Rosen, Jody. *Two Wheels Good: The History and Mystery of the Bicycle*. New York: Crown, 2022. xii + 397 pp. Illustrations, Notes, Index. $28.99

Reviewed by Duncan R. Jamieson, Ph.D. Department of History, Ashland University, Ashland Ohio, USA

Knowing my interest in sport and more specifically bicycling, a colleague alerted me to Jill Lepore’s recent review of Jody Rosen’s, *Two Wheels Good* in *The New Yorker* (May 30 2022). Rosen is a native New Yorker, a contributing writer for the *New York Times Magazine* and a bicyclist; Lepore is a professor of history at Harvard University, a staff writer for *The New Yorker* and a bicyclist. Both have excellent cycling bona fides, though she might have an edge as she was “doored” when J. K. Rowling opened the rear door of the stretch limousine in which she was riding. Like Rosen and Lepore, I began riding as a child and continue awheel today. My bicycling bona fides are represented by tens of thousands of miles, including dozens of centuries (100-mile tours in a day), an 800-mile unsupported credit card tour from Ashland, Ohio to Provincetown, Massachusetts, and a 3,200-mile supported transcontinental ride from Los Angeles, California to Boston, Massachusetts. However, I am a much more cautious rider than either Rosen or Lepore, only being grazed by a car once and falling very few times, even including my childhood riding. In addition to book chapters and articles, mostly on long distance bicycle travel, my monograph, *The Self-Propelled Voyager* (2015, New York: Rowman and Littlefield) is a narrative history examining the reality that despite the massive technological advancements in cycles, equipment, communication, clothing and other incidentals, the actual experience of cycling is remarkedly similar today as to what it was almost 150 years ago when Thomas Stevens set off from San Francisco to become the first person to take a bicycle around the world.

Though Lepore refers to Rosen’s book as “a set of quirky and kaleidoscopic stories” (60), a brilliant summary of the book, the majority of her article reviews her life on two wheels. While *Two Wheels* is interesting and worth the time it takes to read, I do take exception to the hyperbole the publisher is using to promote it. It seems the subtitle is more the creation of a clever marketer than the author; the book is certainly not about “the history and mystery of the bicycle.” Rosen himself makes it clear this is not a history of either the bicycle or bicycling, though the opening few chapters do offer a reasonable though sketchy look at the early days. Relative to mystery, the questions regarding who came up with the improvements between Karl Von Drais’ 1817 hobby horse and the arrival of the safety in the late 1880s are rather clearly accepted by cycle historians, though these intervening years are murky at best, with several countries making claims to their role in cycling’s development, something Rosen doesn’t discuss. The bold type statement on the jacket flap that this is “a panoramic revisionist portrait of the nineteenth-century invention that is transforming the twenty-first-century world” is an incredible stretch for even the most optimistic cyclists. Then, one of the quotes on the back cover suggests, this is “wide-ranging and [somewhat] inquisitive” but in no way is it “an entire library of books on the bicycle.” The book is a collection of chapters covering a number of issues related to the cycle and its place in Western and Eastern societies. In a rather convoluted fashion Rosen does consider the divide between the mostly white, middle-class Westerners who ride because it is enjoyable and convenient, and the desperately impoverished and marginalized in Eastern societies who use the bicycle because it is the only transportation they can afford. This ignores the sizeable underclass in the United States and likely other Western countries forced to cycle because there is no viable alternative. It also overlooks Eastern elites who use the wheel, by choice, for pleasure. Unfortunately, Rosen does not follow through on this distinction, though it is something that has a long history in cycling. When first introduced, the ordinary and then the safety were the province of the middle and upper classes who had both the leisure time and disposable income to enjoy the gratification that comes from traveling using one’s own power. By the last days of the 19th century, however, overproduction of new bicycles and a thriving market for used wheels slashed prices, along with the allure, long before the internal combustion engine pushed the bicycle to the edge of the road. A generation later none of this deterred the middle-class English civil servant, Bernard Newman, from cycling through every country in Europe in the middle third of the 20th century. Frequently, people assumed he was too poor to travel by any other means, which was most definitely NOT the case. A similar feeling in the early 21st century confronted Englishwoman Anne Mustoe as she rode through the American southwest along the eight-hundred-mile Santa Fe Trail. When she stopped late in the day looking for accommodations people assumed she needed help with payment—why else would she be bicycling? She always politely refused, explaining she rode by choice, not necessity. These are only two of many examples of how, at least in much of the Western world, the bicycle has been and continues to be viewed as either a children’s toy or something used by a small minority of adult whackos.

 Following a prologue which connects the highly popular, collectable late 19th century bicycle posters displaying scantily clothed nymphs with different manufacturers wheels and an introduction connecting bicycles with space Rosen has fifteen disparate chapters on the bicycle. He correctly distinguishes between cycling in the United States where the wheel is seen as a children’s toy by most or as something for white-collar, middle-class Caucasians with disposable income and free time. Europeans are more likely to accept it as an appropriate method of transportation as well as leisure. In the East the bicycle is more a utilitarian machine to move people and goods to power the economy. Worldwide, bicycle production exceeds the number of automobiles by perhaps as much as twenty percent, though both are built and bought for work and/or for leisure. *Two Wheels* discusses the place of the bicycle in societies as culturally, economically and geographically diverse as the Netherlands, Bangladesh, the United States, Bhutan and China. While interesting vignettes, they do not explore the international intricacies of the cycle. The 23,000,000 Dutch own and ride 28,000,000 bicycles (approximately three times the number of automobiles owned and operated by the Dutch), commuting, shopping, riding to school, going on holiday. Conversely in the United States, the number of automobiles approaches but does not equal the population, and automobiles are not evenly distributed. Rosen devotes an entire chapter to the poor working conditions of pedicab operators in Bangladesh; however deplorable they may be, his trope overlooks the pedicab operators who ply their trade in London, New York or any number of other Western cities. Granted, in the former pedicab drivers are a staple of transportation for the customer and income for the operator, while in the West for the customer they are a tourist attraction, likely something that the operator (invariably young) is doing on the side while trying to figure out what’s next. Unfortunately, this distinction is never explored. In Chapter 9, “Uphill,” Rosen opens with the Bhutanese king who enjoys cycling so much he abdicated the throne to his eldest son in 2006 so he could spend his spare time cycling. He then describes The Tour of the Dragon, an annual 165.5-mile cycle race that attracts top contenders from around the world. In Chapter 11, “Cross Country,” Rosen provides a bit of background on the origins of Adventure Cycling, though the majority of the chapter focuses on the love story description of the 1976 Bikecentennial ride, where a couple of thousand riders left trailheads on the Pacific Ocean to cross the United States to commemorate the two hundredth anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. At the same time a similar sized group left the Atlantic headed west to meet, wave and pass the riders going east. Among the eastward riders a man and woman met, fell in love and married two years later; they then reprise their lives, careers and cycling adventures. Yet, even though a New Yorker by birth, upbringing, employment and current status, Rosen seems not to know of the Great Five Boro Bike Tour, held for decades on the first Sunday in May when New York City closes major arteries to allow 30,000 plus cyclists to ride traffic-free through each borough. Perhaps the best part of The Five Boro is cycling south on the Brooklyn Queens Expressway cruising freely at twenty miles an hour and looking left to see drivers crawling along, snarled in traffic on the north bound lanes! The last chapter, 15, “Mass Movement,” describes Critical Mass, Black Lives Matter and China, none with sufficient detail to explore their significance to cycling and quality of life. Rosen points out that China historically had been perhaps the most bicycle friendly nation on earth. Then in a great leap forward to emulate the West, it pushed the cycles and their riders to the sideline to make way for the automobile and massive pollution. After a generation it seems that China is recognizing the folly of this, and like many Western governments is trying to make its cities more cycle friendly and livable.

From its earliest predecessor, the Draisine, to today’s electric assisted bicycles, the machine has always been a lightening-rod for diametrically opposed opinions on its value and its place. Either the most efficient transportation device ever invented or a children’s toy, either the last best hope to save humanity from the apocalyptic devastation of climate change or a sinister plot to sideline the individual’s right to double or triple park on already overly congested streets, Rosen offers a few bits of enlightenment but with little depth. He cites P. J. O’Rourke and his misanthropic views of bicycles, as well as Harrison Salisbury’s testimony to Congress on how the North Vietnamese used the bicycle to defeat the Americans. But it’s obvious he knows nothing of Daniel Behrman’s *Man Who Loved Bicycles* (New York: Harper’s Magazine Press, 1973) in which this self-professed autophobe described how cars were killing cities like Paris and New York.

While Rosen clearly understands the class divide created by the middle class who ride by choice as opposed to the underclass who ride by necessity, and while he has interesting anecdotes, including his experiences on Gotham’s roads, if the reader is interested in the place of the bicycle, I would recommend David Herlihy’s *The Bicycle*, Melody Hoffman, *Bike Lanes are White Lanes*, James Longhurst, *Bike Battles*, Evan Friss, *The Cycling City*, J. Harry Wray, *Pedal Power*, my *The Self-Propelled Voyager*, or any of Joe Kurmaskie’s zany first person bicycle adventures. The last fifteen or so years has seen a dramatic increase in the number of books on the history, place and meaning of the bicycle—these are just a few that would be better choices.