

Book Club Kit

**St. Albert
Public
Library**

T 780-459-1682
E sapl@sapl.ca

About Jessica Bruder



Photograph by Todd Gray

Jessica Bruder is a journalist who writes about subcultures and social issues.

For her *New York Times*-bestselling book *Nomadland*, she spent months living in a camper van, documenting itinerant Americans who gave up traditional housing and hit the road full time, enabling them to travel from job to job and carve out a place in a precarious economy. The project spanned three years and more than 15,000 miles of driving — from coast to coast and from Mexico to the Canadian border. *Nomadland* won the Ryszard Kapuściński Award for Literary Reportage and the Discover Award. It was a finalist for the J. Anthony Lukas Prize and the Helen Bernstein Book Award. The *New York Times* named it both a Notable Book and an Editors' Choice. The book has been translated into 24 languages and adapted into an eponymous Oscar-winning film.

Jessica is also the author of *Burning Book* and, with co-author Dale Maharidge, *Snowden's Box: Trust in the Age of Surveillance*.

Jessica has been an adjunct professor at Columbia Journalism School and contributing to *The New York Times* for more than a decade. She has written cover features for *The Atlantic*, *Audubon*, *New York*, *WIRED* and *Harper's* magazines. Her stories have also run in outlets including *The Washington Post*, *The Associated Press*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Guardian*, *The International Herald Tribune*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Inc.* and *O: The Oprah Magazine*. She has been a staff reporter at *The Oregonian* and *The New York Observer* and a senior editor at *Fortune Small Business* magazine. Her photography appears in *Nomadland*, *Burning Book* and *Snowden's Box*, and has also been published by *The New York Times*, *The New York Observer* and *Blender* magazine.

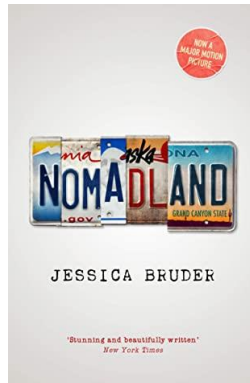
Jessica has a B.A. in English and French from Amherst College and an M.S. in magazine writing from Columbia Journalism School. Support for her work has come from fellowships at the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center, Logan Nonfiction Program, MacDowell and Yaddo.

Going back further, she was a Starbucks barista, a snowboarder, an electric guitar nerd, a music store clerk, a junior camp counselor and a really lousy waitress. She is, eternally, a proud and patch-wearing member of the Madagascar Institute and the Flaming Lotus Girls.

She lives in Brooklyn with a dog named Max and more plants than you can shake a leafy stick at.

Source: <https://www.jessicabruder.com/bio>

Synopsis – Nomadland



From the beet fields of North Dakota to the National Forest campgrounds of California to Amazon’s CamperForce program in Texas, employers have discovered a new, low-cost labor pool, made up largely of transient older Americans. Finding that social security comes up short, often underwater on mortgages, these invisible casualties of the Great Recession have taken to the road by the tens of thousands in late-model RVs, travel trailers, and vans, forming a growing community of nomads.

On frequently traveled routes between seasonal jobs, Jessica Bruder meets people from all walks of life: a former professor, a McDonald’s vice president, a minister, a college administrator, and a motorcycle cop, among many others—including her irrepressible protagonist, a onetime cocktail waitress, Home Depot clerk, and general contractor named Linda May.

In a secondhand vehicle she christens “Van Halen,” Bruder hits the road to get to know her subjects more intimately. Accompanying Linda May and others from campground toilet cleaning to warehouse product scanning to desert reunions, then moving on to the dangerous work of beet harvesting, Bruder tells a compelling, eye-opening tale of the dark underbelly of the American economy—one that foreshadows the precarious future that may await many more of us. At the same time, she celebrates the exceptional resilience and creativity of these quintessential Americans who have given up ordinary rootedness to survive. Like Linda May, who dreams of finding land on which to build her own sustainable “Earthship” home, they have not given up hope.

Source: <https://wnorton.com/books/9780393356311>

Interview

'Nomadland' author Jessica Bruder's best piece of writing advice didn't come from a writer

Source: <https://artscanvas.org/books/nomadland-author-jessica-bruders-best-piece-of-writing-advice-didnt-come-from-a-writer>

Mar. 30, 2021

Courtney Vinopal

Our March/April 2021 pick for Now Read This, the PBS NewsHour's book club with The New York Times, is Jessica Bruder's "Nomadland," which chronicles the lives of older workers on the road. It served as inspiration for the Oscar-nominated film starring Frances McDormand, which was directed by Chloé Zhao.

Journalist Jessica Bruder says she's seen a lot of great writers' advice over the years, but one trick that she particularly likes "wasn't devised for writers."

The tip came from Linda May, a nomad that Bruder met on the road and chronicled in her 2017 book, "Nomadland." May also played herself in the recent film adaptation of Bruder's book.

May told Bruder that when she worked in an Amazon warehouse and felt like quitting, she'd ask herself, "Can I do this for just 10 more minutes?" The answer was invariably, "Of course!"

"This was a strategy she'd picked up from Alcoholics Anonymous, but it works for writing, too," Bruder told the PBS NewsHour in a recent questionnaire. "It's a great way to flatten resistance."

Bruder shared more about her vampire-like writing routines, as well as how her reporting for "Nomadland" eventually developed into a book.

What is your daily writing routine?

Honestly? I'm a vampire bat. When given the choice, I'll start writing after dinner and go until maybe 2 a.m. There's nothing like making a hot cup of coffee and firing up my laptop when most people are winding down. The distractions melt away. When I'm in flow, I feel like I'm driving at night on an empty highway, just cruising, sipping that coffee and keeping my eyes on the spot where my headlights break the dark. I used to go really late – until 4 a.m. or so – but that's gotten harder. Morning people rule our world, making it difficult for night creatures to avoid their influence.

During the day, I'm usually occupied with tasks that don't require a solitary and trancelike state. I walk the dog, scramble eggs, answer email, spend time with (or at least talk to) people I hope to write about, mess around with narrative structure, edit journalism students' stories, devise

seminars, write pitches, get some exercise, water my unruly plants, etc. I keep a to-do list on paper, and if I'm not hurtling through short tasks as fast as I'd like, I use a timer to stay on track. Sometimes my days crowd out my nights, but I'm happiest when I can maintain some kind of balance between the two.

What is your favorite childhood book? Or one book you think everyone should read?

My mom was a teacher who specialized in early childhood, so our house was always full of books. My favorite was "Swimmy" by Leo Lionni. It's about a misfit—a black fish in a school of red ones—who swims so fast that he's the sole survivor of a tuna attack. After exploring the ocean alone, he meets a new bunch of guppies. He helps them get in formation: the silhouette of a giant fish. Together they chase the tuna away. (Think "Spartacus" meets "Finding Nemo," but better.) I loved the story and also Lionni's watercolor illustrations, page after page of figurative seascapes. I could have spent hours absorbing all that texture and detail. It felt like dissolving into the pages.

What is something you've seen, watched or read that you think is overlooked and deserves more attention?

The 2018 film "Sorry to Bother You" got some attention but deserved more. I'd never seen anything like it: a candy-colored critique of American capitalism, pinballing between satire and full-blown absurdity. The storyline was unapologetically, exuberantly weird. I mean, who else could have pulled off a magic-realism-inflected takedown of the telemarketing industry? And somehow make that hilarious? [Director and writer] Boots Riley is a national treasure.

What is the best piece of writer's advice you've received?

There's a lot of great advice floating around. Most of it I have a hard time following. One tip I see a lot is "dash off a loose first draft." That's the writerly equivalent of "dance like no one's watching." I'm no good at it, though, since I tend to move slowly, smoothing sentences and embedding details along the way. I call this approach "building a sandcastle with tweezers."

There's one little trick that I like, but it wasn't devised for writers. It came from Linda May, who I wrote about in *Nomadland*. She told me about working in an Amazon warehouse, how she often felt like quitting. Whenever that feeling came on strong, Linda asked herself, "Can I do this for just ten more minutes?" The answer was always, "Of course!" This was a strategy she'd picked up from Alcoholics Anonymous, but it works for writing, too. It's a great way to flatten resistance.

Can you describe the moment you knew you wanted to write this particular book? And when you knew it was over?

In January of 2014, I spent two weeks in the Sonoran Desert outside Quartzsite, Arizona, reporting a story for Harper's Magazine on transient older workers. One night, while walking away from an outhouse, I got so captivated by all the stars overhead that I tripped over a boulder. Pain radiated from my shoulder. Lying in my tent, I wondered how badly I'd messed up and

whether this marked the end of my project. By morning I felt better, but something in my attitude had shifted. I knew I wanted to follow the story as far as I could. I still felt that way when my Harper's editor, James Marcus, asked if he could show a pre-publication version of the article to a friend in book publishing. Alane Mason at W.W. Norton & Co. liked it. She asked if it could evolve into something longer, to which I replied, "Hell, yes!" Or something to that effect.

Writing non-fiction is weird. When you're done, the plot keeps going without you. For that reason, it's rare for me to feel a sense of closure. There's a deadline. I turn in the manuscript. But I rarely feel finished. That's especially true for "Nomadland," since I've stayed engaged with the people I wrote about and their stories. It's still a big part of my life.

Discussion Questions

Source: <https://wnorton.com/books/Nomadland/about-the-book/reading-guide>

- 1) The people portrayed in *Nomadland* take to life on the road for various reasons, from economic necessity to wanderlust, and there are a lot of them—around 300,000. What do you think drives these people, many of them nearing or beyond traditional retirement age, to go off the grid?
- 2) Do you think *Nomadland* fairly characterizes the United States in the wake of the Great Recession of 2008? Are the modern nomads really an “indicator species,” as Jessica Bruder writes, signaling bigger changes ahead? In other words, is the shift to a nomadic lifestyle a temporary adjustment, or is it likely to grow in the coming years?
- 3) How do you feel about the corporate response to these modern nomads of creating low-paying seasonal jobs specifically designed for RVers and vandwellers? Do you think these corporations are exploiting a source of cheap labor, or providing valuable opportunities for employment?
- 4) A common theme of Bruder’s reporting is the fact that communities spring up everywhere among the new nomads: mutual support groups, online forums, newsletters, and clubs. What does this say about the traveling life? And about human needs in general?
- 5) How would you feel if your own community became a waypoint for nomads like the people described in this book? Would you be able to accept them staying at the margins of your town, setting up in the parking lots of big box retailers? Why or why not?
- 6) Many of the nomads are older, nearing or past the age that used to signify retirement. Is their lifestyle—living “houseless”; working low-paying, seasonal jobs—an indictment of the United States’ social safety net, and if so, how? Or is it an adaptive lifestyle that eschews the formal restrictions of society? Discuss your reasoning.
- 7) Bruder wonders at one point why the modern RV nomads are “so white,” noting a “micro-minority” of people of color among the traveling population (pp. 179–80). Do you believe, as she proposes, that this is due to possible racism within the community, or racism outside the community that could lead to police harassment and profiling on the road? Or is it due to something else entirely?

- 8) As part of her reporting, Bruder does short-term work at a beet-processing plant and in a warehouse with Amazon's CamperForce program, experiencing for herself the labor conditions nomads and other short-term workers face every day. What do you make of her experience? Do you think she captured the reality of this world?
- 9) "*What parts of this life are you willing to give up, so you can keep on living?*" and "*When do impossible choices start to tear people—a society—apart?*" (p. 247) asks Bruder in her final chapter, arguing that the growth of the nomad population reflects some Americans choosing a new answer to these questions when faced with difficult financial challenges. Do you think the sacrifices they make by taking to the road are worth it? Why or why not?

Reviews

New York Times Book Review

Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/17/books/review/nomadland-jessica-bruder.html>

In 'Nomadland,' the Golden Years Are the Wander Years

BY ARLIE RUSSELL HOCHSCHILD
NOVEMBER 17, 2017

NOMADLAND

Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century

By Jessica Bruder

Illustrated. 273 pp. W.W. Norton & Company. \$26.95.

At the steering wheel of her Jeep Grand Cherokee Laredo is a silver-haired grandma named Linda May, towing her home: a secondhand, pale-yellow 10-foot-long fiberglass trailer she calls the Squeeze Inn — “there’s room, squeeze in!” — to a new job in a new place. At 65, Linda is houseless but not, she feels, homeless. She has raised two daughters, mostly on her own, and before heading off, she slept — feeling “stuck” — on the living-room couch of the rented house of her daughter and three teenage grandchildren. Formerly a long-haul trucker, a Home Depot cashier, a building inspector, an I.R.S. phone rep and a co-owner of a flooring store, Linda is heading out to a \$9.35-an-hour summer job as a campground “host.” “Get paid to go camping!” the concessionaire brochure reads brightly. In the San Bernardino National Forest, she will help campers with check-in, shovel broken glass from campfire pits and mostly clean 18 toilets three times a day.

Moving “like blood cells through the veins of the country,” Jessica Bruder writes, a growing number of older people, post-recession refugees from the middle and working class, are, like Linda, crossing the land in their Jeeps, campers and repurposed buses in search of work. We meet a 67-year-old former San Francisco taxi driver who, squeezed out by Uber, unloads truckloads of sugar beets in North Dakota. We meet Chuck, a former McDonald’s vice president who lost his home on a golf course in a gated community in Myrtle Beach, S.C., and now sells beer and hamburgers at spring training for the Oakland A’s. We meet Don, a former software

executive of 69 with a white goatee, who lost his savings in the 2008 crash and lost his house in a divorce. He now lives with his dog in a 1990 Airstream and works 12-hour shifts during the pre-Christmas season at an Amazon warehouse. Other nomads “pick raspberries in Vermont, apples in Washington and blueberries in Kentucky. They give tours at fish hatcheries, take tickets at Nascar races and guard the gates of Texas oil fields.” Still, it has not been easy; workers mentioned hip replacements, bad knees, a minor stroke. While many live in recreational vehicles with names like Lazy Daze, these nomads do hard work for low wages, and know how to find a free shower, cut-price dentistry and discount Viagra.

In this stunning and beautifully written book, Bruder, the author of “Burning Book: A Visual History of Burning Man,” describes her journey with Linda and her other interviews conducted in five states over three years, with more than 50 nomads in the first year alone. Bruder also worked at a beet processing plant — “Be Part of an ‘Unbeetable’ Experience!” in the parlance of the recruitment brochure — and describes trying to catch large beets that flew off a processing machine as akin to “catching bowling balls in a pillowcase.” After a while, she gets her own van and names it Halen.

Bruder also worked at an Amazon fulfillment center, among workers in their 50s and up. “We’ve had folks in their 80s who do a phenomenal job for us,” one official for CamperForce, “a program created by the online retailer to hire itinerant workers,” said. “Some walk 15 miles on concrete floors, stooping, squatting, reaching and climbing stairs as they scan, sort and box merchandise,” Bruder notes. “Buns of steel, here we come,” an instructor tells gray-haired listeners. Amazon receives federal tax credit for hiring the “disadvantaged,” which includes those on Supplemental Security Income or food stamps. The CamperForce newsletter was upbeat: “Make new friends and reacquaint with old ones, share good food, good stories, and good times around the campfire, or around the table. In some ways, that’s worth more than money.” But nomads took the jobs for the money, toiling in warehouses where the summer heat could rise above 90 degrees and you could be asked to lift 50-pound loads. Amazon offered its workers free, over-the-counter pain-relief pills.

How are we to understand the Lindas of our nation? Is she a latter-day Okie, like one of the Joads in “The Grapes of Wrath”? Perhaps, but the Joads traveled together as a family, not alone. Or does Linda resemble migrant workers from Mexico or the Philippines? Like her, many travel alone, but they often do so with an eye to settlement or return. Unlike the black migrants from the South who, over decades, moved North and West during the Great Migration, Linda — like most of those profiled in Bruder’s book — is white; she may fear poverty, but her migration isn’t propelled by racial intimidation. Linda presumably joined black and Hispanic workers in quite a

few places she worked; nearly a quarter of workers in Amazon's more than 50 warehouses across the country are black, and 12 percent Hispanic. Other of Bruder's nomads join guest workers from abroad picking fruit. Bruder wonders why the van-dwelling community itself, though, is "so white." She cannot pinpoint a definitive reason among the various possibilities she raises, though she does note that "living in a vehicle seems like an especially dangerous gambit for anyone who might be a victim of racial profiling."

From time to time, Linda meets other nomads at R.V. desert rallies. Among the largest ones is the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous near Quartzsite, Ariz., an annual winter "pop-up metropolis," as Bruder calls it. There tens of thousands gather, some workers, some leisured, in small vans and large, parked snugly, not set apart by green lawns as they might be in a suburban tract. As in the community that blossoms around Burning Man festivals, a barber gives donation-optional haircuts. A woman offers banana-nut bread baked in her solar oven. Groups sit around bonfires to burn old bankruptcy papers and share hobo stew.

It's hard to know how many elderly van-dwellers roam the nation. Many of Bruder's nomads had lost their homes, jobs or both in the 2008 crash. In 2010, 1,050,500 properties were repossessed. Social Security benefits are modest, Bruder reminds us, especially for women. She also tells us that, at the time of her writing, there were only a dozen American counties and one metro area where a person working full time at minimum wage could afford a one-bedroom apartment at fair market rent.

What forces set these nomads in motion? Here I wish Bruder had given us a view from beyond the driver's seat. For years, stockholders have taken the lion's share of rising corporate profits, leaving a shrinking share to the middle- and working-class worker. The current administration and Congress aim to cut the nation's safety net and to loosen regulations on banks, stirring fears of another devastating crash. The stage seems set to leave Americans on their own to travel a potentially bumpy economic road, a scene that would seem to fly in the face of the picket-fence stability and localism bandied about in conservative rhetoric. Republicans like to talk about "freedom," but the tax reform they're currently proposing would most likely widen the gap between rich and poor even further, reducing Linda's freedom to stay put if she wanted to.

To Linda, the American dream has been whittled down to self-sufficiency and the open road. The tires on her Jeep are worn thin, the "check engine" gauge doesn't work, and she suffers occasional dizzy spells. Her gumption and work ethic seem so admirable, but her van and her health seem so precarious, her hopes so vulnerable to fate.

The Lindas of America are largely invisible. When Bruder drove her own van home to Brooklyn, she began to notice vans she hadn't noticed before — parked on a residential street, in a gas station, a store lot. As I reluctantly put down this brilliant and haunting book, I thought back to the vagabond songwriter and musician Woody Guthrie, who fled the great Oklahoma Dust Bowl of the 1930s, later riding the rails and singing, "From the redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters / This land was made for you and me." Those huge, billowing clouds of topsoil that drove millions from their homes now seem safely tucked away in sepia-tinted photos of a bygone past. But without ominous clouds above to warn us of what lies ahead, the powerful force of automation and the destruction of any safety net may silently push more and more of us onto the open road.

Kirkus Book Review

Source: <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/jessica-bruder/nomadland/>

Kirkus Reviews' Best Books of 2017

NOMADLAND
Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century
By Jessica Bruder • Release Date: Sept. 26, 2017

Journalist Bruder (*Burning Book: A Visual History of Burning Man*, 2007) expands her remarkable cover story for Harper's into a book about low-income Americans eking out a living while driving from locale to locale for seasonal employment.

From the beginning of her immersion into a mostly invisible subculture, the author makes it clear that the nomads—many of them senior citizens—refuse to think of themselves as "homeless." Rather, they refer to themselves as "houseless," as in no longer burdened by mortgage payments, repairs, and other drawbacks, and they discuss "wheel estate" instead of real estate. Most of them did not lose their houses willingly, having fallen victim to mortgage fraud, job loss, health care debt, divorce, alcoholism, or some combination of those and additional factors. As a result, they sleep in their cars or trucks or cheaply purchased campers and try to make the best of the situation. At a distance, the nomads might be mistaken for RV owners traveling the country for pleasure, but that is not the

case. Bruder traveled with some of the houseless for years while researching and writing her book. She builds the narrative around one especially accommodating nomad, senior citizen Linda May, who is fully fleshed on the page thanks to the author's deep reporting. May and her fellow travelers tend to find physically demanding, low-wage jobs at Amazon.com warehouses that aggressively seek seasonal workers or at campgrounds, sugar beet harvest sites, and the like. The often desperate nomads build communities wherever they land, offering tips for overcoming common troubles, sharing food, repairing vehicles, counseling each other through bouts of depression, and establishing a grapevine about potential employers. Though very little about Bruder's excellent journalistic account offers hope for the future, an ersatz hope radiates from within *Nomadland*: that hard work and persistence will lead to more stable situations.

Engaging, highly relevant immersion journalism.

Pub Date: Sept. 26, 2017

ISBN: 978-0-393-24931-6

Page Count: 320

Publisher: Norton

Review Posted Online: May 9, 2017

Kirkus Reviews Issue: June 1, 2017

Additional Information

Video interviews:

Jessica Bruder interview ✕  

 All  Videos  News  Images  Shopping  More Tools

About 879,000 results (0.53 seconds)

Videos ⋮



LIVE Q&A: 'Nomadland' author Jessica Bruder takes your ...

YouTube · PBS NewsHour
Apr 15, 2021



10 key moments in this video



The Road to 'Nomadland': A Talk With Author & Alumna ...

YouTube · Columbia Journalism School
Apr 27, 2021



8 key moments in this video



'Nomadland' author Jessica Bruder on how Amazon stopped ...

YouTube · PBS NewsHour
Apr 16, 2021

Official Trailer for Nomadland, the Film based on the Book:

Source: https://youtu.be/6sxCFZ8_d84



At the 2021 Academy Awards, *Nomadland* won Oscars in the following categories:

Best Motion Picture of the Year

Best Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role (Frances McDormand)

Best Achievement in Directing (Chloé Zhao – first Asian Woman nominated for Best Director)