

Bodies in Motion
Evolution and Experience in Motorcycling
by Steven L. Thompson
417 pages, \$19.95
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“Why do you ride a motorcycle?” All of us have struggled to find the words that accurately explain our passion. What is it about motorcycling is so rewarding that it outweighs the risks and inconveniences? Why do we choose a mode of transportation that goes against the grain?

Moto-author Steven L. Thompson explores these questions in *Bodies in Motion; Evolution and Experience in Motorcycling*. Mr. Thompson is the former Editor-at-Large for *Cycle World*, Editorial Director of *Cycle Guide*, Editor-in-Chief of *Road Test*, and has been with several auto publications. He has had six titles published and is currently Senior Contributing Editor of *AutoWeek* and an Advisory Editor of *Technology and Culture*. A road rider since 1963, he also has over twenty years of motorcycle racing experience. With a lifetime of riding, writing and racing, Mr. Thompson is uniquely qualified to write this book.

The author first approaches the question from an evolutionary perspective. Mr. Thompson argues that riders harbor an innate need to move about, acquired from our tree-dwelling ancestors. He coins the term “automobility,” meaning that humans (especially riders) experience positive sensations while in motion. He further argues that the motions experienced while riding a motorcycle, with its changes in speed, lean, and rapid acceleration and braking, closely echo the same sensations our ancestors felt while jumping in and swinging from tree to tree.

The author discusses human biomechanics. He draws on studies that demonstrate that we, as humans, enjoy, even *prefer* motion. Our bodies, on a non-mental level, are programmed to favorably respond to motion. This response to motion was originally a survival tool used by our ancestors to avoid predators and keep them going in their endless search for food. We are hard wired to seek out motion. Riders may simply be attuned to this cellular-level drive.

We may be similarly programmed in terms of the types of machine we prefer. Humans are visual creatures. While we use all of our senses to navigate our world, our primary means of information acquisition is through our eyes. Mr. Thompson looks at the motorcycle marketplace as an organism and various engine configurations and motorcycle types as organisms. Why do some motors (V-twin, inline-four) thrive while others (transverse opposed twin, longitudinal parallel twin) become extinct? Why do most motorcycles fall into one of four types? Why do these types (cruiser, sport bike) continue to thrive and newer designs (three-wheelers, recumbent) are marginalized or rejected?

By far the best part of the book is the discussion on motorcycle engines. The author commissioned a study in 2001 at Stanford University that tested and measured the vibration characteristics of nine different motorcycles as perceived by riders. For the first time ever, we have good, measured data on how different bikes vibrate and are able to analyze rider preferences. One man’s pleasant thrumming is another’s shaking heap.

The acid test for me is does this book or motorcycle inspire? *Bodies in Motion* has me mentally re-riding every bike I have ever ridden. I question what it is about specific bikes that I find appealing and which leave me cold. This is that rare book that stays with you long after you finish reading it. Enthusiastically recommended with three-and-a-half-out-of-four cylinders.

Verdict:

- Non-rider* - Helps you understand our passion.
- Newbie* - May not fully resonate until you have ridden many different machines.
- Poser* - Sorry, no chrome. Dig in anyway.

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