Women at the Wheel

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

In 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 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 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
independence the car could have provided.” In the following para-
graph, 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 free-
dom 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 dri-
vig, or questioned their own abil-
ity 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
mentions one of the new stereo-
types: “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 cen-
tury when popular culture “asserted
a connection between electric cars
and women,” there were in fact “neg-
ligible 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
(Fernwood Publishing, 2017); Stu-
dents 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 Swit-
zerland before World War I (Asso-
ciated University Presses, 1988). Her
email address is: madelynholmes@
yahoo.com.

Americans considered the
car to be female, regularly
referring to the automobile
as “her” and “she.”