

Chicago Tribune May, 1997

THE PERFECT VEHICLE: What It Is About Motorcycles

By Melissa Holbrook Pierson

Norton. 240 pp.

Legend has it that Cleopatra applied an asp to her breast after asking around about what was the easiest way to die. In 30 B.C. Egypt was not yet manufacturing motorcycles.

From the first recorded casualty in 1899 to he who expired this morning, riders have found motorcycles an unusually seductive vehicle for flirting with their mortality. Freelance writer and poet Melissa Holbrook Pierson reminds us: "Medical professionals call them donorcycles," a word I first heard decades ago, lying on an x-ray table trying to remember the days when breathing didn't hurt.

Writers from George Bernard Shaw to Stephen King (ever looking for ways to hone his sense of terror?) have ridden them, and writers from T.E. Lawrence (of Arabia) to John Gardner have died on them. But the writer who may have most succinctly captured why was non-riding poet Wallace Stevens: "Death is the mother of beauty." Knowing our time is limited makes us value it.

The motorcyclist, then, is not someone unafraid of death but someone even more afraid of not being fully alive.

That is the feeling Pierson captures so vividly and from so many angles in this paean to the road, part memoir, part history, part manual and part travel narrative.

"One finds among motorcyclists," she notes, "a large number of people who always feel as if there were a fire lit under them when they are sitting still." But among these seven million riders are all kinds of such people, from little old grandmothers to gargantuan leather-vested guys named Snake, from disaffected debutantes like the author to "RUBs" (rich urban bikers) who crunch numbers all week then on Sunday mount their Harleys and pretend they're bad to the bone when they're merely obnoxious to the subcutaneous tissue. All become "both the happy passenger on an amusement park ride and its earnest operator."

The book is engaging when Pierson writes about bikes and charming when she takes personal excursions into herself.

From her patrician upbringing by parents fond of chamber music and cocktail parties, Pierson says she learned little more than how to write prompt thank-you notes. "From motorcycles I learned practically everything else." This leads her to introduce a variety of men with whom she rode and from whom she learned motorcycle repair.

The first ("Let's call him Tad, and me ready") helped her discover one of the contradictions in herself that make her an ideal biker: while "it is possible to feel more alone on a motorcycle than anywhere at rest," Pierson learned she had "the desire to be different, or at least to be seen that way--perhaps to be seen in the first place. And one doesn't ride motorcycles if one wishes to remain invisible."

As they both love Italian motorcycles, Tad chooses an Italian restaurant to end the relationship.

Then came Armen Amirian, "a charter member of what he calls Hell's Vegetarians." Then came Bob, then Franz, who created fantasies of vending machines dispensing little bottles of Wild Turkey and Jack Daniel's before Pierson began to feel he was "a mountain I felt too tired to climb."

Finally, she says, "after years of semi-disastrous dating... I decided the romance racket was not for me." In case by that point we'd forgotten she's full of contradictions, within a dozen lines after swearing off romance Pierson meets and marries her husband.

But if it's from men she learns motorcycle maintenance, it's from the bikes themselves she learns zen, in the form of the pure yet variegated pleasure of feeling "joyous, powerful, peaceful, frightened, vulnerable, and back out to happy again, perhaps in the same ten miles. It is life compressed, its own answer to the question "Why?"

That answer whispers background harmony while Pierson tells us about other things. There are motorcycle events, such as the Laconia races (around since 1917), Sturgis, Daytona's Bike Week and the TT on the Isle of Man. There are the famous riders, like Evel Knievel and Steve McQueen--who loved riding so much that he not only did his own riding in *The Great Escape* but also stood in for the Nazi cyclists--and the riders who were famous, like Charles Lindbergh, Roy Rogers, Elvis Presley, Malcolm Forbes and Haile Selassie.

She describes the bikes themselves. There are vintage Triumphs and Nortons, whose riders "rarely go far... but they'll nod appreciatively ... when another cool bike goes by." There's Honda, first of the affordable quality Japanese bikes that revolutionized the industry a generation ago. There's Moto Guzzi, Pierson's own bike, so pleasurable that one man quit smoking after first riding one just so he could ride it longer. And of course, there's the mystique of America's cycle, the Harley, whose first bike, made 90 years ago, was ridden over 100,000 miles, and whose owners feel so interconnected that my son once said, "When you buy a Harley you're not just getting a bike, you're getting a family."

In describing the delight of cross-country touring with friends, Pierson shows why touring is the opposite of boring. It has been said that a bore is someone who deprives you of solitude without providing you with company. Touring provides both solitude and company.

Ultimately, of course, any book aspiring to tell you why *you'd* love motorcycling must fail, even one this well researched and deftly written. The reasons are too numerous, diverse and idiosyncratic. But as Pierson tells us why *she* loves riding, many who share her passion will feel themselves often nodding, saying, "Yeah, she caught it."