a quotation from the magical realist Jorge Luis Borges that suggests the important role of dreams towards cultivating mental clarity. For example, how a

person achieves “worth” by following the path of empirical observation to arrive at truth and ultimately emerge from a maze of distracting lies and bewilderments. Borges writes:

"In dreams and wakefulness, he contemplated the responses of his phantoms and was not deluded by imposters, and he perceived increasing understanding of certain bewilderments. He sought a soul worthy of sharing in the universe."

These postulates include other philosophical truths written by lions of literature and science like Tolstoy, Thomas Henry Huxley, and others that as a whole represent diversity of thought. The quotations address powerful ideas and ideologies in conflict, and are relative wisdoms rather than any general agreement on a single, fundamental and essential truth.

A ninth postulate, a quotation by the astronomer Carl Sagan, appears after the close of the *CM* story. Sagan writes, “Our tendency has been to pretend that the Universe is how we wish our home would be, rather than to revise our notion of what’s homey so it embraces the Universe.” Sagan believes, as does Silas in *CM*, that achieving a cosmic perspective on reality can overcome the human tendency to act selfishly. Emergence from self-centeredness is a worthy goal. Silas claims on p. 95, “I try to live by astronomical truths.” This is perhaps his most concise definition of a “Cosmoterian” put forth in *CM*.

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Silas’s hasty, toxic marriage is failing fast and not even Marcus Aurelius has prepared him to cope with one of life’s classic blunders. His downward spiral intensifies along with his doubts. Has Dominique concocted her paranormal encounters and feigned mental stress in order to pressure Silas into selling the Hundred to carpetbagging real estate developers? After all, she herself *is* a real-estate developer! Why has he been so naïve? Has he stumbled half-blinded by romantic self-delusion into marrying a lying, greedy opportunist?

Silas seeks advice from two trusted females who enter his life within weeks of his marriage. They have witnessed his slide into confusion accompanying his deteriorating relationship with Dominique. One is Dominique’s sister, Celeste, a Dominican novitiate who has growing doubts about taking her final vows although she remains a devoted Catholic committed to helping others. She looks for ways to assist Silas in his crisis. After a brief visit to the Hundred, she and Silas discover they have much in common and begin exchanging letters dealing with troubling aspects of their lives. Their correspondence reveals how both are persevering against adversity to make a difference in the world, and how their spiritual quests transcend religiosity and selfishness.

His other acquaintance is the secretive Kyzmyt, who wears a forest-green cloak. But is she flesh and blood? It is only Silas who seems to interact with her after encountering her for the first time when his concern for his wife’s mental health condition sends him perambulating through the woods to sort out his predicament. On one of his subsequent visits to her house, Silas encounters a weathered man gathering wood. He tells Silas the woman who lived there recently died, but was a gifted herbalist and capable of prognosticating the future.

Kyzmyt is of Native American descent and a Wiccan from Louisiana. A healer. She listens closely as Silas reveals his sorrows before offering Silas sage advice and encourages him – the zealous empiricist – to *see* what is going on around him. She mixes for him fragrant potpourris to put under his pillow at night. When he questions the efficacy of her alchemy, she replies, “It is what it is, does what it does.”

Although Kyzmyt shares many insights with Silas in her roundabout and mystical way, she does not directly articulate any fundamental maxim of a Wiccan philosophy. However, informed readers of *CM* will already know that Wicca teaches above all “Harm no others, but do as you will.”



Silas’s stress has triggered lucid dreaming and somnambulism, both more irritating than concerning to Dominique. She begins to spend more time in town with her real estate supervisor Wallace Deever who invites her to join him and speak at a business conference in Arizona. When Dominique departs, Silas finds himself confused and feeling empty. He receives a single, perfunctory postcard from Dominique. She then vanishes.

Unprepared for this crisis, Silas knows not what to do. Although unsure, he may still be in love with his ingrate wife, and so he clings to the hope that he can somehow still salvage their marriage. He hires a detective in Phoenix before joining him there to commence investigation into Dominique’s disappearance, a search that leads to yet more mysteries.

Silas returns to the Hundred and uncovers more evidence that Dominique is a classic sociopath without remorse. He has to accept that he was gullible and his own enabler to his cuckolding. The continuing search into his futile attempt to discover the truth further disarranges his mental faculties. Celeste and Kyzmyt intervene to apply their healing skills to bringing him back to normalcy. However, before they can help him Silas rents a ride in hot-air balloon on a day of unpredictable winds and tumbles head first onto an unforgiving pasture.

He awakens in a coma to find himself half-paralyzed. His lengthy recuperating and despair nudge him further into the maelstrom of a Nietzschean abyss. Celeste doubles down on her commitment to saving Silas from himself. Observing her commitment, he acknowledges that she is his “celestial mechanic” (p. 369). Meanwhile, Kyzmyt persists with her counsel to heal Silas. She proves to be a good and talented witch. In the hands of these two trusted *others* his healing begins.

Once well enough, Silas embarks on a trip to a small town in Iowa to seek out a woman he has never met, but with whom he has become attracted to through an exchange of letters during his convalescence. This woman, Flora Cavendish, has claimed in her letters to own a bookstore. Silas arrives in town to discover there is no such bookstore. There is, however, a Cavendish family graveyard. In the expectation of meeting Flora, he walks to the cemetery. A cat suddenly appears out of nowhere to lead the way.

Approaching the cemetery, he sees a figure in a hooded cloak standing near a seated statue by a tomb. As Silas nears she draws back her hood to face him, and he hears “Let’s go home.”

But who is it who speaks?

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“Otherosophy” is a term Heat-Moon creates for use by his protagonist. Is this a vernacular voice of altruism? Altruism associates with several big “-isms”: Confucianism, Jainism, Marxism, philanthropism and anyone who practices “random acts of kindness.

Silas’s secular and erudite Cosmoterianism as Otherosophy thus holds respect for others as its first principle. In *CM* “Hurt not others” is a Cosmoterian *proscription*. Other literary works often phrase this same commandment slightly differently, and more positively, as a *prescription*, as in, “Others before self.” Henry David Thoreau (an erudite, secular agnostic like Silas) wrote in *Civil Disobedience* (1849), “If I have unjustly wrested a plank from a drowning man, I must restore it to him though I drown myself.”

Indeed, reading *CM* without also thinking of Thoreau, and especially his *Walden, or, A Life in the Woods* (1854) seems impossible. Silas, like Thoreau and the scientist T. H. Huxley (who coined the term “agnostic”) was a philosopher of nature and a student of its complex relations with the human condition. Some remarkable parallels between Silas’s Hundred and Thoreau’s Walden contribute to an entertaining and satisfying *CM* reading experience. Heat-Moon challenges the readers of *CM* by playing sophisticated word games and “connect-the-dots” from literary classics with them. For example, Thoreau writes about ice harvesting at Walden Pond and in *CM* there is a ghostly icehouse that occupies a sinister and central place in the story.

Significantly, Silas’s map depicts the notorious icehouse at the precise center of the Hundred. In *CM* empirical rationalism coexists with the phantasmagorical on the Hundred. If *CM* is “a *Blue Highways* of the mind,” the labyrinthine journey Silas takes in his pursuit of the missing Dominique inevitably invokes both gravitational mechanics and a notion of center-quest. “The icehouse calls,” Silas writes in a suicide note as he spirals towards what may be his own rendezvous there with Death.

Both Thoreau and Silas seek to discover certain truths by withdrawing to the outskirts of modern civilization and engaging nature through a personal experience that allows them to apply new knowledge to improving the human condition. Philosophically, Heat-Moon is a rational empiricist and not a romantic transcendentalist like Thoreau. Whereas Thoreau’s *Walden* is a peaceful retreat inviting meditation, Heat-Moon’s Hundred reveals itself as a place dark and haunted.

As searchers in quest of a higher purpose in life and a greater Truth, there is agreement between the lesson learned by Silas the Cosmoterian on the Hundred and the lesson learned by Thoreau the Transcendentalist on the shores of Walden Pond. Bluntly put, hell is other people --

but you cannot live without them. Both Thoreau and Silas highly recommend acting with tolerance and respect toward others.

Empirical observation *best* prepares humans to ascertain their ideal nature and then act rationally in an imperfect world. Marcus Aurelius the Stoic/Cynic governed Rome famously while acting on this assumption. Like other philosophers throughout human history, Aurelius observed the natural order and practiced in his day the moral equivalent of the ancient “Golden Rule.” Specifically the *Meditations* of Aurelius offer this advice: “Dwell on the beauty of life. Watch the stars, and see yourself running with them.” Silas takes both the method and the practice of Aurelius wisdom to heart.

Silas adheres to the argument of Aurelius in *Meditations*. Agnostic Aurelius recommends, “Live a good life,” and Silas agrees (stoically) that he has the necessary and sufficient sense of purpose and self-control to strive to achieve that outcome. Aurelius wrote, “Each of us lives only now, this brief instant. The rest has been lived already, or is impossible to see.” Another way of phrasing this wisdom is current in American contemporary urban vernacular, in rhyming verse: “Live every minute- put yourself in it.” Silas elaborates on the topic of an “afterlife” (pp. 95 and 96), “You are alive for a while because your sub-atomics are alive forever.” Similarly, Marcus Aurelius writes in *Meditations*, “Alexander the Great and his mule driver both died and the same thing happened to both. They were absorbed alike into the life force of the world, or dissolved alike into atoms.”

Heat-Moon appears to conclude *Celestial Mechanics* with a convincing authoritative confirmation in strong support of the wisdom of Silas’s Aurelian stoic empiricism (and his own Cosmoterianism) as the best rational hope for improving the human condition in a troubled world. However, Heat-Moon may alternatively be cleverly challenging his readers to “connect the dots” in such a way as to reveal a more humbling conclusion reached by Shakespeare’s Hamlet, who famously reminds his friend Horatio, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” Heat-Moon emphasizes the limitations of human thought as articulated in various famous “contemplation,” “meditations” and “wisdoms” throughout the course of human history.

There are non-fiction books that take a rational approach to contemplating celestial phenomena as a search for ethical insights into improving the human condition. Some reach the same conclusion as Silas does in *CM*; for example, that humanity should adopt a “Cosmoterian”-like healing agenda that promotes the universal practice of a respectful “Othertarianism” to achieve tolerance and spread peacefulness worldwide. A widely shared ethical cosmology – a humanity that altruistically thinks cosmically and acts globally – can transform the world. Heat-Moon’s philosophical novel can be interpreted to convey a similarly optimistic message. *CM* is thus an innovative and unique novel that wrestles with profound ideas of contemporary urgency and significance.

Academics, and particularly poststructuralist and postmodernist in the humanities and social sciences, might be tempted on reading *CM* to sharpen their red pencils in anticipation of preparing classroom lectures. Geography teachers of graduate-level courses in American literary landscapes, philosophy and methodology, current trends, and the history of geographic thought,

among other topics, should seriously consider including *CM* as required reading for class discussion purposes. Geography seminars focusing narrowly on the emerging subfields of urban and rural psychogeographies and geopsychologies will find *CM* particularly provocative and ripe for discussion.

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Celestial Mechanics: a tale for a mid-winter night is without question a “novel” worth reading. When read as a modern natural narrative, it will not disappoint Heat-Moon’s loyal readers who are addicted to his expected brand of erudition, witticisms, and word power; a potion to which they have responded to enthusiastically and with joy (as emotional and heartfelt reader comments in response to his previous books do readily attest). I will call Heat-Moon’s famously euphoric brand of prose “Trogonite” (rhymes with dynamite) in acknowledgement of the bursts of pleasure that his crafted compositions typically radiate over his readers.

Trogonite is a highly valued rare earth as modern, realistic storytelling goes, and Heat-Moon owns a mountain of it. He has mined that mountain successfully through the decades since he discovered that rich vein in 1983, with *Blue Highways*, his debut blockbuster. He staked his claim there and then, earning a vast readership with that initial commercial publication. This earliest expression of “pristine Trogonite” occupied the New York Times Best Seller’s list for nearly a year. Then came *PrairyErth*, subtitled *A Deep Map* (1991), followed by *River-Horse: The Logbook of a Boat across America* (1999), *Roads to Quoz: An American Mosey* (2008), *Here, There, Elsewhere: Stories from the Road* (2013).

All of Heat-Moon’s travel books have chronicled the breadth and depth of his journeys as a consistently benign, often bemused, stranger venturing into unfamiliar, mundane, and neglected American spaces and places in search of discovering the vital pulse of its diverse citizenry. He has especially searched out the “meat and potatoes” of local lore by unearthing vernacular truths. Heat-Moon’s serendipitous roadside observations and encounters have provided the Saroyanesque human comedy that populates and characterizes the pages of his books.

Over the past three decades, his writings have offered clear evidence spoken in vernacular voices from “here, there, elsewhere” that there is vital force in the creeping, tangled rootstalk of diverse yet intimately interconnected Americans. His work amplifies these voices united in their diversity.

Heat-Moon wants to untangle this complex American rhizome in meaningful ways by narrating his experience along its networks of roads, and rivers. He pauses in place occasionally to probe its depths, and then writes in engaging detail about the many layers and levels of its physical and cultural uniqueness.

CM is both a “*Blue Highways* of the mind” and a *PrairyErth* that explores a particular place – the Hundred -- at a more intimate and detailed and profound scale. As a philosophical novel, *CM* is darkly ethereal and engaging reading. Mortality and morality come to forefront in this story of Silas Fortunato.

Celestial Mechanics boldly yet cautiously transcends certain bounds of natural modern fiction and moves into contingent realms of unnatural postmodern storytelling. It is experimental. The book begins with a dramatic warning wherein the author cautions readers: “In your hand is, more or less, a work of fiction. The characters and their names are inventions, but resemblances to veritable locales are hardly coincidental. And, it must be confessed, much of what follows is factual, and some has been actual.”

Is this an open invitation for readers to enter into and re-engage with his familiar style and narrative? Or is it a challenge to join him on an exploratory journey that engages a postmodern storytelling in order to elucidate a profound and optimistic idea?