

Fragments from Michael Stahl's *Wheels* and *Car* columns.

Cop the full welly in my best-of book, *A Load of Bullet!*

I recently spent the best part of a week in stark, mind-melting confusion and fear. The *worst* part of the week was the other couple of days when there was, you know, nothing special going on.

(Wheels, November 2002)

You know what really makes me mad? Pardon? Well, sure, there's that. Ooh, becrikey, that too. Okay, and whatever else you just thought of.

(Wheels, January 1998)

I love to drive. There are plenty of things that remind me of how much I love to drive. The best one is walking.

(Wheels, January 1999)

Now, I really like the Swedes. In fact, I seem to meet a lot of Swedes that I'd like to like a lot more than they'd like me to. Swedish people have a healthy, outdoorsy attitude, solid values, nice furniture. They have a pure sense of the aesthetic and can do marvellous things with timber. They even have a popular children's confectionery fashioned from timber.

(CAR, March 2004, on ergonomic design)

You could have bought a fan-belt for a Sopwith Camel there, and if Sopwith Camels didn't have fan belts, they might have sold you one anyway. The old spare parts store on William Street was a dark, damp, twelve-by-twelve box of blackened magic. It closed down a year ago.

(Wheels, June 1991)

Show a motoring journalist anything resembling a continuous road circuit and he'll only want to know three things:

- * direction of racing
- * lap record
- * approximate value of branded merchandise/digital camera to be won

(Wheels, December 2002, at a Japanese proving ground)

Did you ever clench a river stone in your palm, carve a statuette from softwood with a keen chisel, caress a warm, freshly-fired pottery work of your own design?

Me neither. But I have swept a slippery sponge over the porcelain front-quarter panels of a Porsche 911, finger-cleaned the lacquered spokes of

an M3's wheels and buffed the billiard-ball corner of a Benz C280's taillight with an old Castrol T-shirt.

(Wheels, August 1994, on the most washable cars)

I spent almost two hours in the department store, grilling the sales guy (even though grillers were in another department) about every low-slung, broad-tracked, Kamm-tailed, rear-diffused, air-suspended and ergo-handled French Racing Iron that took my fancy. And in the end – like everyone does if they can afford it – I bought a German one.

(CAR, January 2003, on buying whitegoods)

Fruit is bad in any form, most particularly liquid. The molecular structure of fruit juice is such that, should just a fraction of one millilitre be spilled upon skin, it sets up a chemical reaction that will coat an entire human body and car interior within minutes.

(Wheels, April 1993, on eating and driving)

I've seen my dad do this countless times: "Gawd-strewth – a 1929 Packard steering knuckle *for only 20 dollars!* Lad, you know how much this thing is worth?"

"Uhh, 10?"

(Wheels, January 2003)

They say the 1960s were all about change, but it all happened in the 1970s. People, and cars, got smarter. The innocence of the 1960s gave way to hard-edged, self-important styling and, just as suddenly, to the seriousness of US federal safety and pollution standards. British sports cars all but disappeared, safety started to sell, and Honda knocked everyone's knees from under them with the Civic. The decade opened with a best-selling VW beetle and closed with a best-selling VW Golf.

(Wheels, July 2007)

"pile of shit, doesn't go, suit moron"

(Wheels, January 2003, on truth in advertising a 50-year-old motorcycle. I bought it)

By my reckoning I've struck only half a dozen animals in a dozen years. I'm not counting rabbits, which regenerate as soon as your car's shadow has passed, or lizards or snakes or other plug-uglies that already look like they're dead anyway.

(Wheels, August 1992, on animals I have run over)

Once, I asked my cousin which of his cars he remembered most fondly. He looked at me like I'd asked whether he loved Pooh, Piglet or Eeyore best.

(Wheels, May 1997, on my cousin Pigsbreath, serial owner of \$200 cars)

The stuck-speedo scenario is the automotive identical twin to "The victim's watch had stopped at..." in a Sherlock Holmes mystery. Personally, I couldn't imagine any machine so loyal as a watch that will expire at almost precisely the same time as its owner. Well, maybe a pacemaker.

(CAR, May 2004, on debunking the 'stuck speedometer' as evidence)

I remembered back to when I was learning to drive. My racing-driver parents had always insisted that they didn't want their kids to repeat any mistakes they might be making. In one sense it's worked, because I haven't had kids.

(Wheels, March 1996. I have now)

There again, on the other hand (I have three), I don't suppose I'd have been any better as an eyewitness at a Cobb & Co bank robbery. "An eyewitness described the getaway vehicle as a horse." Palamino? Shetland? Maybe one-a-them Andalusian Dancing Stallions? "Dunno. A horse. Hairy bastard. Brownish."

(Wheels, July 1995, on ignorant witnesses: "it was a white sedan")

I never drink and drive, but while at the wheel I could be in any one of my 17 diagnosed personalities. On my way to the office today, I was Radnar, a 17th century Albanian hog farmer. Obviously, I can't vouch for Radnar's driving abilities. I'm only a six-year-old orphan girl from Cairo.

(Wheels, March 1996, on appraising one's own driving)

Imagine a public hospital that actually *prides* itself on lengthening its waiting times, making its beds narrower and lumpier, and planning \$300 million of next year's budget from openly pick-pocketing its patients.

(Wheels, March 2003, on Australian traffic authorities)

Road Sign Alphabets ... Each kid is supposed to spot the letters of the alphabet on passing road signs. The first kid to complete the alphabet wins. What cruel trick was this? I used to have nightmares about our Volvo driving into Zillmere or Zetland with three child skeletons in the back.

(Wheels, January 1991, on travel games)

It just erupted in a violent, gut-flattening, flash-flood of thrust. The rear wheels were scrabbling while the fronts were off the ground. I felt in real fear that this car was about to be engulfed by its own anus and left there, inside-out, in the middle of the road.

(Wheels, March 2003, on driving a 1986 Ruf-Porsche 911 Turbo)

It's a full-surround cinema of cars at 65mph under too-bright LA lighting. Even dusty old clunkers add a sense of Hollywood surreality; over to my right, a faded, cola-coloured '81 Mustang slides by, revealing a small, boxy red hatchback with a blonde at the wheel. She keeps pace with me, loping along on zero dampers, then drifts away onto the first off-ramp.

I remembered that same scene in *Paris, Texas*.

(Wheels, January 2003, on an LA freeway)

The rental Moke's bright, canary-yellow paintwork made it appear pathetically optimistic. I identified with it immediately.

(Wheels, December 1994, on the hardy, holiday-rental Mini Moke)

Working on a conservative estimate that just one per cent of our society would account for squids, geeks, smart-arses, acid burnouts, con merchants, violent slime, peer-pressured teens, satanic ritualists, hillbilly inbreds, cause-driven minorities, benzo-crazed homebodies, sporting shooters, spittle-flecked lunatics, doddering imbeciles, armed-and-dangerous prison escapees and psychopathic arsonists in need of petrol, it calculates that Karl and his kin get to meet one of the above every three-and-a-bit hours.

(Wheels, February 1993, on Karl, the late-night petrol station attendant)

My mum has decided to sell her Porsche. The occasion is one of great sadness for me, and I don't mind admitting that I've had to struggle through this process of letting go. But it's time for acceptance, for taking inventory, for gathering strength and facing the future. She was a good mum, but now I need a new one.

(Wheels, April 1992)

Every year, my whole family was dragged out to the Sydney Showground, wandering for hours among the scabby-kneed children, the horse manure, dropped fairy-flosses, swirling newspapers, the sweaty smell of Dagwood Dogs, the foul-mouthed dodgem car attendants, the sick, the elderly and the insane, to look at the cars of the Motor Show.

(Wheels, May 2000, on Motor Shows)

We bade a ceremonious farewell to his favourite toy Camaro SS with two Double Bungers inserted through the side windows. Sausage Face had been momentarily distracted frying ants with a magnifying glass, until the explosion lit the sky.

(Wheels, June 1990, on playing with the kid next door)

I push the choke all the way down, switch the engine off, get out again and climb underneath to check the oil level. The dipstick is actually on top of the engine, but I like to check the oil level on the road first. Modern cars don't burn or leak oil. My Fiat does both, sometimes simultaneously.

(Wheels, October 1992, on pre-flight inspecting my 1964 Fiat 500)

From the registration pull-through I've had, you'd think I'd driven up in a Russian-registered Merc S-class with Osama bin Laden's mobile number stamped into the engine block.

(Wheels, December 2003, on trying to road-register unusual vehicles in Australia)

I imagine that's what's happening among the junior designers at BMW each time they're presented with a new clay model.

"Mein Gott ... Hans, look at this."

"Scheisen! ... Franz, shall I take you to the infirmary? I will go find a shovel and some Chux Super-Wipes..."

(Wheels, January 2004, on BMW's new design direction)

I've always been really gullible, believe it or not, which you would, if you were me, because, well, that's my point. On top of that, I seem to attract chronic liars and know-it-alls. So my understanding of everything outside of my own direct experience – like the time my sister saw a pterodactyl stealing my money-box – might be open to question.

(Wheels, February 2004, on meeting the grandson of the inventor of windscreen wipers. Really! I think)

When I was 10, I went halves with another kid in a Suzuki 50 step-through. Y'know, like a Honda postie-bike, except that the Suzuki was a two-stroke. Ours cost \$50 and was in really good condition. Until we improved it.

(Wheels, coc0304, on my first motor vehicle)

A new crash helmet has everything that flicks my switch. It's solid, polished, hard to the touch. It has glossy paint and moving parts. It smells

new and toxic-chemically. It's tough and comfy, like a bullet-proof Mercedes S-class for your head. It has space for stickers.

(Wheels, February 2001, on buying crash helmet number nine)

Normally I'm not nervous when I'm driving, which is saying something, when *I'm* driving. But at midnight on Sunday, I decided to do a couple of laps of the boulevard Peripherique, the 35 km, six-lane ring road around Paris. Within just a couple of kays, I noticed in the mirror that the veins on my temples were sticking out and glowing like Morris Minor turn-signals.

(Wheels, January 2001, on driving in Paris in a \$550,000 Bentley Arnage)

Like, there's ever been even a Transport minister who could fix a flat? If I ever heard about a politician jacking-up a Statesman, my first mental image wouldn't include a Holden.

(Wheels, November 2001, on politicians as motoring experts)

Voice-activated conversation: Right now there's plenty of talk about voice activated controls for car telephones, on-board navigation, even to send and receive e-mails on the move. Too much talk, if you ask me. This kind of computer understands verbal commands and talks back to you. So I say: why not have *two* of these voice computers? Let them sort it out!

(Wheels, March 1999, on inventions we don't need. But will probably get)

There are a few things that I have a lot of. One is skateboard shoes. Skateboard shoes look like the things I like: Fast, technical and purposeful. More truthfully, they *are* the things I am: loose, furry and smelly.

(Wheels, December 2001)

I pick up the phone and ring this (car rental) company, asking how I can be sure of reserving something that's so "or similar" to an Alfa 156 that it actually *is* one, and explaining my need to subvert Mr C's growing conviction that pressing a lever to receive a food pellet would be too challenging an assignment for his future son-in-law.

(Wheels, January 2002, on renting a car for my father-in-law)

The only 156 they had was at an agency about 60 kilometres from where I live. So, to get out there, I rented a little Most Popular Makes Group A Two-Door Economy. Or similar.

(Wheels, January 2002, on the outcome)

My whole family has mentally categorised long-ago holidays, adventures and births under the eras Simca, Wolseley, Volkswagen and Volvo ... I was born under the sign of Volkswagen Type 3, with mum's Fiat 500 rising.

(CAR, March 2003)

My old Gruntmor Laptron – aged four, in human-years, so about 112 in computer-years – got so maxed-out that it needed some sort of electronic enema, a process from which it never fully recovered.

(Wheels, June 2002, on buying a new computer)

Remember how car commercials used to emphasise really good stuff, like how you can pick up tons of girls, make “Hey, Charger” peace signs at people, then drive stupidly fast and smash through a giant sheet of glass? Back then, the safety-weenies’ speed suffix “where conditions allow” would have meant: “when your dad’s pissed and you’ve taken his car.”

(Wheels, May 2002, on new laws in car advertising)

When I got back to the pits, (Allan) McNish was waiting, staring dreamily down the track. “You know, they were the most nervous few minutes of my life,” he said, smiling.

“Ahh, yes – that last, victorious lap at Le Mans?”

“No, I mean just now.”

(CAR, April 2003, on driving the 1998 Le Mans-winning Porsche GT1-98)

If I told you that this straight, dry, near-deserted stretch of road were a motorway in Britain, chances are that you’d be appalled and outraged. If these very same conditions were repeated on an Italian *autostrada*, you’d think me a bit irresponsible, but probably not exactly the spawn of Satan. And if it were on a German *autobahn*, you’d just go, “Yeah, so why didn’t you get the 200, nancy-boy?”

(CAR, July 2003, on setting a 300km/h – 190mph – personal best)

I simply wouldn’t survive in a nanny-state like Britain, where you’re presumed to be so stupid that you can’t see a 40-tonne truck coming at you unless its driver is wearing an approved, fluorescent-coloured safety singlet.

(CAR, February 2004)