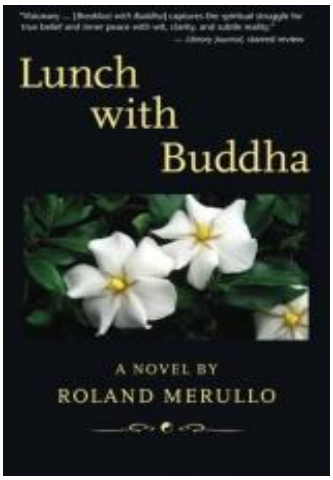
Lunch with Buddha

by Roland Merullo



About the Book

On the surface, **Lunch with Buddha** is a story about family. Otto Ringling and his sister Cecelia could not be more different. He?s just turned 50, an editor of food books at a prestigious New York publishing house, a man with a nice home in the suburbs, children he adores, and a sense of himself as being a mainstream, upper-middle-class American. Cecelia is the last thing from mainstream. For two decades she?s made a living reading palms and performing past-life regressions. She believes firmly in our ability to communicate with those who have passed on.

It will turn out, though, that they have more in common than just their North Dakota roots.

In **Lunch with Buddha**, when Otto faces what might be the greatest of life?s difficulties, it is Cecelia who knows how to help him. As she did years earlier in this book?s predecessor, Breakfast with Buddha, she arranges for her brother to travel with Volya Rinpoche, a famous spiritual teacher ? who now also happens to be her husband.

After early chapters in which the family gathers for an important event, the novel portrays a road trip made by Otto and Rinpoche, in a rattling pickup, from Seattle to the family farm in North Dakota. Along the way the brothers-in-law have a series of experiences --- some hilarious, some poignant --- all aimed at bringing Otto a deeper peace of mind. They visit American landmarks; they have a variety of meals, both excellent and awful; they meet a cast of minor characters, each of whom enables Rinpoche to impart some new spiritual lesson. Their conversations range from questions about life and death to talk of history, marijuana, child-rearing, sexuality, Native Americans, and outdoor swimming.

In the end, with the help of their miraculous daughter, Shelsa, and the prodding of Otto?s own almost-adult children, Rinpoche and Cecelia push this decent, middle-of-the-road American into a more profound understanding of the purpose of his life. His sense of the line between possible and impossible is altered, and the story?s ending points him toward a very different way of being in this world.

Discussion Guide

1. The main idea of this novel is a very somber one. How does the author use humor to soften it? Do you feel it?s appropriate to mix such a sad subject with humorous moments? Does it dilute or sharpen the reader?s empathy with Otto and his family?

2. How important is family in this story? At the end of the novel there is a shift where Rinpoche appears a bit less and other family members more. What did the author have in mind by doing this?

3. How does the author approach the sensitive subject of religious faith? Did you feel the book was ever ?preachy?? If you have read **Breakfast with Buddha**, did you see any progression in Otto?s spiritual search? If so, how would you describe it?

4. What role does food play and does that role change at all as the book goes on?

5. What kinds of images and objects does Rinpoche use as spiritual lessons and do these work for you? Did you connect this with Emerson?s quote in the epigraph?

6. Is Rinpoche likeable and, if so, how is he made likea-ble? What don?t you like about him? About Otto?

7. This story is fiction, but it?s based on an actual road trip. In what way does that ?factual skeleton? strengthen or weaken the novel? There are photos of the trip on the website. Did you choose to look at them? Did they correspond to the written descriptions in the book?

8. What are your thoughts about Shelsa? Landrea? Gilligan Neufaren? Rundy? Jarvis Barton-Phillips? What role or roles do these minor characters play in the novel?

9. It?s a risk to end a book with a solitary retreat. Was it effective for you? Did it fit the rest of the novel?

10. What role does Cecelia play in Otto?s spiritual education? Does his opinion of her change as the novel progresses?

11. What roles do Otto?s children play? How are they different?

12. What do you think of Rinpoche?s talk in Spokane? Did your opinion of it change as the book went on?

13. Is there an effort here to make a distinction between Otto?s spiritual search and the ?powers? that someone like Landrea has? Is there a difference between her contact with Jeannie and Otto?s contact with Jeannie?

14. What role does the Spokane transgendered person play? When she speaks of troubles, and when Rinpoche mentions his worrisome dreams?where do you think that could lead in the future?

15. Why does the author mention roadside signs and radio programs so often?

16. If you read **Breakfast with Buddha**, how is **Lunch with Buddha** the same, and how is it different? Would you be interested in having **Dinner** with these characters?

Author Bio

Roland Merullo is the bestselling author of more than 20 works of fiction and nonfiction, including ONCE NIGHT FALLS; THE DELIGHT OF BEING ORDINARY; THE TALK-FUNNY GIRL, an Alex Award winner; VATICAN WALTZ, a *Publishers Weekly* Best Books of 2013 pick; BREAKFAST WITH BUDDHA, an international bestseller now in its 20th printing; LUNCH WITH BUDDHA, selected as one of the Best Books of 2013 by *Kirkus Reviews*; REVERE BEACH BOULEVARD, named one of the ?Top 100 Essential Books of New England? by the *Boston Globe*; and REVERE BEACH ELEGY, winner of the Massachusetts Book Award for nonfiction.

Born in Boston and raised in Revere, Massachusetts, Roland attended Brown University, where he obtained a bachelor of arts in Russian studies and a master of arts in Russian language and literature. A former Peace Corps volunteer, he?s also made his living as a carpenter, college professor and cabdriver. Roland, his wife and their two lovely daughters live in the hills of western Massachusetts.

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