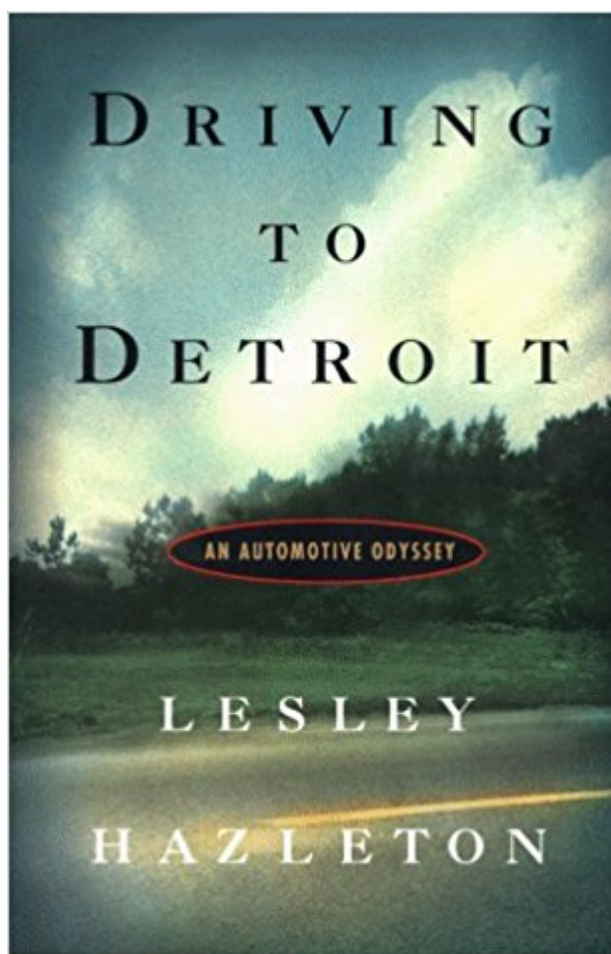


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Driving To Detroit : An Automotive Odyssey



Synopsis

Leaving her home in Seattle in midsummer to drive "the long way round" to the Detroit auto show, Lesley Hazleton embarks on a five-month journey to visit the holy places for cars-- where they are raced, displayed, crashed, tested, and made-- as she seeks to understand our deep fascination with automobiles. Her quest takes her on a road trip that teaches her not only about cars and the peculiar passions of car lovers but also about herself. A committed environmentalist in thrall to the internal combustion engine, Hazleton explores her own worship of speed during assaults on the landspeed record at the Bonneville Salt Flats; negotiates the famed off-road Rubicon Trail across the Sierras; finds the exact spot where James Dean died in his Porsche Spyder; and attends a crash conference in Albuquerque, where her discovery that "when metal and flesh collide, metal always wins" sheds light on our erotic fascination with the automobile. She crushes cars in a Houston junkyard; works the nightshift at the Saturn plant in Tennessee; and in Detroit, turns away from the glitz and gleam of new metal to watch what happens when a car is driven into a million pounds of concrete. Along the way she corresponds with a class of eight-year-olds, befriends a priest who fixes his parishioners' cars, and encounters people and places where cars are created, worshiped, celebrated, and even feared. Throughout her journey, Hazleton's ability to make us see and smell and hear what is unique about each place she visits keeps us riveted, eager to move on with her to the next town on the map. Halfway through this extraordinary adventure, Hazleton's father, the man who taught her to drive, dies suddenly, and her trip becomes a journey of grief and memory, a deeply personal odyssey that after thirteen thousand miles almost costs her her own life on an ice-bound highway. What begins as a romance takes her deep into the heartland of obsession, evolving into a meditation on life and death as she delves into the soul of a nation and its machine.

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Customer Reviews

With vigor and purpose, British-born Lesley Hazleton hits the American road as "a rite of passage," journeying cross-country from her home in Seattle to the Detroit auto show. Along the way, she visits the speed runs on Utah's Bonneville Salt Flats, rumbles across the Sierras on the Rubicon Trail, takes her turn on the Saturn assembly line, and discovers the place where James Dean died in his Porsche. Through her journey, "a kind of Automotive geography of America," the allure of the automobile emerges--how it is entwined with the country and, importantly, her life. Hazleton is transfixed by the essence of the road and its machine, and her ability to place readers beside her in the passenger seat is provocative. When her father dies in faraway England, we become her confidant as she turns to contemplate her own grief and loss. "Journeys have a way of creating their own momentum," she writes. And although these departures from the strictly automotive theme may seem at first a distraction, they are very much a part of the larger journey of self-discovery that the American road has often held for many who have traveled and written about it. The insights she brings to characters, scenes, and sketches elsewhere become all the more meaningful. We see that, indeed, this romantic machine, the automobile, has a darker side. Just three hours from returning home, there is a wonderfully distracting radio program, an icy road, a sudden skid... Hazleton's journey dares to veer from the well-platted grid of first intentions into the back roads of the soul. A journey well worth taking. --Byron Ricks

Kerouac's Beat-bible meets the literary memoir in Hazleton's (Confessions of a Fast Woman) lively account of a six-month road trip across the American landscape. A British expat and car columnist for the Detroit Free Press seeking to map out an "automotive geography of America," Hazelton resolves to follow the most roundabout route from her home in Seattle to the annual Detroit Auto Show. Driving her Ford Explorer down unmarked paths and rocky sluices from state to state, she rubs elbows with a Catholic priest/mechanic, a hot-rod customizer named Big Daddy and an ominous armored car specialist. From the Sierra's treacherous Rubicon Trail to a family-run Texas junkyard and an eerie crash-testing site in Michigan, many of this quest's destinations are refreshingly unfamiliar. Less successful are Hazleton's attempts to wax philosophically on the erotica of speed and to patch together her book's episodic structure with childhood memories of a

now-ill father. Without sounding righteous, Hazleton decries the loss of the natural landscape to lazy sightseers whose paved highways have invaded "every nook and corner of the national parks." While at times the material feels too flimsy to support the weight of autobiography, Hazleton remains a congenial guide, and her decision to remain more reportorial than confessional works to her advantage, making this a vivid portrait of the bizarre and hidden aspects of American car culture. Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc.

There's nothing like a little intellectual arrogance from across the pond to get under my skin. What's been highly acclaimed by others as an introspective journey into Ms. Hazleton's self is instead a rambling stream of (un)consciousness that's so chock full of errors that it just adds up to one big irritation. I'm not the sharpest knife in the drawer, but when a person who is an automotive journalist, private pilot, environmentalist, car enthusiast, and supposed "keen observer of human nature" sets forth so many incorrect or just plain goofy interpretations of events that even I pick up on them, I wonder how she's gotten the gigs she has. Let alone if she deserves them. Here's a quick example: To press home a point, she says "As Rambo said, 'I'll be back'". Sorry, Arnold as The Terminator said that. This from the keen observer of our woeful American popular culture. As she passes the aviation boneyard in Arizona, she's surprised by the "lack of rust" on the aircraft. Being aluminum, they don't rust very often. Remember, she's an auto journalist, enthusiast, and private pilot. The list goes on, but you get the idea. The irony is that in decrying the very inventions she herself can't seem to live without and in having, at best, a shaky command of the facts, her attempt to scale a flagpole that rises above the teeming masses like me to point out our ignorance just gives us all a better view of her backside.

Driving to Detroit is about automobiles to about the same extent as Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Repairing is about motorcycles. Driving to Detroit is about America. It is a deeply penetrating, highly compelling, extremely entertaining analysis of our culture. People who like Barbara Kingsolver's fiction or William Least Heat Moon's travel journalism will love this book. It belongs in the travel and sociology sections of bookstores, not hidden among auto-repair manuals in the transportation section which is where I always finally find it when I want copies for nieces and nephews and other friends. Ms. Hazleton writes with honesty and elegance. She exposes the strength and beauty of our special kind of aggressiveness in America, but she also exposes its ugly side -- with delicacy and compassion. She is a consummate journalist, and a thoroughly competent psychologist. She misses nothing, but has a remarkable flare for knowing how much to reveal and in what kind of time frame. I

find that subtle insights created by her apparently innocent descriptions of people and events are still seeping through the layers of my awareness, bursting into consciousness and amazing me at the oddest times. Unfortunately, books like this one don't fit into the kinds of simplistic niches that make marketing easy. Driving to Detroit is about psychology, and sociology, and culture, and education; and human decency, and conflict, and generosity and opportunism; and automobiles.

This is a book about Mrs. Hazelton and little else. She goes places where interesting things are happening, says little about them and doesn't talk to the people involved in those events. She wants to talk about herself. Tossing her hair and fantasizing that she is a movie star as she is photographed in a fabulous 1930s French car is worth pages but the person who restored the car is dismissed quickly. She attends a classic car auction without getting to know anyone involved. But she paints a negative picture of everyone involved without learning anything about those people. Whenever Ms. Hazelton mentions other people, she sneers briefly and moves on. Most of those people sounded more interesting than Ms. Hazelton. Blue Highways by William Least Heat Moon is a much better travel experience book. He talks to people and finds interest in what they say and do.

OK, so aluminum doesn't rust and it wasn't Rambo who said "I'll be back." Big deal. "Driving to Detroit" is a still compelling read, more memoir than textbook, an engaging account of a woman's uniquely personal journey. Those looking for nuts-and-bolts automotive statistics and measurements should look elsewhere; those who love "road" books, however, will find this one worth adding to their collections. Is it a woman's book? Definitely. But it's also a book for men who love cars and aren't afraid to examine that love affair more deeply.

Not good at all.

not much in the way of car talk as you might expect in such a book..Rather disjointed, not worth a read...

In chronicling her far off-the-beaten-path 13,000 mile journey from Seattle to Detroit, Ms. Hazleton both celebrates and skewers the American love affair with the automobile.

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