

## Book Review

# Living Like Lebowski

By Cody Badaracca

Life, like a good White Russian, is a delicate balance; cold ice, fiery vodka, a Yin and Yang of half and half creamer and Kahlua liqueur. It needs to all be mixed just right to make the enjoyable beverage. But balance is not an easy thing to achieve as any good gymnast or stumbling drunk will tell you. If the cocktail has too much vodka or Kahlua, it (like life) can be overwhelming. Too much ice or creamer and it tastes watered down or bland. This balance takes practice and needs guidance with the aid of two books: the first, a good mixology or bartending 101 manual. The second and more important is a copy of *The Abide Guide: Living Like Lebowski* by Oliver Benjamin and Dwayne Eutsey, the founders of the “Church of the Latter-Day Dude.”

Dudeism. A religion based around the character Jeffrey “The Dude” Lebowski as played by Jeff Bridges in the movie *The Big Lebowski* (TBL) by the Coen Brothers.

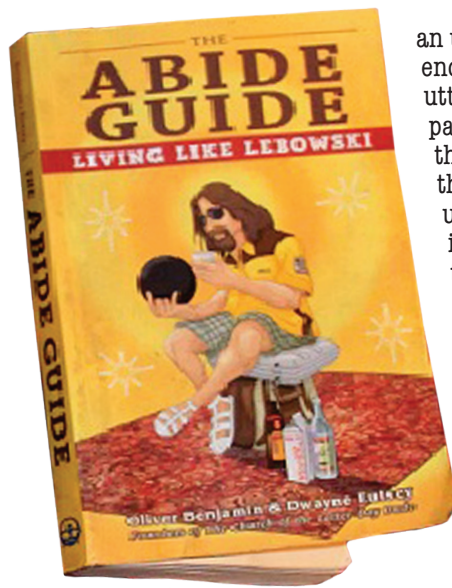
You may be asking: “what in God’s holy name are you blathering about?”

Never heard of TBL? You live a deprived life. For those into the whole “brevity thing”: Jeff Lebowski is an aging ex-hippy living in Los Angeles in the early nineties – right around the time of our conflict with Saddam and the Eye-rackies. He’s a loser. A dead beat. Someone the square community doesn’t give a shit about and preoccupies most of his time with driving around, bowling and the occasional acid flashback. Also, no one calls him “Lebowski.” He’s The Dude, so that’s what you call him... that or “Duder”, or “His Dudeness”, or “El Duderino” if you’re not into the whole “brevity thing.”

Life is good for The Dude until one day he comes home to find two thugs in his bungalow demanding money from him. The Dude is prey to a case of mistaken identity. It turns out the thugs were looking for the other Jeffrey Lebowski; the millionaire Jeffrey Lebowski. No big deal, except one of the thugs peed on The Dude’s rug, and it really tied the room together. In trying to gain compensation from the other Jeffrey Lebowski for his rug that’s been micturated upon, The Dude is thrown into a film noir plot where a girl has been thought kidnapped, a toe cut off, and everyone from known pornographers to nihilists are trying to scam a million dollars from The Dude – money he doesn’t have.

Fabulous stuff, man. The movie wasn’t a blockbuster when it premiered in 1998, but has since gained a cult following worthy of Rocky Horror Picture Show status, sans the transsexuals. An aptly named “LebowskiFest” was started in 2001 in Louisville, Kentucky to honor all that is Lebowski. Eleven years running of beautiful tradition, the festival consists of a costume contest, lawn party, screening of the movie, and a lot of bowling and White Russians. A lot.

To segue, if the whole White Russian/life metaphor isn’t your thing, how about bowling? As Benjamin and Eutsey write, “there is no sport better suited than bowling to help visualize the nature and art of living. It is both



an utterly pointless endeavor and an utterly beautiful past time... it is this: Take something heavy and unwieldy and set it in motion. Try to let it flow with balance and between a tension of opposites. Sit down and rest. Then stand up and try again.”

Dealing with all facets of TBL and laden

with Lebowski-puns and drawings (yes, the book has pictures, if that piques your interest), *The Abide Guide* is parceled into three sections. The first is a tongue-in-cheek New Testament to The Dude, who is interestingly Christ-like in his appearance. “Wiser Fellers than Ourselves – Dudeist History” is a quasi-scholarly text showcasing other “Dudes” in history like Mark Twain, Emily Dickinson, and Lao-Tzu. It discusses the relationship between Dudeism and feminism, politics, and whether or not TBL is a “stoner film.” The final section is a self-help reference with instructions in Dude-Jitsu, some kind of Yoga and how to Feng Shui one’s pad to make it completely unspoiled. Although the authors seem to lose their train of thought sometimes within the sections and can get verbose, the twofold ethos of the book shines through and is really half and half of the same idea:

1) Just take it easy.

2) Abide.

Simple as that. There’s even an illustration of The Dude holding tablets like a stoned Moses with those maxims etched into them. Taking cues from Eastern philosophy and religions like Taoism and Buddhism, Dudeism emphasizes the NOW and the importance of being present in it. Just take it easy – one of the many lines repeated throughout the film, and a notion glossed over in an age of instant technological gratification, polemic politics and celebrity worship. The Dude takes it easy. He bowls, has some burgers and beers with his friends, and does Tai Chi on his rug. That’s about it, aside from the occasional acid flashback. And emphasis should not be placed on The Dude’s drug regimen or the fact that he’s a lazy man, which he most certainly is. Again, it’s all about just taking it easy.

While you can’t really label that a philosophy (‘cause what is a philosophy?), it also is not a call to senseless hedonism or worse, despite The Dude adhering to a strict drug regimen. “[T]here’s more to it than that – though the Dude stands in stark contrast to the big over-arching ideoloshies of the 20th century, he also

stands apart from their annihilating opposite, nihilism... To the Dudeist way of thinking, life is a liquid being passed from temporary container to temporary container. It’s a distinctly pragmatic approach to making sense of this strange movie that we’ve all walked into the middle of.” Forget about the TOE (theory of everything) and abide with whatever the cosmos rolls your way, like stated on Dudeism.com: “Life is short and complicated, and nobody knows what to do about it. So don’t do anything about it. Just take it easy, man... do your best to be true to yourself and others - that is to say, abide.”

The Dude Abides. Take comfort in that. Despite being labeled a “bum” and pushed around by fascists, The Dude is perfectly content with who and where he is in life, unlike his bowling buddy Walter – a Vietnam veteran and devout Jew who is indignant and reacts to everything, no matter how small. Where Walter pulls handguns on people for minor infractions of THE RULES, The Dude’s mind is limber and he tries to welcome the world with open hands. “If you’re not going to approach the ‘whole durn human comedy’ with an open, affable attitude, then you’re not going to get the point. Friendliness is the only asset you can share that doesn’t cost you anything.” The Dude esteems friendship, even with his landlord who asks if The Dude can watch his dance cycle and give him notes. The Dude replies, “I’ll be there, man,” and indeed he is.

While it is easy to laugh at Dudeism in the same way people make fun of Trekkies and Lord of The Rings fans, or write off *The Abide Guide* as pseudo-religious pop culture hogwash based on a movie, there is actual substance to the book; and over 150,000 ordained Dudeist priests worldwide. “If we understand it correctly ‘mere’ entertainment has always been an essential part of religious life, especially in Western civilization... we agree with many wiser fellers than ourselves who say that movies serve a similar purpose today. Filmmakers reach into the same deep, mythic pools that their theatrical forebears plumbed to create narratives they hope will resonate profoundly with viewers.”

Why not make a religion based on *The Big Lebowski*? The Coen Brothers are no amateurs when it comes to cinema. Anyone who has seen their other films like *O’ Brother, Where Art Thou?*, *Raising Arizona*, or *Fargo* might agree.

Littered with interesting footnotes ranging from Nietzsche to Kurt Cobain’s first band, and dissecting various details of TBL, Benjamin and Eutsey obviously put a good deal of thought into *The Abide Guide*. It’s worth the read, if only to make you laugh to beat the band (which is part of the point). The authors write: “We need not indulge in illusions.” – a line borrowed from the 60’s political manifesto, *The Port Huron Statement* (which The Dude claims to be a co-author of), “That sentence just about wraps it all up, doesn’t it?” Indeed. Parts, anyway.