



New York Times Book Recommendation
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by Robert Lipsyte
www.nytimes.com

After a Year at Speed, These Books Offer Chance for Reflection

Many of the pages I turned in 2001 are marked by oil, beer or barbecue sauce, reminders of my Year at Speed. An unusually high percentage of those stained auto racing books will remain on my shelf, and some I will even recommend for the gift giving season.

Most idiosyncratic of the books is Henry ("Smokey") Yunick's delightful three-volume set, "Best Damn Garage in Town" (Carbon Press, \$275 hardcover Collector's Edition, \$95 softcover Racer's Edition). Yunick, who died in May just before the his 78th birthday, was a legendary motor sports insider, owner, mechanic and inventor. His hilarious, profane, opinionated, informative and wise memoir/history/techno manual runs 1,100 highly readable pages. There are 400 wonderful pictures.

Smokey was a one-man Greatest Generation whose World War II adventures seem divided between hot planes and hot nurses. Because of his garage language, he is hard to quote here, but his rant after Dale Earnhardt's death is a taste of his style.

Yunick writes: "Moveable walls, concrete tracks, fueling by computer, air jacks 'stead of the 30 pound flying sledge hammers they use, mandatory retirement age, etc. When the hell they gonna get to doing something? Maybe after next ace gets killed? When they gonna get rid of the [deleted] restrictor plates and go to smaller engines? Don't give me the [deleted] answer you can get killed in bathtub. It's this simple: whoe ever's running NASCAR has got his head up his [deleted]."

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Book Review: Best Damn Garage in Town

By Jeff Koch
Hot Rod Magazine

The day Smokey's book (Best Damn Garage in Town...The World According to Smokey; Carbon Press, 2001) came in, there were broad grins all around these parts. Smokey didn't suffer fools gladly, and he called them all to task in his posthumous 1,100-page, self-published, three-volume tome.

When you get your paws on BDGIT, and anyone with any appreciation for the history of racing and performance cars damn well ought to, you'd better have time to set a spell. It's a quick read with lots of priceless photography, but 1,100 pages is a fat stack of paper no matter how you slice it – more that 10.5 pounds worth (including slipcase). One volume is devoted to Smokey's NASCAR exploits. Another volume is his Indy experience and inventions (including the legendary Hot Vapor engine). The third is his history, life, exploits, and experiences that helped shape the man and make him who he was. I've spent hours blowing off my other duties here at the office, unable to pull myself from these sweet, straight-shooting pages. No wonder Yunick was so skinny—he was constantly on the move, and his metabolism must have been comparable to a hummingbird's. Between inventing, Indy, NASCAR, and writing for Circle Track, it's amazing that ol' Smoke had any time to sleep, much less pan for gold in South America and chase as much skirt as he did.

If you're looking for a straight chronology, forget it. Yunick goes off on tangents and gets waylaid so often in the course of a tale, half the time you forget where he was going. Hell, sometimes he forgot, too. That's fine; it's still a trip worth taking. But you'll have to read the lot to get a well-rounded picture of what's going on, and make your own call. As Baskervill relates, Yunick didn't cheat, he just believed that anything not prohibited by name was OK—whether it be NASCAR's rulebook, wartime smuggling shenanigans, or marriage vows. As a result, Yunick found himself constantly getting screwed by the rulemakers, or so he felt. Was he paranoid? Was it karma? Was it ego? Is this the pot calling the kettle black? Judge for yourself. It could be dismissed as mere whining if he didn't win so much.

Finished mere months before his passing earlier this year [2001], and on sale since July, the stories remain priceless. There was no ghostwriter here; this is straight transcribed Smokey talking. However, there's a difference between home-spun conversational charm and sloppy editing; BDGIT could have had a far stronger hand on copy-editing chores and, taking out some repeated points that go off as rants and tangents, could have been closer to 950 pages. Spelling is approximate and changeable, quotes opened are never closed, and punctuation is subjective and distracting. That said, it doesn't make BDGIT any less valuable a look into the man and his legendary automotive exploits. Better still is that since it's published by Smokey's family, they get the profits. They'll probably need 'em, to fend off the lawsuits from those alive who feel slighted by his opinion. For a good time, call 866-SMOKEY2.

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Book Review: Best Damn Garage in Town

By Matt McLaughlin
SpeedFX

About the only thing black and white in the late Smokey Yunick's autobiography is the photographs. The book is a colorful story about a colorful man expressed in colorful terms that redefine "uncensored." The book, sub-titled "The World According To Smokey" is actually three separate volumes of over 300 pages a piece; "Walking Under A Snake's Belly" (My So Called Life) "Little Skinny Rulebook and Eating an Elephant" (Indy Racing and Inventions) and of particular note to stock car racing fans "All Right You Sons-A-Bitches, Let's Have a Race!" (Stock Car Racing Years.)

You only think you know the story of stock car racing's early years until you read this book. Yunick talks about the years he spent making two dollars an hour towing race cars cross country half asleep at 80 MPH with the driver and one or two unpaid helpers, just to be able to race for a \$500 dollar purse that might or might not be paid because they loved racing that much. Drivers of the era were (by and large) hard drinking, hell-raising, woman chasing garage mechanics who couldn't read or write, and certainly couldn't support themselves racing. A majority of them have since passed on which might be a good thing because Yunick doesn't shy away from detailing their off-track exploits in terms as equally vivid as he used to note their on track accomplishments. And these were a randy bunch of guys. He talks of an era when after practice and qualifying crew chiefs yanked the engine the night prior to the race and rebuilt it in the borrowed bay of a local garage or if no garage was handy, in a motel room. (And he notes that racers had a hard time getting motel rooms in those days. I can't imagine why, especially since they seemed always to be polite enough to invite the motel manager to the orgy once they got the man's wife involved.)

It's a bygone era in this sport and the damn shame of it is that the rich history of NASCAR is so relatively unknown that many readers will never have heard of the drivers who ran for Yunick. There's few drivers today who could match this who's who list for talent and with the passing of Dale Earnhardt not one who can hold a candle to them as far as bravery in what was a brutally dangerous era in this sport. We're talking men like Herb Thomas, Jim Rathman, Marshall Teague, Paul Goldsmith, Curtis Turner, Joe Weatherly, and Darrell Derringer. Want to know who they are? Read the book. Heck, a lot of folks reading this won't know who Fireball Roberts is. In his era Roberts was as big a star as Earnhardt or Gordon. Smokey opines had they been able to develop a tire that would have lasted under the high weight and extreme horsepower of cars of the era Roberts would have won even more races. One of the greatest regrets of Yunick's life apparently is not being able to talk his friend into retiring once Smokey decided Roberts no longer had the

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desire to race. Roberts died from injuries suffered in the 1964 World 600 which would have been his final race if he had survived.

While the era of inline sixes and fender skirts is past, some things about stock car racing remain the same. Yunick writes that NASCAR's rulebook has always been open to interpretation. Whenever he came up with an innovation they didn't like they'd rule it "not in the spirit of competition" and when Smokey asked why they'd simply tell him "because we said so." The sanctioning body still rules on capricious whim, with no appeal process once they've made up their minds. (Seen the T-Rex chassis around lately?) One of those innovations Smokey tried adding to his cars was a steel plate to keep the gas filler neck from tearing free of the gas tank and starting a fire when the car was hit from the rear, a regular occurrence in that day. He was told he could not use the safety device. Apparently fires sold a lot of tickets to fans. Sort of like restrictor plates do today. Yunick, working with Bell helicopter, had developed a workable fuel cell but again was told he wasn't allowed to race with it. It was only after Fireball Robert's grisly fiery wreck at Charlotte that eventually took his life that NASCAR decided to mandate fuel cells after all. Even way back then they were reactive not proactive. In one chapter of the book Smokey opines Dale Earnhardt would still be with us if NASCAR had adopted some safety ideas he discussed with them over a decade ago.

If you're tired of politically correct tomes on NASCAR this book is the antidote. Yunick had a stormy relationship with the France family though he talks sadly of Bill France Sr.'s attempts to reach out to him in the last stage of his life.

Smokey is a guy who once

said to Bill France Sr. concerning Bill Junior; "It will take him five years in fifth grade to get an idiot's license" to which the Senior France replied "I think he could do it in four." Smokey grudgingly admits Bill Junior did all right by himself for a guy he didn't think was bright enough to "pour piss out of a boot." No, the late Mr. Yunick was rarely at a loss for words. His apt description of a driver having a hard time holding onto an ill handling car is "looked like a monkey (having sex with) a football". (Only Smokey would never use the term "having sex with" when there's a simpler if impolite term to get the job done in half the time.)

Even before he entered stock car racing in its infancy Yunick had a pretty amazing life. Previous biographies have said Smokey was born an orphan but he doesn't mention anything along those lines. His earliest recollections are of growing up on a farm with an alcoholic and abusive father and a demanding combative mother. He was expected to help with farm chores from the time Smokey was old enough to walk, and when his father passed away while Smokey was in the tenth grade he was forced to quit school to support his mom and sister. That led to Yunick's first mechanical adventure.



Convinced the family horse was out to kill him, Yunick bought an old Dodge and converted it into a tractor. No blueprints, no plans, just a naturally mechanically inclined mind that told him what would work.

Reading Yunick's story you grow to like the guy, warts (glaringly exposed) and all. I mean how can you not like a guy who gives the race media 30% of the credit for NASCAR's success and says writers don't get paid half enough. He recommends more car makers use a strategy employed in 1957 when Chevrolet gave out 2000 brand new cars to racing writers to encourage them to say nice things about Chevys. (And if anyone from Dodge is reading this, remove the light rack and decals off the Darlington pace car, send it to me and I'll write real nice things about ya'll for a long time.) When World War 2 broke out Yunick decided he wanted to be a bomber pilot. Three of the primary qualifications for the assignment were a birth certificate, a college diploma, and 20/20 eyesight. (Smokey had damaged one eye in an industrial accident that started as a prank.) So guess who ended up the head pilot on a B-17 flying bombing runs over Nazi Germany at the age of 19?

Disillusioned by the ugly side of war and corruption and mindless rules in the military Yunick left the service, married, lived briefly in New Jersey then announced to his wife he didn't like the cold weather and he was moving to Daytona Beach, a city he'd first seen from the air while shaking down bombers. He gave her the option of coming along that evening, and expresses regret she chose to do so. After a brief stint as a commercial pilot he bought land to build a shop (\$2400 for the land, \$1000 dollars for the building and \$600 for a military surplus Dodge Power Wagon to convert into a tow truck) to start his own business. The land wasn't a good bargain in that when the river reached high tide it was under water, so Smokey built dikes so he could build his shop. An alligator from the river served as a shop mascot until a drunken regular messed with it and got bitten. From those humble beginnings a multi-million dollar business sprung.

And Smokey's is a pretty remarkable life. A guy who started out with 50 dollar cars and 25 dollar engines out of a wrecking yard to build race cars ended up a valued consultant of American car companies, while still thinking "engineer" was spelled "engine ear." He developed engines later used in production cars and in the early 60s build a turbo-charged 650 horsepower Pontiac 389 engine. Even in the heyday of the muscle car era, not even the top dogs approached that mark. Had GM been able to develop a carb and a bottom end that would allow that engine to have survived, who knows how wild things would have gotten by 1970? (Yunick's take on muscle cars is they were a good way to kill rich men's sons.) That aborted project did lead Yunick to develop the Holley double-pumper carb that's still used on all Winston Cup cars today. A 1967 Chevelle Smokey built was never allowed to race a single lap (Ford and Chrysler didn't



want a garage mechanic showing up their multi-million dollar race teams) but it became so infamous it was sold for \$100,000 to a collector. Of course Detroit didn't always listen to Smokey's advice. Flown to the factory to test drive a batch of late 70s GM cars, Yunick was asked his opinion. Using less polite terms he said none of them were worth a bowel movement. Asked what they should do to fix them Yunick replied "Stop making cars for two years and fix them." He doesn't recall being flown back the next year to try out that batch.

In addition to his NASCAR accomplishments, which included 57 wins, Yunick had a long term love affair with the Indianapolis 500. He liked the simpler rules that said a car had to be at least this long, this wide, and weigh this much, but from there on out you do what you want. Some of his Indy creations were incredibly wild stuff, though not always successful. A Yunick prepared and owned car did win the 1960 Indianapolis 500 with Jim Rathman at the wheel. (Not AJ Foyt's 1961 win at Indy as erroneously reported earlier this year on this site by another writer.)

This book is not for everyone. The faint of heart of going to have a difficult time with the blue language and sexual bragging though if you've ever hung out in the back shop of an automobile establishment it will sound familiar. Most modern day blockbuster movies contain the same words, just not so colorfully strung together. Yunick did not have a politically correct attitude about minorities or women, particularly as race car drivers. Some stories are repeated more than once as apparently Yunick took to editors the way he did NASCAR inspection barn officials. But if you imagine sitting on a porch listening to a fascinating elderly guy still sharp as a switchblade but prone to repeating himself time to time, it's actually rather charming. And the price is not inconsiderable, though when it comes to accurate information on this era of racing and this character you either buy this book or you never find out.

The Best Damn Garage in Town is a great damn book about a great damn man, the likes of which we will never see again in this age of specialization. Smokey Yunick was the ultimate Redneck Renaissance man, the DaVinci of Daytona Beach. Smokey, mechanic, patriot, scoundrel and inventor, passed away May 9th of this year. His death was accompanied by little fanfare, but he left this earth a poorer place without him. You owe it yourself to read this book and find out why. Smokey's tale can only be told in his own words. No one else could do it justice.

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