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SHE'S A BAD MOTORCYCLE: Writers on Riding

By Gino Zanetti, ed.

Thunder's Mouth Press. 336 pp.

Like Woody Allen at the end of *Manhattan*, most of us could list those things that uniquely for us make life worth living. If your list contains motorcycles, Gino Zanetti offers a must-read. If not, move now to the next review.

Despite regrettable omissions, such as Brock Yates's *The Outlaw Machine*, many of the best books ever written on motorcycles are excerpted here. There are passages from the famous: T.E. Laurence (of Arabia), Che Guevara, Eric Burdon and Peter Coyote. There are selections from acclaimed writers: Chester Himes, Hunter S. Thompson, Tom Wolfe, Diane Wakowski and Thomas, plus a slice from the most famous of all motorcycle books, Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.

Nine pieces are outright wonderful. Four of these deal with the Hell's Angels, first of the mystique-tinged outlaw clubs that flourished after W.W. II as havens for returned warriors without a war. Thompson offers a superb eyewitness account of the Angels' 1965 run to Bass Lake, followed immediately by another account of that run by gang member Frank Reynolds, encantatory and energetic, viewing the weekend through the filter of Angels morality and a haze of alcohol, pot and LSD.

The LSD, writes Wolfe, they'd just adopted from their strange new friendship with Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters. In sparkling prose, Wolfe describes how the taste for violence of the one and flower child inclinations of the other were easily bridged by mutual disregard for convention and a will to push fun to its limits.

The fun stopped at the infamous Rolling Stones Altamont concert, and actor Coyote provides a sympathetic account of the fatal stabbing involving the Angels that occurred there, far clearer than the view seen in the 1970 rock documentary *Gimme Shelter*.

Ralph "Sonny" Barger, best known of all Hell's Angels, writes an engrossing description of how he loves motorcycles right down to their last cotter pin, perpetually tearing them down and building them up the way restless housewives scramble furniture. Charismatic in a Luciano way for his organizational genius, Barger is alternately informative and droll, whether suggesting the superiority of Japanese bikes to Harleys or why it is a very poor idea to steal the beloved ride of a Hell's Angels president.

Also outstanding are a story by champion racer Horace McCoy about his fierce rivalry with an ill-fated rider who needed to hear the crowd's loudest cheers or die, an affable tale by Gary Paulsen of buying a Harley at 56 and bringing to fruition a dream that started as a kid with a baseball card in his bicycle spokes, Erika Lopez's zesty

women's rider viewpoint told in a voice as jaded as her earrings, and Pirsig's brilliantly cerebral differentiation of classical and romantic modes of thought as they apply to motorcycles and everything else.

Some pieces are dreadful, like a doggerel inanity by the regrettably lionized Dennis Hopper. *Easy Rider* having achieved cult status, we forget that while Peter Fonda embodied hippie freedom, Hopper personified hippie kvetch.

This is no book for those whose tone contains genuine deprecation when saying, "Boys will be boys," but it's more than worth its price for readers whose idea of "man" has a whiff of motor oil in it, and those who like writing that often, like a great motorcycle tour itself, takes wing.