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## Review: Rough road, smooth read

Sunday, January 31, 2010

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It's hard to imagine anyone better than Paul Ingrassia to "ride shotgun" on a journey through the sometimes triumphant, often turbulent, history of U.S. automaking -- or a more clear-eyed and evenhanded account of Detroit's recent downfall than his "Crash Course: The American Automobile Industry's Road from Glory to Disaster" (Random House).

Why? Because, as the book's note about him puts it, Ingrassia "is one of the few authors who has been trained as a journalist and has direct experience in running a business." Thus, both management and labor take well-deserved lumps for the consequences of building an industry on what he calls "a corporate oligopoly and a union monopoly -- a combination that had produced decades of astounding success but also sowed the seeds of failure."

Ingrassia shared a 1993 Pulitzer Prize for coverage of General Motors, wrote about the auto industry for The Wall Street Journal for 25 years and retired as vice president of news strategy for Dow Jones Newswires. He makes good use of his knowledge and experience in "Crash Course," conveying tons of pertinent facts along with illuminating analysis, plus occasional opinions and flashes of dry wit, making for an accessible, entertaining read.

Enhanced by a four-page timeline, 16 pages of black-and-white photos, notes on sources and a handy index, "Crash Course" consists of 13 chapters plus an afterword. Ingrassia begins with "the bleak winter" of 2008-09 in Detroit, then goes back to the start of the 20th century to trace the industry from its beginnings.

Continuing through the rise of GM to become the world's pre-eminent marketing-savvy corporation and the Big Three's clashes with -- and coddling of -- the United Auto Workers, Ingrassia efficiently covers the postwar car culture of the 1950s, the glory days of 1960s "muscle cars," the energy-crisis and import-car challenges of the 1970s, the advent of Japanese "transplants" on American soil in the 1980s and the U.S. SUV/pickup boom of the 1990s.

He gives appropriate attention to such titans as Henry Ford, Alfred P. Sloan, Walter Reuther, John DeLorean and Lee Iacocca. But he also wisely personalizes the impacts of postwar events by following the fortunes of father-and-son autoworkers in Illinois and a car dealer in Maine.

The nearer his tale gets to the present day, the more its pace slows, but the more its level of detail increases. That whets the reader's appetite for the inside scoop Ingrassia delivers on unprecedented federal interventions to keep GM and Chrysler in business and why Ford has been able to survive without a bailout.

Ingrassia highlights myriad ill-advised decisions and mind-bogglingly shortsighted self-interest on the part of both the automakers and the UAW. He makes clear that he understands why the bailouts of GM and Chrysler -- which could have, but didn't, take the sort of steps that let Ford avoid bankruptcy -- didn't set well with many who saw those actions as anathema to free-market principles.

But Ingrassia ultimately, if somewhat grudgingly, pronounces Washington's interventions necessary (the ellipsis is the author's): "As events had actually unfolded, however, the alternative to saving Chrysler and especially GM was ... what? Maybe their outright collapse wouldn't have deepened America's worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. But it would have been foolhardy to find out."

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The afterword deals briefly with events as late as last September, and Ingrassia ends the book on an upbeat note: "Amid all this upheaval, however, one thing is certain: Americans will still love their cars -- be they Hondas or hybrids, GMs or Jeeps -- as they have for more than a century.

"That much will not change."

For anyone who considers a car more than mere transportation, values business and political lessons taught by painful experience or wants a blow-by-blow, behind-the-scenes account of how and why Detroit careened off the road and Washington pulled it out of the ditch, "Crash Course" has the feel of a definitive account -- one that perhaps only Ingrassia could write.

#### TEST DRIVES

One of the delights of Paul Ingrassia's "Crash Course" is its wealth of amusing, astonishing and enlightening nuggets. Here's a sampling.

- Ingrassia puts Henry Ford's birth in a context that makes just how long ago it happened seem like a revelation: "Henry Ford was born less than a month after the Battle of Gettysburg, on July 30, 1863 ... ."
- After offering an equation stating that the combination of mass production and mass marketing by Henry Ford and GM's Alfred P. Sloan, "the two giants of the American auto industry's formative years," resulted in mass consumption and modern America, Ingrassia quips: "That's at least as true as, say,  $E = mc^2$ , and it's probably better for the economy."
- History repeating itself: "An overextended and failing company. A financial rescue from people who insisted, in return, that the CEO resign. Was this GM in 1920 or GM in 2009? It was both, actually ... ."
- In March 1948, early in his tenure as Ford's president, Henry Ford II turned down something he was offered for free -- the partially destroyed Volkswagen factory in the British sector of occupied postwar Germany. A Ford VP told him: "Mr. Ford, I don't think that what we are being offered here is worth a damn."
- VW started shipping Beetles to America in 1949 not to defeat Detroit but to gain U.S. dollars to buy American machine tools. And many of VW's early U.S. customers were as all-American as could be -- "returning GIs who had seen, and often driven, the cars in Europe and liked them."
- Honda's first U.S. plant -- a small motorcycle factory in Ohio, announced in 1977 -- was seen at the time as "a small consolation prize for the state's failure to land the big fish, the new Volkswagen auto-assembly plant in New Stanton, Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh."
- Early infighting after the merger of Chrysler and Daimler-Benz was not about substantive issues, but about business cards' size (Europeans' were bigger) and throwaway items. "The Germans were scandalized that Americans would desecrate their corporate logo by putting it on paper napkins and plastic cups -- items that people would dirty with their mouths and then toss in the trash."
- Bureaucracy run amok: "General Motors had a Bulletin Board Study Committee (no kidding), which in 1988 recommended that new bulletin boards be installed at company headquarters for the GM Women's Club and the GM Men's Club. The committee could have been the punch line in a corporate comedy skit. As for separate women's and men's clubs, they were relics from the days of tail fins -- and evidence of a corporate culture frozen in time."

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#### NEW PAGES TO TURN

##### **Gridlock: Why We're Stuck in Traffic and What to Do About It**

by Randal O'Toole

(Cato Institute)

Here's a book for anyone whose temper frays as his commute drags on. Randal O'Toole, a Cato Institute senior fellow with expertise in transportation, urban growth and public land issues, notes that traffic congestion today is five times worse than it was 25 years ago -- and contends many transportation plans and projects just make it worse. He points the finger at a government philosophy bent on crimping personal mobility -- a foundation of American freedom and prosperity -- by reducing use of automobiles, plus perverse federal budget incentives that actually encourage increasing congestion. What's more, he says, little-used, costly high-speed trains and urban transit won't even meet energy-saving or environmental goals. His free-market solution: users paying for transportation facilities, cost-effective ways to deal with negative effects, and new, low-cost, mobility-enhancing technologies.

##### **The War on Success: How the Obama Agenda Is Shattering the American Dream**



by Tommy Newberry

(Regnery)

Reflecting growing public sentiment, "The War on Success" gives voice to misgivings about the Obama administration's policies and pronouncements -- and offers suggestions for achieving success and fostering it in families and communities. Tommy Newberry, a best-selling author and "success coach," says the Democrats in control are undermining the very notion of success through hard work and merit -- as well as the concept of taking responsibility for one's own triumphs and failures -- via heavier tax burdens, additional regulations and expanding bureaucracy. "The War on Success" is sure to resonate with those who are, as the publisher puts it, "fed up with working hard, playing by the rules, making sacrifices for your family -- and then watching Washington give handouts and bailouts to their buddies who took short cuts to profits and power."

#### **The Citizen's Constitution: An Annotated Guide**

by Seth Lipsky

(Basic Books)

#### **The Annotated U.S. Constitution and Declaration of Independence**

edited by Jack N. Rakove

(Belknap Press/Harvard University Press)

These books were released last fall, but with more decisions to come on the heels of the U.S. Supreme Court's redefinition of campaign-finance law in the context of the First Amendment, they're timely reminders that Americans too rarely read, much less consider, their nation's most important documents as closely as they should. Seth Lipsky's approach is more colorful, Jack N. Rakove's more scholarly, but both books are important additions to a vital and ongoing American debate. Whatever one thinks the Constitution and Declaration of Independence mean, there's value in revisiting those texts, reviewing how they've been construed throughout U.S. history and reconsidering arguments for and against differing interpretations. These two books invite Americans to do just that -- and to renew their appreciation for the genius of those who drafted the blueprints for U.S. freedom and republican government.

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#### **SHELF LIFE: THE HEART OF SO MANY MATTERS**

Thanks to Valentine's Day, love always is in the air in February -- but that doesn't mean everything's sweet.

Love, sex, romance and marriage are wonderful, but often also controversial, scandalous and susceptible to exploitation that has nothing to do with eternal wedded bliss. And what's acceptable -- or not -- hardly has remained constant.

Whatever conventions apply, they dictate advantages and disadvantages for men and women in politics, business and other endeavors, making rising above those challenges a way to stand out -- and playing off them a perennial commercial ploy.

The following titles, selected especially for A Page of Books readers by manager Karen Rossi and her staff at Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh's Downtown & Business branch, illuminate these issues, from men and women in remarkable marriages, scandals and business ventures to the use of the suggestive and the titillating in pursuit of profit.

#### **Abigail & John: Portrait of a Marriage**

by Edith B. Gelles

(William Morrow, 2009)

#### **American Eve: Evelyn Nesbit, Stanford White, The Birth of the "It" Girl, and the Crime of the Century**

by Paula Uruburu

(Riverhead Books, 2008)

#### **The Last Empress: Madame Chiang Kai-Shek and the Birth of Modern China**

by Hannah Pakula

(Simon & Schuster, 2009)

#### **The Widow Clicquot: The Story of a Champagne Empire and the Woman Who Ruled It**

by Tilar J. Mazzeo

(Collins, 2008)

**Buyology: Truth and Lies About Why We Buy**

by Martin Lindstrom

(Doubleday, 2008)

**The Erotic History of Advertising**

by Tom Reichert

(Prometheus Books, 2003)

**Hot Button Marketing: Push the Emotional Buttons that Get People to Buy**

by Barry Feig

(Adams Business, 2006)

**Karma Queens, Geek Gods, & Innerpreneurs: Meet the 9 Consumer Types Shaping Today's Marketplace**

by Ron Rentel with Joe Zellnik

(McGraw Hill, 2007)

*A Page of Books, written and compiled by Alan Wallace, appears on the last Sunday of each month.*

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