Book Review: No Speed Limit – Sixty Years of Road Testing Classic Cars

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Author: Kim Henson

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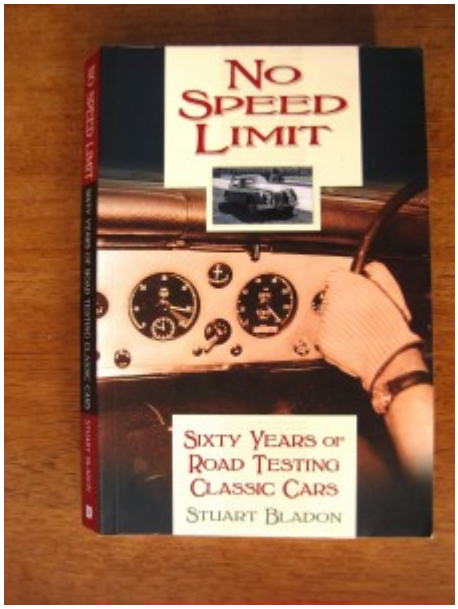
A ‘Must read’ title for all motoring enthusiasts, reviewed by Kim Henson



Author: Stuart Bladon

Published by: The History Press (www.thehistorypress.co.uk)

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I was very much looking forward to reading this book, not least because Stuart Bladon is one of the most accomplished, knowledgeable and highly respected motoring writers – ever. For more than six decades his passion for, and enjoyment of, cars and motoring, his in-depth knowledge of the vehicles he has driven, and his meticulous attention to detail in every aspect of his writing has ensured that his work has been read with keen interest by so many people since the 1950s. Of course, Stuart continues to write about cars today.

In his assessments of every conceivable type of motor car, over so many years, Stuart has gained a justifiable reputation for fairly assessing the relative merits of different models. He is also very well known for getting the best out of any particular vehicle, not just in terms of outright dynamic performance, but also, and especially, in fuel consumption. His wealth of fascinating long-distance drives and record-breaking economy achievements at home and abroad, stand as testimony to Stuart's dedicated approach (and are listed within a separate section within the book).

This new book is impeccably written in an entertaining and personal way, and its easy-to-read text, divided into short chapters (each of which concentrates on a particular model) gives the reader a real flavour of what it was like to actually drive the cars in question.

Stuart's automotive story starts in the late 1930s, and the first chapter in the book includes a poignant description of the temporary evacuation of his family from Coventry during the terrible bombing to which it was subjected early in 1941. Within this section Stuart describes how, as they left their home, he looked out of the back window of his father's Vauxhall 14, to see the huge flames as the city burned. Powerful writing indeed.

As the book progresses Stuart describes his early career and the various cars that he drove, including many vehicular adventures he experienced along the way.

He recounts how he started work on ‘The Autocar’ magazine in the summer of 1955, and through the following pages he writes about the many vehicles that came his way for assessment and road testing. He includes interesting information on the painstaking and time-consuming techniques used to obtain the various performance figures. During his time on the magazine, it was one of the most highly respected publications in terms of consistently achieving accurate and realistic figures, that could be implicitly relied on by the title’s enthusiastic readers.

He doesn’t hold back on the various hair-raising episodes that occurred; I shan’t spoil Stuart’s story by telling you exactly what happened, but suffice to say that some of the ‘prangs’ that occurred were serious indeed.

Thankfully Stuart survived, and in 1981 he left ‘Autocar’ (by then the definite article in the title had been dropped) to begin a new chapter in his own life story, becoming a freelance motoring writer. Since then, for the past 35 years, he has written on automotive matters for a wide variety of publications, and many of the interesting moments, and the highs and lows of his work, are included in the book. His various epic ‘economy missions’ (many of which were ingeniously devised by Stuart himself) to and from destinations far and wide, are included too, and again make fascinating reading.

VERDICT

Quite simply, a superb motoring book, and one of the most enjoyable reads I’ve experienced in a long time. If you are interested in cars and driving you will love reading it too, I am sure.

All sorts of vehicle have been included, from humble family saloons to expensive and luxurious models, to some of the fastest/most exotic sports cars ever produced. Stuart also writes about many of the interesting characters he has encountered during his career so far, from magazine colleagues to motor manufacturers’ press office personnel to ‘difficult’ bureaucrats, among many others!

Throughout this volume, I was highly impressed by Stuart's ability to recall the smallest (but important) details of each model, performance and economy figures, technical aspects – and so on – relating to a huge variety of vehicles. No doubt this was helped by notes made at the time of driving each model, and the published reports that followed – all underlining the careful attention to detail for which he is known.

Stuart's entertaining anecdotes, from a highly experienced motoring writer who has been living and breathing motor cars for well over 60 years, are well worth reading.

Stuart, thanks for writing this book; a job done so very well, and I take my hat off to you!