

# Women at the Wheel

*Women at the Wheel: A Century of Buying, Driving, and Fixing Cars.*

By Katherine J. Parkin. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017.

**I**n Katherine Parkin's new book about women and the automobile the author draws a striking distinction between men and women's attitudes towards driving. Whereas men have traditionally embraced the car as transforming of their lives, women on the other hand have not found that it offered them the same sense of independence. Even though by 2012 there were more licensed

book with stereotypes of women as bad drivers or as backseat drivers, emphasizing women's primary historical association with the car as a passenger or as a service driver in the role of wife or mother. The author contextualizes this history, underlining the role of the car as part and parcel of the country's shift to the suburbs. With the emergence and eventual dominance of the automobile in the United States, women had to go out and get products and services once delivered to the home. And women used the car to drive men to work and children to school and to extracurricular activities.

One of the strongest chapters in the book is The Car and Identity. Parkin maintains that "Americans considered the car to be female, regularly referring to the automobile as 'her' and 'she'." She goes on to assert that the car's female identity "gave rise to the love and even lust that men, in particular, felt for their cars. With both women and cars having bodies, car talk often blurred the lines between the two." She quotes from poems, songs, advertisements, and scholarly reports to identify ways that Americans have "both animated and anthropomorphized automobiles." Parkin provides evidence of how "people embraced their vehicles as humanized machines," giving them female names, identifying with one's

car, describing their beauty and sensuality, as well as their desire to possess them.

Katherine Parkin is a professor of history at Monmouth University, New Jersey. The vast quantity of sources that she assembled into this book demonstrate her love of research, for she traveled down many one-lane roads as well as express highways in her pursuit of "wonderful car materials." The more than thirty historical illustrations offer graphic evidence to the text. She is the author of a previous book on a related topic: *Food is Love: Advertising and Gender Roles in Modern America*.

Unfortunately, I found Parkin's line of argumentation difficult to comprehend, for she relishes the opportunity to give the reader opposing evidence for every observation. The book is filled with contradictions, starting with the cover design. While trying to show how gendered and male-oriented buying, driving, and fixing cars has been in United States society, the book's cover in fact illustrates how Chrysler and De Soto tried to lure women customers to buy a 1955 DeSoto. The company used a photo of a female fashion designer at the wheel to claim that their car was both fashionable and affordable for women on a tight budget.

In the first chapter, entitled Learning to Drive, Parkin states that "patriarchal power often meant that men contributed to dissuading or disallowing women from seeking the

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women drivers than men in the United States, the author argues that "the broader American society and its car culture in particular persisted in being patriarchal into the twenty-first century."

Parkin's book "takes a gendered lens to automobile history." She makes use of evidence to support her contentions by beginning the

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independence the car could have provided." In the following paragraph, however, she describes how for battered women driving a car empowered them vis-a-vis their husbands. On the other hand, the author discounts the feelings of freedom having a license represented for women generally by describing how driving made women fearful. Either they were afraid of the car breaking down, or of highway driving, or questioned their own ability because "men had made them too nervous."

Even in her discussion of safety on the road, whether women or men are safer drivers, the author presents both sides, leaving the reader with an equivocal impression. She quotes early newspaper articles that decry male drivers as "speed fiends" and women as "reckless drivers." Parkin draws from a vast array of publications, some humorous, some psychological, some statistical, to prove that there was no difference between

women or men drivers. Yet she concludes that "one hundred years after the cars' introduction and embrace by women, many still contend that women are not good drivers."

In the twenty-first century, when many women (and men) are turning to more sustainable lifestyles Parkin mentions one of the new stereotypes: "the inviolable connection between women and hybrid/electric cars." But as she is prone to offer two sides to every topic, the author notes that in the early twentieth century when popular culture "asserted a connection between electric cars and women," there were in fact "negligible numbers of electric-powered cars registered to women."

### Author Information

*Madelyn Holmes* is the author of five books: *Working for the Common Good: Canadian Women Politicians*

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(Fernwood Publishing, 2017); *Students and Teachers of the New China* (McFarland & Company, 2007); *American Women Conservationists* (McFarland & Company, 2004); *Lives of Women Public Schoolteachers: Scenes from American Educational History*, co-author Beverly J. Weiss (Garland Publishing, 1995); *Forgotten Migrants: Foreign Workers in Switzerland before World War 1* (Associated University Presses, 1988). Her email address is: madelynholmes@yahoo.com.

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