

***Bike Lust: Harleys, Women, and American Society*¹**
By Barbara Joans

Reviewed by Lawrence F. Van Horn^{2,3}

The annual motorcyclists' run to Sturgis, South Dakota, prompted my interest in this book. The gathering is mentioned 9 times, mostly in the context of people who have been there and refer to it in their interviews with the author. Barbara Joans, unfortunately, has not been to Sturgis, so we have no ethnographic description of this rally. However, she describes what appears to be a similar run – the Redwood Run, near Garberville, California, of which she and her husband are veterans.

The author's purpose is to describe what she calls "Harley culture," a term she uses throughout the book to refer to the American subculture of bikers, riders, and passengers of Harley-Davidson motorcycles. Harley culture encompasses the rules of conduct, behavioral expectations, and rites of passage and other rituals associated with owners and passengers of Harley-Davidsons (H-Ders). This subculture is distinguished from that of other brands. The owners of BMW (Bavarian Motor Works) motorcycles will, it seems, wave to bikers on other brands including Honda, Kawasaki, Suzuki, and Yamaha, while H-Ders will tend to wave only to other H-Ders, yet the paramount rule of the road remains the same for all: stop and help a downed biker and "wrench" if you can.

Wrenching refers to using one's mechanical knowledge to get the motorcycle going again. The ability to wrench makes a difference in how one is perceived in relation to other H-Ders. Only those men and women who can tear down and rebuild their machines are regarded as true Harley bikers. Those who own and ride their own Harleys but who do not wrench are known as riders. Those who travel only on someone else's back seat are called passengers. As a category, passengers are exclusively women.

The title refers to the author's relationship with her new Harley-Davidson motorcycle named Lady. Joans, an anthropologist at Merritt College in Oakland, California, interviewed 35 bikers, riders, and passengers (19 men and 16 women) about Harleys. She participated in rides and runs, attended campouts and

meetings, and went to bars and parades. She visited dealers and followed the time-honored tradition of participant observation the prime field method of cultural anthropology, to gather data. The book covers information from her interviews interspersed with description and analysis of Harley-Davidson events and incidents in which she was involved. The author also provides background on the Harley-Davidson Company and discusses how ridership has changed to include more women and to reflect more ethnic, occupational, and professional diversity.

Joans' style ranges from bikers' slang to elegant prose. She implies that Harley history mimics American history. Both have reflected "great justice and great injustice," witnessing noble struggles "for human rights and personal freedoms" including "legacies of democracy, independence, and success" versus "legacies of racism, inequality, and poverty" (p. 255). How she demonstrates this premise is for readers to discover if they will but peruse *Bike Lust*.

Notes

1. Madison, WI. University of Wisconsin Press, 2001. 284 pages, illustrations, bibliography, index, glossary. Cloth, \$55.00. Paper, \$21.95.

2. Lawrence F. Van Horn received his Ph.D. in cultural anthropology from the City University of New York in 1977. He currently serves as a cultural resource specialist in the Planning Branch, Planning and Site Design, Denver Service Center, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. He is a contributor to *Concept of Tribal Society* and helped arrange this multi-review. He can be contacted at: larry_van_horn@nps.com, or at: 303-969-2255, National Park Service, DSC-PSD, 12795 West Alameda Parkway, Denver, CO, 80225-0287.

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