

CARS Journal

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BOOKS

From Hardtop to Hardcover

R.I. native turns fascination with cars into debut novel

By **PETER C.T. ELSWORTH**
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

Rhode Island native Paula Champa did not grow up particularly enamored of cars.

But she has made a fictional 1954 Beacon Type 135 Roadster the unifying element in her debut novel, "The Afterlife of Emerson Tang," which has just

been published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

"I came in as an outsider," she said, noting she had never really

thought about cars when she was young.

Her attitude changed in 2000, when she was working as a magazine editor in New York City and assigned an article about car design. That led to additional editing and writing assignments and an appreciation of the impact that the automobile has had on society.

"It had altered everything in the world in its brief existence," she writes in the book.

"I realized very quickly what a fascinating subject it was," Champa said, "with new technology and new ideas of mobility beginning to proliferate."

At the same time, she said, she had been working on an

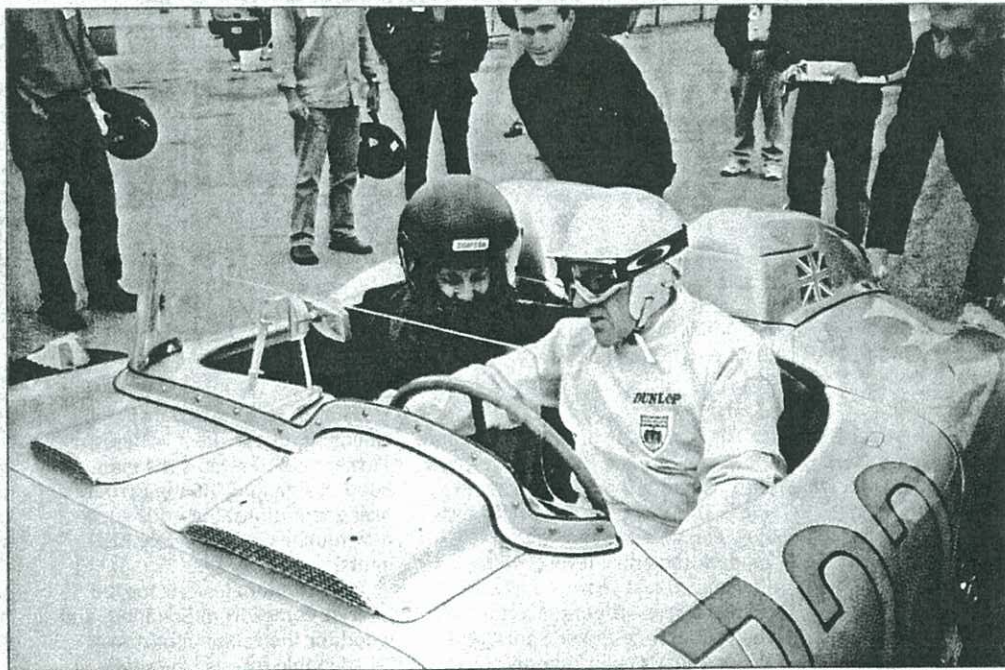


PHOTO COURTESY OF PAULA CHAMPA

Author Paula Champa chats with famous driver Sir Stirling Moss in 2003. Champa has turned her love of automobiles into her first novel, "The Afterlife of Emerson Tang," shown at left.

idea for a book that addressed grief. "What is left of you in the hearts of other people?" she said. "What is the relationship between grief and nostalgia, a yearning for the past?"

Her challenge was to give substance to the "formless" emotion of grief, which in a sense, serves as an afterlife.

A formative moment came when, while at a car show, she learned that an engine could be taken out of one car and

installed in another.

"It had never occurred to me," she said, adding that it seemed to her that a car and its engine was a "concrete" metaphor for the body and its spirit.

In her book, Emerson Tang is a gravely ill collector who has acquired a 1954 Beacon. But the engine comes from another Beacon of the same vintage and he is obsessed with uniting it with the original body in order

to console and perhaps resolve a profound grief associated with his childhood.

He charges Beth Corvid, his aide and archivist who is the novel's narrator, with tracking it down. However, she has to compete with Helene Moreau, a French artist who raced the car with a former lover at the Mille Miglia race in Italy.

Champa said the inclusion of

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the Mille Miglia stemmed from being driven around in 2003 by former British ace Sir Stirling Moss, who won the race in 1955.

It only took 10 minutes, but she said it was one of the most intense experiences of her life. "I can remember everything, the smell of the car, how he drove," Champa said. "It's very vivid to me to this day."

In the book, Moreau is famous for her 'speed paintings,' canvases ripped by passing race cars. Champa said the character reflected her own fascination with the early decades of the 20th century and the Futurism art movement in

Italy, which revered the automobile as the harbinger of a future dominated by power and speed.

"Everyone fell in love with cars," Moreau tells Corvid. "I was as mad for speed as the rest of them — for the freedom and all it promised."

Champa said she was struck by the contrast between the excitement about cars in that era and the present day, when such issues as carbon emissions, fuel efficiency, traffic congestion and safety have resulted in the automobile being regarded with mixed emotions.

"At the time it was new and glamorous, a leap forward. Another century on and [it's not seen as] so exciting," she said, noting the "huge amount of excitement" generated today



PHOTOS COURTESY OF PAULA CHAMPA



by such items as smartphones, tablets and personal computers.

But with cars being increasingly driven by new technology, she said there was a huge connection between the two areas and wondered why there was less excitement about the possibilities of the automobile.

Indeed, she said the new millennium offered all sorts of exciting possibilities, including electric, gas-electric hybrid and diesel power plants, advances in

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Author Paula Champa

navigation technology, driverless cars and the use of biological and recycled materials in their manufacture.

Indeed, Miguel Beacon, the grandson of the fictional car company's founder,

wants to resurrect the brand as a green one: "The revived Beacon Company is going to be working with private and governmental partners to explore new systems for clean transportation."

Champa, who writes on

design and the arts, was raised in Providence and attended Boston University and the University of Pennsylvania. She has an MFA in creative writing from Virginia Commonwealth University.

She will be reading from "The Afterlife of Emerson Tang" at Books on the Square, 471 Angell St., Providence, on Saturday, June 8, at 4 p.m.

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