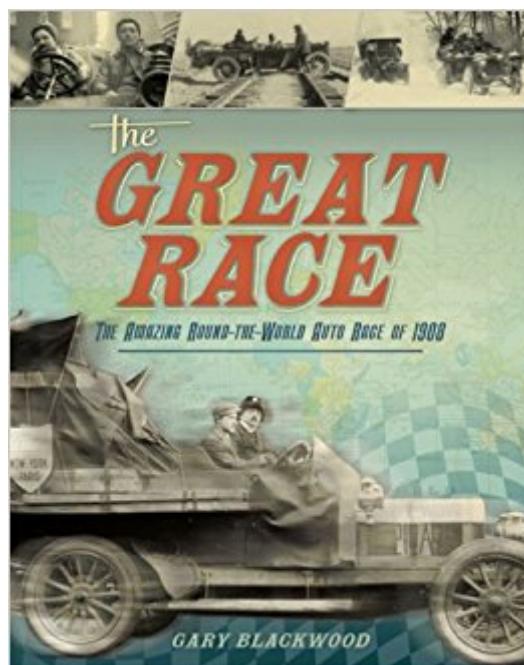


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The Great Race: The Amazing Round-the-World Auto Race Of 1908



Synopsis

Long before the Amazing Race television show there was the Great Race—a thrilling true story that will grab readers from the start to the finish line. In February of 1908, six cars from four countries gathered in Times Square for the pistol shot that began the first around-the-world automobile race. Gas-powered cars hadn't been round very long, and roads were nonexistent as this group of hardy pioneers set out to drive from New York to Paris, hoping to cross the ice of the Bering Strait along the way. The Europeans were sure their cars were superior, but it would be the scrappy Americans in their Thomas Flyer, after braving twenty-foot snowdrifts, bandits, and many near drownings, who would win the race. In a book published to coincide with the 100th anniversary of the race, Gary Blackwood, author of well-known historical-fiction novels, crafts a thrilling narrative of great courage and splendid folly, illustrated with original, never-before-published photographs throughout.

Book Information

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Age Range: 8 - 12 years

Grade Level: 3 - 7

Customer Reviews

As a children's librarian, I feel an odd sense of pride and accomplishment when I discover a work of non-fiction that covers a topic that few adults are familiar with. I can't explain it. Maybe it's my knee-jerk reaction to the world's assumption that children's books are a pale copy of their adult

equivalents. It doesn't happen often, but once in a while an author of books for young people will bend over backwards to research, develop, and hone a story that has somehow failed to remain fixed in the public memory, no matter how fascinating the story. When Gary Blackwood set out to tell the story of the 1908 race to drive around the world, he didn't do it in a vacuum. That said, what he did have to do is pore through old newspapers, documentaries, microfilm collections, and come up with a true to life tale of international in-fighting and unexpected comradarie. In 1908 cars as we know them today were still in their infancy. They were the playthings of the rich and idle, meant entirely for races on circular racetracks. So when a proposal was raised to create a race from New York to Paris by way of Asia, the notion seemed impossible. And yet at the same time it seemed logical to test the automobile in such a race. It had been tested before but as a 1907 article in *Le Matin* said, "The supreme use of the automobile is that it makes long journeys possible . . . But all we have done is make it go round in circles." So it was that 6-7 teams (depending on which ones you count) started out. The cars came from America, Italy, France and Germany. By the end only one team would win, but every person involved would find that such a race would test every fiber of their being until the very last moment. The book includes websites, a Bibliography, an Index, and several maps of the exciting trek across the continents. There's much to love in a story where men fight one another to be the best of the best in seemingly impossible situations. What's more, the author of this book knows how to tap into situations and moments during the race that kids today can relate to. One example is the moment when charming rogue Captain Hansen at a tense moment bursts into a maddeningly repetitive Boy Scout song that goes, "We're here because we're here because we're here because we're here," set to the tune of "Auld Lang Syne". The fact that he wasn't killed then and there is amazing in and of itself. Blackwood also finds certain lines from the time period to be irresistible. "It must be borne in mind that the motor car, after woman, is the most fragile and capricious thing on earth," or so said a reporter for the London "Daily Mail". As part of his job Blackwood has to find the honestly interesting moments while cutting out the fabricated or exaggerated bits of blather. At one point the "Times" recounts a moment when the Italian car encounters a pack of snarling wolves. Not a jot of it is true, but it makes for a compelling read just the same. One of the more remarkable aspects of the tale is how often each team had to help another out of a tight spot. More than once a car like the Thomas Flyer would break down and have to be towed into the nearest town by someone like the Italian Zust. And if one team seemed to be ahead by even a day, the next minute they'd be broken down on the side of the road watching their fellows whiz past. I found the abundant maps and graphs of particular use, especially when I was trying to determine who was who. The list of Official Entries, for example, even goes so far as to list

the Weight, Cylinders, Horsepower, and Drive of the entrants, to say nothing of their Names and Countries. Some complaints I've heard lodged against the book is that it doesn't plumb the story's innate excitement as effectively as it might. And honestly, I can see where these people are coming from. Blackwood is so intent on keeping the race coherent, the contestants memorable, and the timeline linear that he sometimes includes almost too much information. For all that this is a thin 144 page text, it still could have stood some slower and more thoughtful moments from time to time. The introduction of all the characters, for example, is done in a single section. All the drivers are introduced at once, the important ones alongside the unimportant ones, rather than when their cars or countries are announced. An average reader who goes through this cast of characters could be forgiven for forgetting who one man or another was. Better to have introduced them in the context of their car and country. Particularly when most of them drop out almost instantaneously, or in the early days of the race. And I liked the list of The Captains and Their Crews, but we didn't necessarily need all that information in a quick and dirty chapter. I liked the tale but sometimes I yearned for a narrative voice that played around with the words a little more. Blackwood's book does its job well in retelling the facts of the matter, but there's a possibility that some kids will yearn for more. Not to say that the book isn't exciting. One minute the cars are driving on railroad tracks (which are far preferable to the roads before them). The next minute they're almost getting crushed by oncoming trains after driving hell-for-leather for the end of the tunnel. And then the next the drivers are melting down iron spoons to create homemade bearings until they can replace them with new ones. Admittedly, the readership for this book may be limited to those kids and teens for whom automobiles hold a deep and abiding fascination. I enjoyed it and I'm not much of a car buff, so I can only imagine that statements about how some of the mechanical monsters in the contest had, "eight times the fuel capacity of a modern SUV," might send certain readers into fits of apoplectic joy. I think that the book certainly would have benefited from an explanation on Mr. Blackwood's part explaining how he discovered this race and what it was about this story that made him think it was a worthy subject to cover in a work for children and teens. Still, there's no denying that it sucks you in, even if you've little to no interest in motor vehicles or nationwide races. The poet and Italian rider Antonio Scarfoglio summarized his own view of the race eloquently. "We had set out to perpetrate an act of splendid folly, not to open up a new way for men. We wished to be madmen, not pioneers." I thought I was very clever to find this quote, until I saw that it is replicated on the back of the book itself. But there's a reason that Scarfoglio's words echo the story's sentiments perfectly. What could be better than a story about a group of functioning adults that are, by all definitions, completely and utterly insane? Blackwood maybe should have ratcheted up the story's narrative

pull, but as far as I'm concerned this tale will suck in adult and middle grade readers alike. Daredevils, it seems, come in all shapes and varying states of mental competence. The same could be said for their stories.

In 1908, auto makers were still trying to prove that automobiles were reliable and could be used as more than a novelty. A race around the world, they hoped, would at least demonstrate that autos could travel great distances-and also, it would be good publicity. But this race had an interesting and difficult set of circumstances, namely when there are few cars, there are few roads to drive on and few people who know how to drive or repair them. These concepts work together to create an intriguing tale. While this book is written for the 9-to-13-year-old crowd, it has more than enough detail to entertain most adults. The language is very appropriate for the middle reader, and when it isn't, the author puts in a parenthetical description that, frankly, this adult needed a time or two. I would like to make it clear that this isn't a "light" read. The cast of characters is huge and some of the team members switch teams (and therefore countries represented) mid-race. I had a hard time keeping track of who drove what, when. Also, the automobiles who raced are not cars we hear of now so it is basically all a "foreign" language to those who aren't early 20th century car buffs. However, after reading this book, I am far more curious about autos of that time period. The accompanying photographs are wonderful and great fun, and I also really enjoyed the many anecdotes that gave the race life. All in all I'd say that this is a really neat book for children who are interested in the time period or in the history of the auto-and their parents will enjoy it also. Armchair Interviews says: An unique way to tell children about the first autos.

The book gave a factual account of the New York to Paris Auto Race of 1908. I felt the author was a bit wordy using run-on sentences. He also started giving away the physical winner of the race before the conclusion of the race. I saw the movie with Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis so I was expecting a closer finish. I liked how the author closed all the loose ends by telling us what happened to the drivers, the cars, and the sponsors of the race.

Excellent bought as a gift and not at all disappointed when it arrived.

a most interesting book of very early automobiling

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