

Bicycles and the Spirit

Wheels On Fire

David Watson

1999

a review of

Under the Sign of the Bicycle by Alon K. Raab (Portland: Gilgul Press), 31 pages, \$3. from the Community Cycling Center, 2407 NE Alberta, Portland OR 97211.

"When I look at childhood," begins Robert Bly in a poem in his stunning recent collection, *Morning Poems*,

I see the yellow rosebush

Grandma planted near her door, the gravel

Beneath the bicycle tires, and the new legs pumping

As we raced along...

("A farm in Minnesota")

FE contributor Alon K. Raab's small book captures that same sense of dreamy innocence and vigor so recognizable to many of us—our flying off to obscure adventures on our first bicycle.

Under the Sign of the Bicycle is playfully and beautifully designed, somehow both lavish and simple in its collection of bicycle graphics and type. In the first meditation on this by now almost archetypal relationship; "Bicycle Music," he writes, "In the beginning was the bicycle wheel, and it went swish, swish, swish..." The bicycle wheel and the bicycle achieve mythic significance as Raab ponders his "love for bicycles and their generosity" in return.

Simple and profound bicycle stories follow—of riding with his young daughter, and as a child himself riding with a friend to school in a small village on the Mediterranean, and suddenly running across a Bedouin shepherd and his flock. Raab meditates on the history of dispossession, imperial conquest and ecological destruction while riding on Sauvie Island near Portland, and elsewhere wonders about drivers of the cars that speed by, forcing him off the road.

"Their vehicles evoke in me, not the mass advertised images of ease and freedom," he writes, "but instead mobile coffins, as they head toward those cemeteries called parking lots." He is reminded of Alfred Jarry, author of the proto-dada absurdist classic *Ubu Roi*, apparently a "passionate bicyclist, who rode around turn of the century Paris with two revolvers in his belt and a carbine across his chest." According to Raab, "Jarry used to fire into the air to warn of his coming"—quite a contrast with the contemporary custom of blowing a whistle when approaching an intersection (even as one suspects the Jarry story is apocryphal).

The bicycle intersects with history in other ways—for example, when Raab comes across a young Palestinian boy killed by strafing or artillery fire in Jerusalem during the 1967 war, lying dead among his schoolbooks next to his blue bicycle, or his thoughts on the appearance of the bicycle throughout other terrible moments in the century: "...Russian refugees fleeing German air death, their belongings strapped to their carts and bicycles; Vietnamese peasants jumping into ditches to escape Napalm fire, their bikes left by the road; a recent photo from Sarajevo showing an elderly gentleman in a tight fitting suit riding his tall bicycle amidst the ruins of his once beautiful and prosperous city; his face an expression of strenuous, effort and much sorrow. Somalia, El Salvador, Angola,

Kurdistan—the list goes on.” Later, he returns to the site where the Palestinian boy died, near where his own parents are buried. “Following Jewish tradition, I place stones and flowers on the spot.”

Raab also tells the story of Marie Rose Gineste, shown in a recent photo with the same bicycle she used as a young woman in the French village of Montauban in 1942 to deliver a letter throughout a district of a hundred kilometers that urged village priests and their parishes to resist the deportation of Jews by the Nazi occupiers and their cohorts. She began hiding fugitives and using “a simple black bicycle with a tiny bell and a small generator light, whose beam managed to pierce the darkness,” to participate in the resistance.

“There are times,” Raab comments, “when the saving of the world can begin with a single bicycle and its brave rider, who forty-seven years after the war, is still riding along country roads.” One is reminded by such testimony that every time an individual steps forward (or onto a bicycle’s pedals for that matter) to resist injustice and to affirm life, a kind of eternal mythic return to the essence of what it means to be human is repeated, like the bicycle wheel turning around once again.

In other essays, Raab comments on such cardinal bike themes as Rossellini’s celebrated film, *Bicycle Thief*, which he says, came to be one of “the regions of [his] childhood,” and another on the Dutch Provos, who in the early 1960s provided free bikes around Amsterdam for convivial and ecological transport by anyone who wished to use them.

From there he moves, appropriately and necessarily, to recent Critical Mass bicycle demonstrations against the car and the ecological and cultural devastation it is causing. Raab, who has never owned an automobile, nor even acquired a driver’s license, concludes, “We have to live in a radically different way”; one cannot help but think that a different way of life is going to include the bicycle, at least for a long time to come.

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