



Walden on Wheels: On the Open Road from Debt to Freedom

Ken Ilgunas

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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."

Walden on Wheels: On the Open Road from Debt to Freedom Details

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From Reader Review Walden on Wheels: On the Open Road from Debt to Freedom for online ebook

Dominic Tiberio says

Vapid. That sums up the entire book in a single word. Walden on Wheels is a complete letdown in almost every respect. 90% fluff and whining and 10% life, and the most interesting aspects of Ken's life are either glossed over or skipped entirely. 3/4 of the way through the book and you just begin to get to the van aspect. What you have is an eye into the mind and world of the current generation and it is pitiful at best. Not because of the world around them holding them back but because of how vapid and banal their existence is by choice and deed. Ken breaks free a bit of this but never truly becomes free. His trips to Alaska are no "Into the Wild" instead he just works non-stop to pay off his debt irrationally which is what you will read about on every page, his voyageur trip is a B.S. pretend trip headed by a motivational speaker, and his grand stand against debt and college is to then go back to college for a self-admitted useless degree. For all of his bluster and pseudo-intellectualism and insight Ken never actually achieves anything... except to prove that he can write a book that tries to sound more important than it is, sort of exactly like "Walden" which he seems to have some distaste for despite, in all reality, his accomplishment of pretty much the same result. Terrible.

Courtney Brown says

The ideas are there, but it's been a long time since I've met a narrator I disliked quite so much. Disappointing, to say the least.

Happyreader says

This is a book about panic. Kid mindlessly plays video games through his teens, mindless about school and other interests. Mindlessly follows his friend to a second-rate, overpriced private college just because. Didn't really like or pay attention to school. Doesn't think about work beyond working at the local Home Depot. Finally appreciates college after transferring to a cheaper, local school and then panics when he realizes that he's \$32,000 in debt and he has no job prospects. And why should he? He had nothing to offer a potential employer.

One smart decision he makes is to follow his dream of travelling up to Alaska, being one with nature, learning to live frugally and slowly paying off his debt. Love that and loved Jack, the subsistence farmer. Also loved his Voyageur trip.

Did not love the kid though. He's condescending to everyone – the poor people who pick him up hitchhiking, his fellow Alaskans, all women who are likely fat or skanky or suicidal, bulimic (ex-girlfriend) or shrill (his mother), rich people, homeless people, black people, and anyone who successfully becomes gainfully employed. He's not malicious, more socially immature. Except for a handful of high school friends, he doesn't really connect on a deep level with anyone. When he's living in his van in the Duke parking lot, he starts to seem so tight with a buck, anti-materialistic, and anti-social, you almost assume he's writing his Unibomber manifesto. The freedom he keeps ranting about sounds more like refusal to commit to any purpose or people.

He's not secure enough to own up to his own ambition and berates anyone who has ambitions beyond living in the wild. It's his poor opinion of his fellow Coldfoot, Alaska bunkmates that prompts him to think about improving his lot through grad school but once in grad school, he looks down upon his fellow Duke students who want to do more than commit to just hiking the PCT.

By the end, he has an inkling that he should have more of a purpose but he has no idea what that is. For all his talk about the value of education, his best motivator seemed to be getting away from his debt. It woke him up. To what, I have no idea.

Michael says

Dylan asked, "How Does it Feel?" This guy tried to find the answer. I came looking for a story about a guy in the van down by the river (thanks NYT and LAT), but am enjoying getting there the long way.

The key, they say, to a good memoir is honesty, and this one pulls few punches (though it looks like the author has a girlfriend he thanks in the Acknowledgements, though she does not appear in the story). I like how he visited Thoreau's Walden Pond and found that even that author had taken artistic liberties with the concept of living free.

I think Ilgunas is an adventurer in the tradition of Thor Heyerdahl or Edmund Hillary.

I think a lot of this writing about living debt-free is all well and good, but there is little exploration of debt as a promise, and how Ilgunas constructed a life of not only minimal debt, but minimal promises to others. The rejection of the values of his upbringing is really the core conflict of the book, not so much the rejection of debt or even the whole van thing. Perhaps with maturity will come a future book to reconcile who he is with who he wishes to become (this is not that book).

Isn't it a little childish to want to be completely independent? Isn't that the child's refrain, "I can do it MYSELF!" Every man is an island unto himself, of course, until he needs to see a doctor. Isn't life incalculably richer when you embrace family, establish a community? We see here a ton of rejection of everything from a parent to a girlfriend to an academic community, with very little self awareness to tie it all together.

Where is Marcus Aurelius or even James Stockdale? Don't the Stoics, and their philosophy, have something to offer a guy living a monastic, solitary lifestyle?

I don't mind much that this book offers more questions than answers. There is enough self-understanding here to justify the adventure.

I find more struggle for self awareness here than in the solo "around the world" sailing books, such as those by Slocum, Tania Aebi, Moitessier. I think Wind Sand and Stars by Saint Ex will continue to be a more compelling exercise in solitary travel writing.

I am looking forward to a second book by Ilgunas.

BTW, Whoever decided to make this Kindle edition \$3.99 had the right idea. While I think it's ironic that a

book about living a (nearly free) life should cost any money at all, I can spare \$4 to take a journey of self-discovery from Alaska to Mississippi, from New York to North Carolina.

Meghan Gaynor says

I wanted to like this book because I admire minimalist and naturalist lifestyles, and Ken has an interesting story to tell. That said, I grew frustrated with his condescension toward consumer culture, reliance on stereotypes, and countless references to his own moral superiority. The "characters" in this book (based on his real-life loved ones) were painfully two-dimensional, there only to illustrate and reinforce Ken's superior way of life and enlightened character. On a positive note, and to Ken's credit, Thoreau's "Walden" is now near the top of my summer reading list.

Carmen says

My goal was simple and straightforward: get the fuck out of debt as fast as humanly possible.

This book was excellent. Ilgunas is funny and also asks some very important questions about life and civilization. He works tons of odd jobs to work off his \$32,000 debt for undergrad, and later lives in a van at Duke while getting his Master's. This is a funny, thought-provoking book. I love reading about people who are "roughing it," and while this wasn't exactly Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail, it was pretty good.

That being said...

What, you thought I was going to give something five stars and not criticize it? Well, that could happen. But not here.

I sometimes found Ilgunas to be insufferable. This didn't happen often, he had a great sense of humor and this offset a lot of the... I don't want to say preachiness. Look, Ilgunas has a strong message and a strong belief in a certain way of living. I really admire his way of living. I admire the "voluntary poverty, ascetic, debt-free lifestyle" that he is advocating. But at times, I just wanted to tell him to shove it. This only happened about 3 times in the book, though, so it wasn't really a problem. It mostly cropped up when I felt he was looking down at other people. Fat people, for one thing. Actual poor people living in no-choice poverty, for another. He hates the suburbs with a fiery passion I haven't seen since Stephen King. And he's very condescending to people who don't share his values. I don't feel like this is heavy, or even overt, but there were times I was cringing at Ilgunas's (perhaps unintentional) judgmental attitude.

Overall, this is an amazing, worthwhile read that I would recommend to EVERY AMERICAN. And any non-American who had an interest in it. What Ilgunas has to say about debt and our college system is wonderful and thought-provoking. In the modern day and age, it's becoming increasingly unclear what a college degree is really worth (\$32,000?). I highly recommend this book - it's not a slog, he'll have you turning the pages like no one's business.

When your life is all toil and hardship, the things that matter and the bullshit that doesn't become easy to separate.

P.S. I know it's none of my business, but I was dying to know if he was practicing safe sex. Due to a main plot point (view spoiler), I was like "Are you seriously so cheap right now that you can't justify buying condoms? Don't they give away condoms for free on Duke's campus? Condoms! Use them!" Because (view spoiler)

P.P.S. The part of this book where Ilgunas works at the Home Depot really reminded me of another great book, *Horrorstör*, which I recommend if you have any interest in horror novels.

Denise says

I debated giving the book 2 stars because I actually liked the book and the main character for the first third of the book or so. It made me a little more sympathetic to the millennial generation -- coming out of college, faced with debt. Not because I think their situation is really so much different than earlier generations. I know very few of my peers who graduated college without debt or who immediately found jobs in their fields. But it did remind me that it's a scary time for anyone -- and that I, too, was in a hurry to pay off that debt. (Now, well, I have a much healthier relationship with money -- though I'm guessing the author would not agree).

So back to my 1-star review. About halfway through the book (maybe less), the book turned from being a story of a few years of youthful adventure and finding one's self, to being a platform for self-indulgent ramblings. The writer turned preachy and shamefully judgmental -- for someone who previously railed against his parents and friends who he felt judged him for his life choices. He's just hard to like and lacks any self-awareness. I finished reading the book only because I wanted to be sure my bad review was justified. I wanted to like this book and the author -- but was disappointed by both.

Carrie Lahain says

I was really looking forward to reading this book. I have been a proponent of the Voluntary Simplicity movement since the early 1990s when I happened upon a book called *YOUR MONEY OR YOUR LIFE* by Vicki Robin and Joe Dominguez. Through the years I have learned firsthand how frugality can ransom that most limited of commodities--TIME. I also have personal experience of the burden of student loan debt, how poor or thoughtless choices at eighteen can haunt a person for decades. So when I heard about Ken Ilgunas' efforts to escape debt and suffer a little now in return for a more peaceful life forever after, I was ready to jump right on board.

Too bad Ilgunas' head is such an unpleasant place to spend time.

Sure, it might have something to do with his age that he considers working for Home Depot more soul crushing than cleaning toilets in an Alaskan motel. The myth of Rugged Individualism and all that. He's from western New York, which these days is apparently a wasteland of suburban tract housing populated by husks of humanity cut off from nature and doomed by their demand for warm homes and cable television. Even the mighty Niagara Falls fail to move him. Forget for a moment that the state of New York is home to vast amounts of farmland and the Catskill and the Adirondack mountain ranges--perhaps that doesn't mean much in comparison to the wilds of the northern frontier. Hey, who wouldn't like to walk on a glacier or watch caribou galloping along the tundra? My quarrel with Ilgunas (besides his questionable moral code in which a

co-worker who beats his girlfriend until blood seeps from her ear or pours water over dogs sleeping outside in below-freezing temperatures is treated with more compassion than a horny truck driver who eats too many fried foods) is his tendency to indulge in childish tantrums that blame society for his own choice to fritter away his teens/early twenties playing video games and emailing porn.

Does the author have some amazing stories to tell about his time in the wilderness? Absolutely. Does he show us some hard truths about the day-to-day struggles of this country's working poor? Yes. Is he correct about the damage excessive student debt can do to the individual and to society? Definitely. But apparently these life-transforming experiences and insights, which comprise 95% of the book, are not important enough to provide its marketing hook. Instead Ilgunas, critic of modern consumer culture, allowed his publisher to focus on the 5% of the book that has to do with his time actually living in his van.

I know people will ask, what's wrong with capitalizing on the current hot topic of student debt and that perennial best-seller Thoreau's *WALDEN*, especially if it helps another young person avoid financial trouble? Normally, nothing. But once you've read through Ilgunas' repeated tirades against capitalism and those of us who have chosen to make some peace with the world we live in--even if that world has had the bad manners to continue progressing past 1850--you'll find a problem with not getting the book he advertised.

I suppose if one person reads this book and limits the amount of student loan debt he accumulates, it's worth the cover price. But it really is just another tale of adolescent rebellion screeched at ear-splitting volume. If this was 1990, Ilgunas would have backpacked through Europe on five bucks a day, joined a kibbutz, and then come home to get his MBA.

Jody says

It's not often that a book changes your whole outlook on life. Reading *Walden* on Wheels was a transformative experience for me. I no longer have any desire for material things or for career success. Instead, my main goal in life is to find Ken Ilgunas and punch him in the frigging face.

Ok, I'm not actually going to hunt down Ken Ilgunas and beat him up. But, God, how I want to.

I have disliked or hated many books, but I usually try to separate my feelings about the book from the author himself. Especially when I see the author is here on goodreads I try to be mindful of not saying anything mean about the actual author even if I think their writing is a steaming pile of poo. But Ken Ilgunas was so critical, so dismissive, so condescending about every other person he describes in his book that I feel like 1. He started it, and 2. I'm sure he won't care what I think since he can just shove me into one of his buckets of scorn that he uses to categorize every other person in the world.

Let me back up for a minute. The description of this memoir was intriguing to me. Guy graduates with lots of student loans and lives in a van to pay them off. (Actually, he'd already paid them off by the time he got the van and lived there so he wouldn't incur more debt in grad school, but whatever.) I thought I was going to like this guy. I'm a big fan of education and frugality and I like to read about people escaping poverty or working their way back from bad decisions. So I thought I would like Ken Ilgunas. Oh, how I was wrong.

It is not often that someone can simultaneously remind me of a whiny French Renaissance writer moaning about ennui and a current day misogynistic Men's Rights Movement advocate, but Ken manages to do it.

Bravo, Ken.

Ken sees himself as superior to EVERYONE. His coworkers at Home Depot are mindless drones; his coworkers in Alaska are a bunch of alcoholic/addict losers; his coworkers in New Orleans are a bunch of immature fornicators; his parents are wage slaves; his fellow students are sellouts; women are hysterical and/or teases.

He makes pronouncements to his parents about how he loves them, but he can't support their lifestyle choices of being wage slaves. While he stays with them for a few months for free. After accepting multiple loans from his mom.

He talks about how he "helped" his coworkers in New Orleans, like how he wouldn't drive someone to the hospital to get his prescription for antidepressants refilled because he should learn to live without numbing himself. 'Cause, you know, this guy is way more qualified to come up with a treatment plan for depression than, oh, I don't know, a DOCTOR.

Ken prides himself on living this independent, wandering life, and scorns everyone who is more tied down, while simultaneously using them for whatever benefit he can. I'm not talking about bartering - like, can I help you repair your car in exchange for a ride, or I'll clean your house in exchange for a place to stay. But this simultaneous scorn and mooching. "Ugh, how pedestrian to have an apartment. I couldn't be tied down like that because my soul needs to be free. Speaking of free, can I stay with you for a week for free?" (I paraphrase.)

Ilgunas has a distinctive writing style. At first I almost enjoyed it - he was certainly descriptive, if prone to flights of fancy. But after a while it was simile overload. I'd hear the word "like" and dread the upcoming, over-the-top comparison that was sure to follow. One favorite: when he was describing the crappy condition of the dorms at a camp in Alaska he said how they would make Holocaust survivors think back on happier times. Really.

Overall, this book reads like Ken congratulating himself on how superior and whimsical he is. It gets old, fast.

Ken is playing with poverty. It's a self-indulgent, self-congratulatory experiment.

Joseph says

I can agree with many of the ideas that drive this book: college has become far too expensive; life has become far too materialistic; education is still worth whatever we pay for it, as long as it is education; for-profit university's are parasites; and the harshness of the "wilderness" is not experienced enough by enough people. I even love the main thrust of the book: live on as little as possible; be as free as possible. Ilgunas tapped into many of my own experiences with education, with living on less, and with the wild. Given the truth behind all I mention above, along with the climate of higher education today - more particularly, the political climate surrounding higher education generally - this book represents an excellent way of looking at so many things differently. For that, I think the book deserves four stars.

I give the book three stars primarily because of how cynical I've become towards certain stereotypes that

Ilgunas sometimes fits. Ilgunas has a fantastic story to tell, but he tells it in such a self-centered way sometimes, his message sometimes gets lost. He implies throughout the book that society is by-and-large depraved, particularly conservative-minded individuals, and more vastly more ignorant than he and those who think like him are. Even where I agreed with some of his diagnoses, I found it difficult to endure his condescension and self-centeredness.

That doesn't mean you shouldn't read his book. Indeed, I'm guessing that most of my issues came from my cynicism and that most people would find his self-flattery endurable.

Steve Lane says

After Chapter 11 all I could see of this guy was his bad habit of putting down the lives of those that he reached out to for help along the way. He's against going into debt, or having a "boring life and career" in order to buy things like houses and cars, then turns around and bums rides and rooms from the very people he is being critical of. He touts the naturalist lifestyle, then reaches out for advice from a van living guru that just happens to pee in a can and dump it at stop lights as part of his solution to cheap living.

The hypocrisy continues from Chapter 11 on and tarnishes the whole idea of the book for me. I mean - you want to live the "free" and non-conformist life, pointing fingers at everyone else for working for corporations all while your mom sends your college loan payments in for you, loans you money for some of your travels, and you hitchhike from people that bought into using fossil fuels and making payments. Then to top it all off you decide to write a book and utilize much of the system you are critical of. I guess the book would work well for those that feel guilty about buying into the system and envy the guy on the side of the road with the cardboard sign. I'm too much of a capitalist to buy into this whining drivel.

Laine says

This guy is chock full of white privilege, it was not very well written and prone to grandiose statements.

Mandy says

I debated about giving it one or two stars but decided on two because he did have one good thought in the book that I can remember.

I really disliked this guy. He is a hard-core liberal pushing his socialist ideas. He is so prideful and tries to come across humble. Hardly. It's like he starts out with a good thought, makes a person think and then he ends up way out in left-field so then you just feel sorry for the guy. He just doesn't get it. And he is so hypocritical.

Case in point: he shares about his time in Louisiana when he was helping after the hurricane. He describes the people he is working with as degenerates. And goes on to say how these people would end up hooking up with each other and end up pregnant (as is the case in Louisiana or the South, his words). So, I think, well, he has some self-control and being smart... oh no, next paragraph he meets a girl and falls in love, blah, blah, blah, but his story is different. Not sure how he is any different than the other degenerates sleeping around?

I could go on and on.... I feel he probably needs to spend less time in the University setting where so many push these liberal ideas in young adults minds and less time in his van and grow up. That's the thing, he talks of his friends, how they are so different. They used to be so wild and willing to go on an adventure, etc... It's called growing up and having to make grown-up choices. Please...

Mary Holland says

Speaking as someone who abhors being in debt, I'm always interested in other people's solutions to the problem. This is a desperate and often funny tale of how one recent graduate employed some drastic measures to pay off his student loans. Before he gets to the living-in-a-van part he works at Home Depot, cleans toilets in Alaska, works as a tour guide at a national park, and does a lengthy canoe trip across Canada. What actually happens during the story is he grows up, takes responsibility for his own actions, and learns to think critically regarding current received wisdom: getting a corporate job may not be a good thing, you don't have to live where everyone says you should, being safe isn't always good for you, and so on. In short, he becomes an adult. The crisis of his generation is the burden of student loans, and while I wholeheartedly agree that getting an education should not force you into penury for thirty years, no life is trouble-free and everyone, eventually, has to grow up and deal with whatever problems they have either inherited or brought on themselves by poor judgment. Ken Ilgunas's solutions are his own, and his memoir is well done, humorous, and thought-provoking.

The book is well-written, but the liveliest parts are the beginning and middle. The ending drags on, with a bit too much overwrought prose (I blame the master's program at Duke, frankly) and my attention wandered. Still, I give it 4 stars.

Nicky says

I thought this book was very cool! I think a lot of students don't quite see the weight of their debt until they actually have to go and pay it off. We're all just assuming we'll get a good job.

I don't quite understand why everybody seems to dislike the writer's personality so much. Sure, he is a little obsessive and intense at points, and uses some overly strong names for people stuck in the system (loan drones, cubicle monkeys), but other than that they're really isn't much to complain about. Just because somebody chooses a different life and has different values, that doesn't mean everybody has to get personally offended by it... (Unless they are overly sensitive or bitter and secretly envy this person?)
