

Are We There Yet?

Are We There Yet? The American Automobile Past, Present, and Driverless
By Dan Albert. New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2019, 389 pp., \$27.95.

In the pilot episode of *The Sopranos*, Tony, opening up to Dr. Melfi for the first time, accounts for his unhappy mood: “It’s good to be in something from the ground floor. I came too late for that and I know. But lately, I’m getting the feeling that I came in at the end. The best is over.” When I first heard these lines some twenty years ago, I felt a pang of sadness too — not for the decline of the world of organized crime, of course, but for the decline of *my* world, the world of the enthusiastic driver. Even then I could feel it slipping away. Seas of drab bubbles on every new-car lot. State programs designed to drive the remaining cars of character from the road. Casual conversations with peers who said things like “you don’t need a car around here.” For me it was never a question of need. I love to drive, and I always have — the feel of the wheel, the feedback of a proper three-pedal setup, the way a snug seat hugs. I also love the way good cars look, everything from classic American boats to European coupes. And lest I come across as just another old fool longing for his lost youth, I hasten to add that I was barely twenty-two when *The Sopranos* pilot aired. Tony’s words rang true because I

knew, even at twenty-two, that the best was long over. I knew that I had come in at the end.

With all of this in mind, Dan Albert’s new survey of automotive history was an exceptionally difficult read. This has nothing to do with his style, which is smart, funny, and accessible. Nor does it involve his analysis, which is sharp, up-to-date, and informed by all the right scholarly voices from the history of technology. Indeed, had Albert tackled this project from just about any other conceivable angle, I would have breezed through this review. Instead I read the book slowly, with an all-consuming sadness, and when I finished I had to let my notes sit for a while before I started to write. Why? It’s all in his title: *Are We There Yet? The American Automobile Past, Present, and Driverless*.

Driverless. The very word sends shivers down the spine of anyone who genuinely loves to drive. And, as Albert points out, those who “love to drive” is a millions-large and motley crew extending well beyond the diehard-gearhead set. Within Albert’s circle, the “incognito car guys,” as he calls them, include a nurse who swore “she’d never surrender her BMW convertible with its stick shift for a driverless car”; an “eco-conscious, lefty novelist” who found a way to justify foregoing a Prius in favor of a car with at least a bit of soul; and his generation-hand-

held-screen daughter, who doesn’t know a thing about cars but finds going out for an aimless cruise “relaxing.” In my own circle there are a number of old-school gearheads, myself included, but there are also “incognito car guys” like my mother, who always rows through her Golf’s gears with glee; a mild-mannered colleague whom you’d never suspect would own a firecracker of a hot hatchback; and my fiancé, who grins every time she pulls away from a light in her otherwise unassuming CUV. For all of them, what lies ahead is grim. The driverless future that officials at Google and Uber and researchers at countless schools and think tanks hope to build — and about which journalists of every stripe have written with a booster’s zeal — would do away with everything these “car guys” find rewarding about our system of automobility. Instead, as Albert reminds us every few pages, we will live in a world where *automobiles* will quite literally be just that: automatic shuttles operating in perfect harmony and safety.

Or so we’ve been told. For in this book, Albert cuts through all the hype to get a better sense of where we’re *really* going. Using lessons from the history of American automobility, he seeks the roots of the high-tech optimism and the technical-fix mindset that make a driverless future seem so promising to

so many (non-car-guy) people. Through fifteen entertaining and insightful chapters, he covers all the basics one would expect of a survey: Ford and mass production, Sloan and obsolescence, superhighways, foreign competition, safety and environmental regulations, energy crises, computerization, and trucks and SUVs. He also tackles some things one might *not* expect: the CB-radio phenomenon of the 1970s, the lackluster cars of the 1980s and 1990s, the fact that kids these days are not drawn to cars the way their parents were, and the decline of do-it-yourself repair. He delves into the rhetoric of autonomous-vehicle boosters, too, as well as the different ways a driverless future might play out — perhaps our roads and cars will work together as a system, or perhaps each car will navigate our extant infrastructure on its own. Albert also explores the technology of driverless mobility, and here he reveals himself as something of a technological enthusiast, especially when it comes to LIDAR, i.e., light detection and ranging, a descendant of radar. But he is also something of a Jeffersonian. He is willing to admit that driverless technology is intriguing, but is nonetheless ready to ask some difficult questions about its history, and about how, why, and where it may take us.

Three of Albert's broader conclusions warrant note. First, today's driverless push fits a well-established pattern: it is but the latest in a long line of technical fixes we've devised to address the problems inherent in mass car-use without giving up on its core premise, individual mobility. Second, the driverless car could have debuted long ago. GM experimented with road-reading cars in the 1950s, the Fed-

eral Highway Administration did the same in 1960s and 1970s, and the Department of Transportation (and the U.S. military) took up the cause in the 1990s. Third, and most important, in spite of the driverless vehicle's place within the broader history of automobility, a decisive break does lie ahead. Not only will the driverless experience differ fundamentally, but many of today's most fervent boosters *also* foresee an *ownerless* future. If they are right, we won't own our own driverless pods, but will rent them on a fee-per-mile basis. And with this feeble whimper, our car culture will evaporate.

Are We There Yet? has its faults. It is far too quick to dismiss Brock Yates, whose escapades in the 1970s dovetailed with the renegade CB culture in ways this book misses *and* whose contempt for the bloated cars of the 1960s and 1970s was ahead of its time in all the right ways. It also makes too much of the tired argument that driving isn't an exercise in freedom because of the laws and infrastructure which constrain it. One needn't believe in the libertarian fantasy of "pure free will" on the roads to recognize that driving one's own car on one's own schedule is at least a tad more "free" than traveling by bus or rail. It also barely hints at one of the chief reasons why a company like Google might be interested in a driverless future: motorists, once "freed" from having to watch the road, will then be "free" to devote their full attention to their handheld screens.

Still, this book makes a vital contribution. At once insightful, accessible, and funny, it delivers a

much-needed dose of critical analysis to a subject that has far too long belonged to those who stand to profit from it. We needed a thoughtful challenge to the boosters' utopian narratives of mobility without injury, pollution, or waste, and this



This book presents a challenge to the driverless technologist's utopian narrative of individual mobility without injury, pollution, or waste.

is it. Yet even this book does not call that driverless future into question. For Albert it's an inevitability — one deserving of critique, but an inevitability nonetheless.

And that, for me, is what's so sad about what lies ahead. As a friend of mine likes to say, "life's too short to drive a boring car." More and more, though, I truly fear that life will seem *too long* when boring cars with no controls are all there is.

There's that pang of sadness again. Fortunately, in the here and now there's still an easy cure. Where are my keys?

Reviewer Information

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