



Engines of Change: A History of the American Dream in Fifteen Cars

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From Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Paul Ingrassia comes a narrative of America like no other: a cultural history that explores how cars have both propelled and reflected the national experience—from the Model T to the Prius.

From the assembly lines of Henry Ford to the open roads of Route 66, from the lore of Jack Kerouac to the sex appeal of the Hot Rod, America's history is a vehicular history—an idea brought brilliantly to life in this major work by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Paul Ingrassia.

Ingrassia offers a wondrous epic in fifteen automobiles, including the Corvette, the Beetle, and the Chevy Corvair, as well as the personalities and tales behind them: Robert McNamara's unlikely role in Lee Iacocca's Mustang, John Z. DeLorean's Pontiac GTO, Henry Ford's Model T, as well as Honda's Accord, the BMW 3 Series, and the Jeep, among others.

Through these cars and these characters, Ingrassia shows how the car has expressed the particularly American tension between the lure of freedom and the obligations of utility. He also takes us through the rise of American manufacturing, the suburbanization of the country, the birth of the hippie and the yuppie, the emancipation of women, and many more fateful episodes and eras, including the car's unintended consequences: trial lawyers, energy crises, and urban sprawl. Narrative history of the highest caliber, *Engines of Change* is an entirely edifying new way to look at the American story.

Engines of Change: A History of the American Dream in Fifteen Cars Details

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From Reader Review Engines of Change: A History of the American Dream in Fifteen Cars for online ebook

Henry Le Nav says

Ingrassia does for cars what Halberstam did for the Fifties. Well maybe not quite that good, but really a great book that explains the effects of the various cars on the American way of life.

One thing to note about the book, it is not predominately about the car itself. It is more of a look at the history, the people, and the trends that created the car and how the spirit of the car affected American society. So gear heads beware, you are not going to get a chart that shows you the engine displacement and horse power selections available for each year of Corvettes. You will learn the role that Duntov played in the car and why the car appealed to Americans after the Depression and the Second World War. The book should appeal to a wide audience, and not just car enthusiasts.

Also one can argue with his choice of what vehicles to include. The author explains its best:

The hardest part about writing this book wasn't deciding what cars to include. It was deciding what cars to leave out. My selections will disappoint some people, especially fans of iconic automobiles not included.

But this book isn't intended to be about great cars, fast cars, or famous cars, although it contains some of each. Instead it's about the automobiles that have influenced how we live and think as Americans. The cars in this book either changed American society or uniquely captured the spirit of their time. By those criteria most cars, even those regarded as automotive icons, fall short.

Ingrassia, Paul (2012-05-01). Engines of Change (Kindle Locations 5485-5489). Simon & Schuster, Inc.. Kindle Edition.

So if you are a fan of say a 57 Chevy, you are going to be disappointed because a 57 Chevy, while certainly an iconic car, in no way affected American society the way the Corvair did.

The book is informative and fun to read. Ingrassia did a great job researching this book and has a good sense of humor. Excellent book, I thoroughly enjoyed it.

Ben Nourai says

The book "Engines of Change" by Paul Ingrassia walks you through the history of fifteen famous cars. The book starts with introducing Henry Ford who was the founder of the Ford Motor Company. He created a revolutionary vehicle called the Model T that was the most popular automobile of its time because it was well designed to make transportation even better. The Model T was the creation of The Ford Motor Company which started their success. Although the Model T was one of the best selling cars of its time other

companies were creating vehicles to compete with Ford. Later in time newer car designs were being built and the Volkswagen Beetle came to be popular after the Model T. Surprisingly enough Adolf Hitler actually owned a Volkswagen Beetle because he wanted something that was economical and efficient. These two cars started the competition of which company could create a car with both fashion and quality of transportation. Then Ford introduced the Mustang that was designed for racing. The Mustang was a special combination of a casual car that had speed. Overall, Ford has been seen to have incredible inventions in the past and they are still doing a great job with creating new models to this day.

This book was really fascinating to learn about these car companies and their previous creations compared to the cars of today. It was enjoyable to hear about what their first creations were like compared to their newest models because they are so different. This book was interesting because I enjoy cars and like to learn about their history. I had no idea how these cars had such an impact on people's lives. Reading about the Mustang was my favorite part of the book because people were amazed by its performance and speed. All in all, I was thoroughly educated about the automobile history and am excited to keep up on the future of what these companies are going to accomplish next.

Mark Stratton says

An intriguing and at times, humorous look at 15 cars that has cultural and economic impacts in our country. A truly enjoyable read. Highly recommended.

Scott S. says

Not really a tech-y book about cars, but about 100+ years of American history, our culture (and pop culture), business, and sociology. This one's not just for the gear-head crowd, folks! Ingrassia's work educates - with a fair dose of humor and opinion - while it entertains and I'm fond of that in a book, TV show, and/or movie. He deftly is able to connect the dots between Mustangs, Corvettes, and GTOs to Beetles, Prius, and minivans. This one may be going onto my 'favorites' list.

Charles Ameringer says

This is more than a "car book." It is cultural history at its finest; a unique approach and informative on a grand scale. It deftly traces the evolution of the automobile industry and its influence on changes in American entertainment and life styles, and vice-versa. It will bring back memories to readers of all ages. I was not prepared for the pleasure I found in this book.

Charles Moore says

EofC is a really good look at the Detroit Big Three back when they really were the Big Three. Ingrassia covers fifteen of what he sees as the cars that changed America. Included are Mustang, Corvette, the Corvair. It was fun and interesting to read about the luck, the mistakes, the changes over 40 years and since that's the same 40 to 50 years I've been driving I remember a lot of what he talks about.

My favorite by far is the chapter on the Jeep which talks more about the changing tastes of American mainstream than anything else. I never thought of L.L. Bean and the Gremlin and Jeep brand as having something in common.

If, on the other hand, you're not a car nut than this is probably not for you. But, tired of the van, then maybe it's time to look at the car culture. No new models here just good reading for us gearheads.

My first car was a 1955 Bel-Air Chevy my dad bought for me to commute to school. It had a steering wheel that should have been on a riverboat, the gas cap was hidden behind the tail light, and I could probably sleep in the trunk if I had to. My first car I owned was a 1970 Pontiac LeMans. It was the last of the super cool Pontiac. I've only owned the Pontiac, a new VW, a used Tempo and a used '95 Ford Ranger.

I had a pal who married the back of a '65 Vette with the front end of a '64 Vette. One evening, in the summer, we took it out on the US 45 south of Tolono, Illinois, and he lit her up! That baby could punch holes in the atmosphere.

Hadrian says

Steinbeck, in Cannery Row, said that there should be a definitive history of the American car, for it has become a definitive part of the American landscape as food, independence, and sex.

Ingrassia identifies two major trends in American cars - the austerity, practicality, and efficiency which started with the Model T, and the flair and ostentation which started with LaSalle cars in the 1920s and continued through fins in the 1950s, muscle cars, and beyond. Power, allure, and prestige. Many cars today appeal to one or both of these two trends.

Of course, the author starts with the Model T, but his choice of cars afterwards uniquely reflects the American century. LaSalles, jeeps, pickup trucks, the failed experiment of the Corvair, and the rise of foreign automakers, VW, Toyota, and Honda. The big titans of industry rise and fall. Some have fallen, and some have risen up twice or three times. The American cars of the 1960s and 1970s had some real duds, and the author dutifully includes them. Explosions, rust, and factory sabotage, and the industry's darkest hour.

VW and the Japanese car makers became giants in order to fill the American market segment for cars which didn't explode. VW, of course, was once associated with Hitler's Kraft-durch-Freude compulsory relaxation scheme, but reinvented itself as the quirky and self-deprecating alternative to the fins and ostentation of the 1950s, and became a beloved icon.

Of course this is not just about the manufacturers themselves. The cars themselves and their role in American society is reflected through personal testimony, song lyrics, and TV shows from Perry Mason to South Park.

This was a lot of fun, and a good microhistory on a big subject.

Leah says

I selected this book because I know embarrassingly little about cars. I never had much of an interest in them

and would love to sell mine and move back to a city with awesome public transportation. With that considered, I still really liked this book. The story is an interesting look at how key automobiles influenced and were influenced by the broader culture, as well as the high stakes business decisions involved in getting these cars to market.

John says

The main idea of this book, which is that there are some cars that had specific cultural impacts or are particular signposts of trends affecting American history, and for each car we see how and by whom it was developed and introduced, is an interesting idea.

The problem with this book is how this approach is developed. As the book proceed chronologically, it shifts from clear pioneers (the first reliable car affordable to a mass audience, the first car from a tiered system of brands) to vehicles not breaking new categories for society but vehicles that have a certain cultural perception: the BMW for yuppies, the F150s for urban cowboys, the Jeep for rich outdoor chic, the Minivan for soccer moms, and the Prius for Hollywood liberals looking for token demonstrations of supporting causes. As it does so, I'm no longer sure I'm looking at trends of social change that make American history, but am instead reading cultural stereotypes. On the other hand, in some cases, these aren't stereotypes but are well-developed in the history of their ad campaigns (in the case of the VW Beetle), their appearance in music (the Ford Mustang), and their appearance in new publications (such as the emergence of Motor Trend magazine in what is established as the "hot-rod" era). In particular, the changing social needs based on urbanization and education (why do we now have the extra-curricular demands that require soccer practice?) that led to the minivan and the changing environmental background that has led to the hybrid could have been developed as as primary engines of change, rather than starting from their backlashes.

However, in no case does the author fail to delve into the automotive story behind the vehicle. The automotive-industry coverage is really well done.

Overall, the entire book is an insightful listen, composed into car-by-car breakdowns that make it easy to listen to in segments over a set of long car rides. On the other hand, it wasn't like some books that can just be listened to all the way through, and I don't think "culture war" stereotypes is really the way modern American history should be told.

Rey Dekker says

...good read over all...certainly for car-guys and gals but interesting in it's historical presentation and interpretations...the chapter on pick-up trucks was probably the most humourous and the Prius the most educational...didn't know much about the genesis of the alternate fuel auto...and, Dr. Ferdinand Porsche also showed up there...turns out he too had one on the drawing board and even made it into producing a one-off model...man before his time...again...the writer has some chops (won a Pulitzer Prize for writing so that should be a given) and uses some dry, almost biting wit in his delivery...worth a read for sure...

Tim Fugate says

This book (like the title suggests) is the American dream in fifteen cars. Some of the facts about those cars, the history behind their existence, and the history they represent were very surprising. I didn't know that the Corvette almost wasn't made and the war of the great tail fins happened. Nor did I know the story behind the Prius and the Beetle. This book showed me what the American Dream is all about through the lens of a subject I love; cars. It changed my view of how we the people have evolved and adapted to overcome the obstacles placed before us and it proved to me that we make great cars. Each chapter is the story and relevance for another car. There weren't really and debatable subjects except maybe which car is the best. I would recommend this book to people who care about the history of the American Dream and who care about cars. I loved this book because I care about both.

Larry says

For a car lover like myself, this book was an extremely engaging read. Much more than a look at the evolution of the automobile, this microhistory examines how culture steered the development of the car (front-wheel drive?!) and likewise how the car drove the culture (rear-wheel drive?!). You might think such subject matter would be dry, but the author (Paul Ingrassia) brings it alive by telling the personal stories of the men behind the machines and even the consumers themselves. You might not expect it from a car guy, but Ingrassia is actually a very good writer and thorough researcher, plus his sense of humor comes through in every chapter. I'm a tail fin guy myself (and owner of a 1961 Imperial), so I was delighted by the an entire chapter devoted to this memorable era and men like Virgil Exner, the designer of my Imperial, who popularized them. Whatever era of car you prefer, I believe this book will rev up your engine.

Josh says

Overall this was very good book. It tells the story of fifteen cars and the impact they had on American life. Some of the choices were no-brainers such as the Mustang or the Volkswagen Beetle. Both cars are included and the stories, though fairly well known, are detailed and presented in an enjoyable manner.

What I really enjoyed were the not-so-obvious choices. My favorite among these stories were the tales of the Honda Accord and the Chrysler Minivan. I like the subject of cars and frequently read blogs like Jalopnik and watch TV shows and documentaries on car history. These frequently revolve the history of high performance models or rare vehicles. Honda Accords and minivans aren't frequently the subject of articles or shows. They are so ubiquitous, one hardly thinks of them at all. Yet, there is a story behind them. Mr. Ingrassia tells those stories very well.

I do have a couple quibbles that kept this book out of 5 star territory. There were a couple points where the author cracked some awful one-liners that I felt detracted from on going narrative. There were also a couple spots where he oversimplified a complex issue. For instance, one he mentioned that the Tucker Torpedo venture "...collapsed becuase his cars weren't reliable..." Personally, I think that way oversimplifies what happened to Tucker Motors. Anybody who has seen the movie Tucker can tell you that (even if you don't believe the hagiographic portrayal). That wasn't the focus of the chapter, so I let it slide, as I did the other times I felt it occurred.

That said, I felt it was a very enjoyable read.

Jeanne says

If you love cars, and I do, this book examines the zeitgeist and the cars that mirrored the decades. Ford's Model T, the car that Americans bought for decades, begins our automotive age. Our cars have always been a mirror of our times from the gas-guzzling road yachts, to the VW Beetle, to the minivan, the Corvette, DeLorean, BMW and Mercedes Benz, Toyotas, hybrids, electric, and all of the players like Iacoca, DeLorean, Ford and a host of others. What were the influences that brought the Japanese and Germans to the United States to build their cars here? How were the locations for the factories chosen? How are the foreign/American factories different from the Detroit models that nearly killed the U.S. automotive industry? How and why did the times and the times of our lives define our tastes in vehicles? After reading this book, not only will you have a new appreciation for the evolution of cars, but you'll wonder what it is about this age of cars that has a plethora of cars but very little variety in their look, unlike the classics of yesteryear.

Converse says

The Model T Ford, the Corvette, the 1959 Cadillac, the Volkswagen Beetle, the Chevrolet Corvair, The Ford Mustang, Pontiac GTO, Honda Accord, Chrysler minivans, BMW 3 Series, Jeep, the F-150, and the Toyota Prius are the models former Wall Street Journal reporter Paul Ingrassia covers in his book. He deemed the vehicles as significant for a variety of reasons, some technical, one legal (the Corvair), some reflecting the state of the industry (the Accords discussed in the book are those made in Ohio), and a number of them for social reasons. The Model T has to be included as the vehicle that motorized America; its downfall in the 1920s reflected a change in consumer preferences from the cheapest possible transportation to vehicles that were both prettier, more varied, and more comfortable. In terms of variation, the large tail fins of the 1959 Cadillacs were an outlier not yet exceeded. The GTO and Mustang both reflect the youth market of the 1960s. I generally found the book interesting, though my interest in cars has declined as my dislike of monthly payments has increased.
