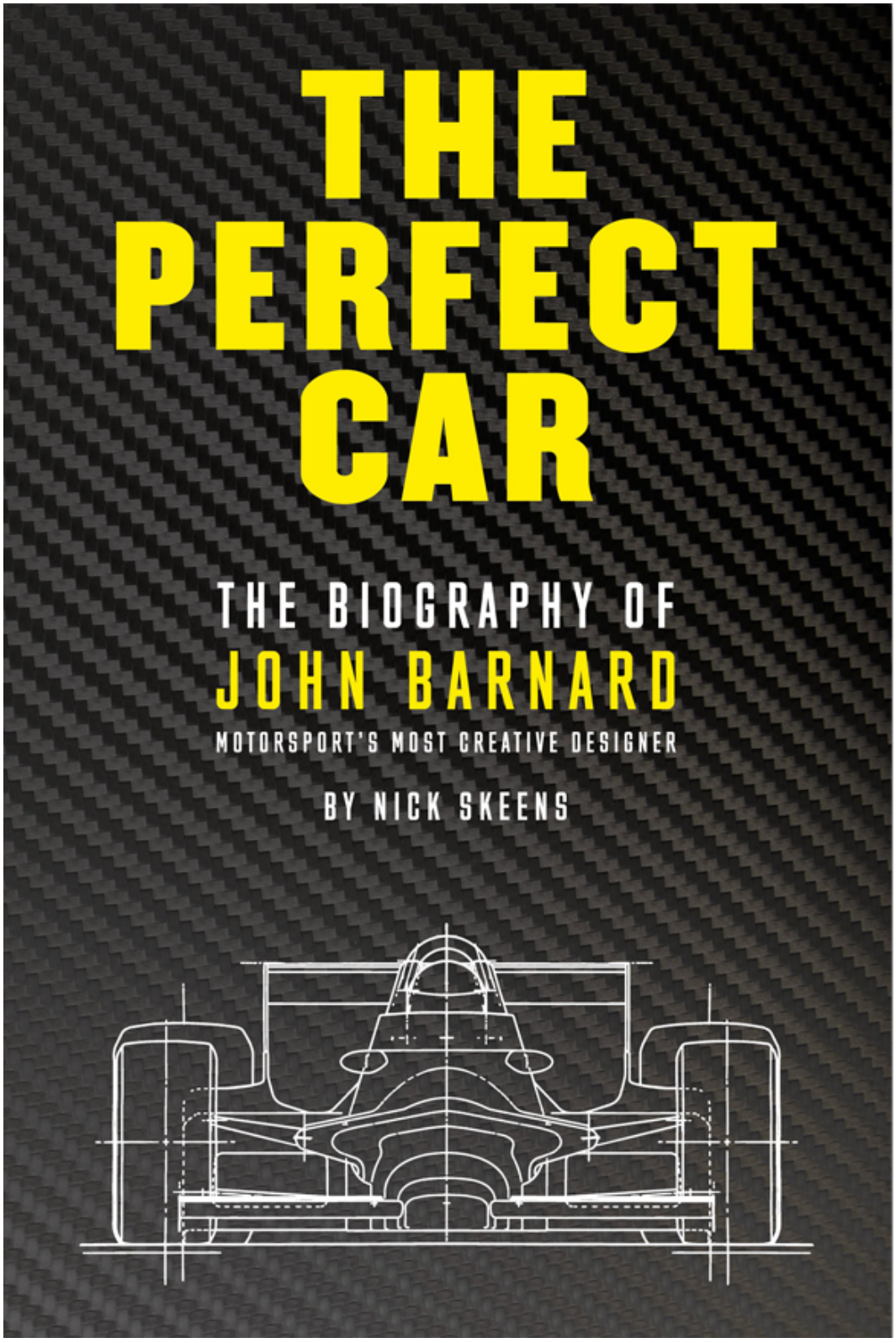
Book Review – The Perfect Car

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THE PERFECT CAR
THE BIOGRAPHY OF
JOHN BARNARD
MOTORSPORT'S MOST CREATIVE DESIGNER
BY NICK SKEENS

The Perfect

Car…

Reviewed by Kieron Fennelly.

Title: The Perfect Car (The Biography of John Barnard)

Author: Nick Skeens

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John Barnard's remarkable design career encompassed two periods at McLaren, plus two stints at Ferrari as well as working for the Americans Parnelli Jones and Jim Hall and turning Benetton into the team which gave Schumacher his first world championship. An extraordinarily impressive CV by any standards, but what makes the book is the character of its subject.

John Barnard is a perfectionist: Today he readily admits that he could have enjoyed more championship success (and earned more money) if he had stuck to a winning combination. But he didn't: "Tweaking" as he puts it bored him. He needed the oxygen of an entirely new challenge. He could have stayed at McLaren, he could even have remained at Ferrari, which as he puts it, has been the only consistent game in the F1 town over seventy years.

Barnard's inventiveness knew no limits. His consistent refusal to accept the engineering status quo meant he redesigned Parnelli Jones's gearbox to run at 90º to the crankshaft so that the car's aerodynamics would not be compromised. No one had attempted a transverse competition gearbox before.

At Ferrari, he was frustrated by the cockpit space required for the gearshift, which increased width and interfered with all-important aerodynamics, so his dispensed with the manual shift, narrowing the car and devised the now ubiquitous steering wheel buttons. If eventually he succeeded in overcoming the objections of a 'not invented here' Ferrari engineering establishment, it took huge and ultimately exhausting determination. Yet after resigning once, Maranello asked Barnard back, but not before Ron Dennis had offered him a deal to return to McLaren, an approach not made public at the time. Concerned that his independence would be restricted under Martin Whitmarsh, Barnard turned down the chance to work again for the firm where his pioneering use of carbon fibre elevated McLaren to the pinnacle of motor racing and made him personally famous.

Author Nick Skeens readily admits he knew nothing about motor sport before meeting John Barnard and he acknowledges the contribution of Formula 1 specialists like Mark Hughes who proofread his texts. The result is a book which has the feel of the insider yet without the insider's sometimes obtrusive tendency to add his own view of events. On a technical level too, Skeens hits a happy medium between sufficient detail to please the informed yet keeping the work accessible to the 'lay' reader. This approach helps to make the descriptions of how Barnard discovered carbon fibre in particular, compelling reading.

Another strand in the book is Barnard's difficult relationship with Ron Dennis, the former racing mechanic who took over McLaren in the late 1970s, two brilliant men with sometimes divergent views. This eventually drove the single-minded Barnard to Ferrari, where the primitiveness of some of its engineering practices were a surprise and where, and rather less surprisingly, he fell victim to Modena's infamous politics as had so many before him. Impressively, Barnard now accepts his dogmatic approach did not always serve him whether it was falling out with Dennis, or rejecting the latter's olive branch, where he "flounced out, possibly his greatest mistake," or insisting on working for Ferrari from his Woking base.

Skeen has clearly researched widely and if the clunking phrase "in an interview for this book" recurs with monotonous frequency, this styling lapse is forgivable when the

contributions themselves add so much to the understanding of John Barnard. Indeed, the story builds to a remarkable climax where the author realises that the work cannot be complete without the views of Ron Dennis and he engineers a meeting between him and Barnard. Skeens's trepidation, indeed excitement as he accompanies Barnard's visit to Dennis's home is palpable and the subsequent dialogue is utterly absorbing, providing a very satisfying dénouement to a work which at times reads like a novel. Barnard has bravely opened himself to a warts and all interpretation of his life. The result is an intelligent and fascinating work in which the subject grows on our estimation.

VERDICT

An exceptional and thorough biography for which Nick Skeens deserves congratulation.