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Side Glances by Peter Egan

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Book Report 1:

I chose to read a collection of forty-eight articles written by an established automotive journalist named Peter Egan. This choice was guided mostly by customer reviews posted on Amazon.com. It is an understatement to say I did not know much about the author Egan. I had literally never heard his name, much less read a word he has written. Now though, after reading *Side Glances Volume 4* which contains each of the columns he authored for *Road and Track* magazine between 2002 and 2006 and some of the feature work he did for the magazine, it is safe to say that the man has become a source of inspiration and an example of my career intentions personified.

I do not think envy is too strong a word to describe my feelings toward the lifestyle of Peter Egan. He lives to work on old vehicles, to travel and to write. The more I read his work, the more I realized we share a good deal of common interests. He is an avid car enthusiast, probably to a fault. He, as I am, is a sailor and a motorcyclist (BIKEEXIF n.d.). He is a combat veteran who served in Vietnam (Egan, 2006, p), a pilot, a musician (Egan 2013), and a gifted writer whose talent, whether God given or hewn out as a result of great effort, has earned him a massive readership.

Egan grew up in Elroy, Wisconsin (Egan, 2006, p. 9) where as a small child he found that he was especially attracted to the smooth, elegant line of the 50’s era Jaguars (Egan, 2006, p. 99). Later he was drafted into the Army after leaving college where he was pursuing journalism before switching his major and eventually dropping out altogether. He went to basic training at Fort Campbell, Kentucky in 1969 (Egan, 2006, p. 182). After serving in Vietnam he returned home in 1970 (Egan, Aug 2013) to marry and work through most of the seventies as an automotive mechanic (Egan, 2006, p43). Egan began writing as a freelancer and was offered a staff position by *Cycle World* magazine in 1977 after submitting the story of how he and his wife rode across America on a motorcycle (Egan, 2013). Three years later, in 1980, Egan moved to California with his wife (who makes regular appearances as a character in his columns) and began writing for *Road and Track* magazine as well (Egan, 2006, p199). He has spent the last thirty plus years writing for both magazines and now lives in rural Wisconsin. As of August 2013 he has retired to pursue other interests (Egan 2013).

Egan’s lifelong infatuation with cars and motorcycles, along with his background in hands-on work with his personal projects, qualify him to write with authority regarding these topics. I gathered from reading his columns that Egan is an enthusiastic reader and even reviews books for *Road and Track* magazine (Egan, 2006, p. 82). He also gets out in the shop and gains practical knowledge about the machines he works on through hands-on labor. Most of Egan’s stories are anecdotal and come from his interactions with the characters he deals with day to day.

I would describe Egan’s style of writing a casual and unassuming while remaining literary. His writing has an air of poignancy and control that I was not expecting from a motor journalist. Egan is certainly not your average car guy dabbling in writing. His command of vocabulary is nothing if not impressive, that or my lexicon is lacking making me easy to impress. Egan has the ability to uncover and describe ironies and he manages at least one really solid simile per article which is something I began looking forward to as I started reading each piece. For example, when describing the E-Type Jaguar he spent three years restoring he had this to say “The cockpit is a wonderful place to be, and it smells like leather and old wool. It’s like driving your grandfather’s library.” (Egan, 2006, p.115). This description resonates with me. It puts me inside that rare car with its rich woven wool carpet and leather wrapped upholstery. Egan is able to share with his audience the sensations of sitting in his vintage Jaguar with these two well-crafted sentences.

Egan can also bend words to shape a metaphor that is certainly pointed at an audience of car lovers but is very literate and insightful. One case that comes to mind is when he likened the Self-Help section of books in a Borders bookstore to “ever-encroaching glaciers” on the automotive section (Egan, 2006, p. 66). I can just see the swelling Self-Help section grinding slowly forth into the automotive territory.

I was not able to find a review written over this book aside from those written by customers who had purchased the book and cared enough to leave their positive feedback on Amazon.com. I found Egan’s self-deprecating and insightful writing utterly relatable. There were so many times as I read the book that I found myself laughing aloud at the text or scribbling “Yes!” or “HA!” in the margins. The book reads well and is entertaining and insightful. I found that I shared a good deal in common with the author/protagonist and really found myself invested in the stories he was telling. I can certainly pencil Egan in on my shortlist of favorite writers now.

To get this book on time, to read it, and to write a report before the deadline I had to pay an extra shipping cost which was more than the book itself. Essentially, I paid for this book more than twice and I would still consider it a good value for the money. Egan’s story is an inspirational one for an aspiring motor journalist like me. You don’t have to dream of one day becoming a writer like Egan to appreciate his work. His articles reached almost six million *Road and Track* readers in 2013 and that doesn’t count the work he was doing for Cycle World. (Road & Track, 2013)

I would personally recommend this book to anyone with an interest in cars or motor journalism. As an enthusiast, I enjoyed this book a great deal but there is more depth here than I expected. Egan writes about himself as much as he does about automobiles. I found the book to be surprisingly literary and Egan’s story of elevating himself from hopeful freelancer to a position as a staff writer at two premier motor publications with a massive committed readership inspirational. As I read along I found myself doing quick internet searches for images of the unfamiliar cars and places in his stories. I also kept my dictionary at hand to look up words I did not know. This is not something I generally do while sitting down with a motoring magazine. The book was a very pleasant surprise. Egan’s story is one of triumph and success and though I am a little sad that he is not going to be producing his *Side Glances* column any longer, I have to wonder if he is just making a little room for the next great motor journalist, maybe one from UNT.

References

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