

<http://www.d-talks.com/2015/01/the-afterlife-of-emerson-tang/>

REVIEW: DESIGN TALKS

THE AFTERLIFE OF EMERSON TANG

Posted by [Nargess Shahmanesh Banks](#) on Thursday, January 15, 2015



“An immensely enjoyable book that is wonderfully crafted, raising all sorts of ideas on life, death, the meaning of design.”

There was so much to admire about Modernism. The art, architecture, design, the ideology of the early part of the last century informed our contemporary life. The automobile, the personal motorcar, too has been pivotal to our modern existence.

To find new ways of living in a world that is so very different to that of the last century, one with its own pressing needs, requires not only an understanding of the past but the willingness to let go. We need to learn from Modernism, admire it even, reflect on it, but not to hold onto it. You could say it is a little like dealing with grief.

This is what I learnt from *The Afterlife of Emerson Tang*. We normally don't review fiction here, but Paula Champa's debut novel straddles the world of fiction and design history – and it feels appropriate for these pages.

Her story evolves around four strangers linked in their quest to unite an engine with its body. Set in the closing years of the twentieth-century, Emerson, a dying eccentric aesthete, and Helene, an ageing artist, battle to find the original engine to a fictional 1954 Beacon. The car, we discover as the story unfolds, has significant meanings for them both.

Narrated by Emerson's archivist Beth, the journey takes us from New York to Germany where Miguel, the grandson of the now ecological Beacon Car Company, joins the race to locate the missing engine. The colourful, and at times tense, plot travels in time to Italy and the Futurist movement; we experience the famed Mille Miglia road race and visit the Pebble Beach vintage car show in California. >> (cont'd)

The Afterlife of Emerson Tang examines what it means to live and die, and what happens to our soul once we're gone. Here the car is the focus of grief – the author has given something as abstract as grief a physical form.

Champa reports on design and cars, and much like me she came to the latter as a novice. Being an outsider in the tightly knitted world of automotive journalism you are struck by the intense passion there is for the car, loved mainly for its past, for its speed and for its power.

The car industry began addressing environmental issues by examining alternative driving solutions in the 1990s, around the time in which the book is set. Yet as exciting as these new developments were for the likes of us, the love wasn't much shared amongst our peers. Was it the nostalgia of the 'golden age' of the automobile; or was it a fear of the future, the unknown?

There may be little sexiness in sustainable transport, yet it is necessary for our survival in this increasingly populated planet. Interestingly enough new generations are less and less interested in the old formula. They don't see the same romance in gas guzzling, polluting high speed machines. For them, the car is a high-tech gadget, which needs to multi-task and connect to their other high-tech gadgets... ultimately be more than a mode of transport. They are excited by alternative driving solutions, by schemes that encourage shared transport.

Champa asks us to re-imagine the future through our knowledge and appreciation of the past; to love the Modernist architecture of the early century, understand avant-garde paintings, and admire the beautiful curves of the classic automobile.

The old thinkers, creators and masters thought and created for another time. Today's world needs its own thinkers and creators.

The Afterlife of Emerson Tang celebrates the excitement of progress, of new life. Emerson and Miguel love the advances of Modernism but realise that the future needs more than the same answers. I cannot recommend this book enough.

—Nargess Shahmanesh Banks

The Afterlife of Emerson Tang by Paula Champa is published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Design Talks | London