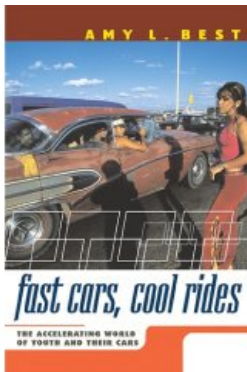


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## Teenagers and Cars — A View Into the World of Youth

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Young people — especially boys and young men — develop an interest in cars that often approaches the obsessive. Sociologist Amy L. Best of George Mason University takes a very important look at this phenomenon in *Fast Cars, Cool Rides: The Accelerating World of Youth and Their Cars*, published by New York University Press.

Best takes her readers into the world of adolescence and young adulthood, considering what a car really means to many young people. Her research was largely conducted among Latino young people in San Jose, California, but her analysis will interest all parents and those concerned with youth culture. These cars represent identity, independence, status, and so much more for these young people. The cars become the arena for self-expression, entertainment, thrill-seeking,

sexuality, and identification with subgroups among in the youth population. If parents only knew.

As she explains,

*I came to study cars because they provided a way into the worlds occupied by young people. Cars hold deep significance for the young, and thus studying cars meant studying a topic of great relevance to them. At the same time, an investigation of cars seemed to provide a way to explore, from the inside out, the meaningful shifts in the lives of young people, to trace the connections among the routines of everyday life for youth and the broader social forces of change, ones that have been coming for some time.*

Of course, cars are not only of importance to the young. The automobile has become one of the primary symbols of our times — seen as a necessity, not as a convenience. As Best argues:

*We are a car-dependent people, even if we hate to admit it. As Americans, we reject the idea of our dependence on anything, preferring to view the car in terms of our much-prized independence and freedom. This is a more inspiring and guilt free way to think of the car, but perhaps less honest.*

The modern world invented adolescence — that extended period of years between childhood and adulthood. For adolescents, the car is the main symbol of growing independence:

*Getting a driver's license is a milestone in American cultural life, carrying significance not only for parents and youth but also for the culture at large. It is one of the few widely shared rites of passage, beyond the high school prom or high school graduation, that signifies one's becoming an adult. Ideas about when one is legitimately an adult and about the degree of freedom to which a young person is entitled come to the fore as parents and their young adult children make decisions about the youths' getting a driver's license and, ultimately, a car. But the car is also an all-to-often contested terrain over which parental control is exercised, where parental anxiety and fear intensify and, sometimes, intergenerational tensions mount.*

Sound familiar? Professor Best also understands something about the link between cars and masculinity in American culture:

*Car culture is often seen as a space where men can be men, and in many instances it provides one of the few opportunities for men to forge emotional ties with other men, often across generations. The car has long been a way for young working-class men to claim respect and dignity as men, to deflect the repeated assaults on their manhood staked elsewhere. But as much as the car and the culture that develops around it can bring men together, the car also creates and deepens divisions among men.*

Some look at young people and cars and see only risk, speed, and insurance bills. Amy L. Best sees so much more, and her research reminds us of the changing character of adolescence in our times — a development that demands the attention of all who care about youth and the next generation. Her sociological perspective reveals postmodern concepts of gender, sexuality, and class, but her observations of young people and their cars are a helpful contribution to our understanding of adolescence in America.

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