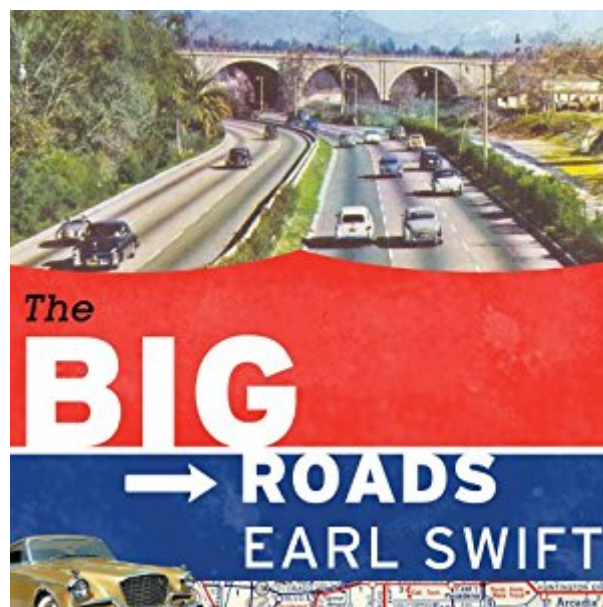




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The Big Roads: The Untold Story Of The Engineers, Visionaries, And Trailblazers Who Created The American Superhighways



Synopsis

From author Earl Swift comes the surprising history of the U.S. interstate system, a fascinating route through the dreams, discoveries, and protests that shaped these mighty roads.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I haven't ever read anything like this book. Sure histories and such, but roads? really. I got the book because I've spent a good part of my life traveling the united states from back in the 50s thru the millennium. All up and down the east coast, on the old route 66, all the way from tampa to Olympia wa, and on and on, and on. Yep, I took interstates for granted. I had my AAA triptick in hand, a couple other maps(no gps back then people, hell, no cellphones either), knew where a few stuckkeys were, and some other rest stops, and headed out. This road history covers the eras from dirt roads, bicycles, model As, through and passed when the idea of an interstate came about. The who's and why's, and virtually everything involving roads; even the materials, with all the guys who spent their lives putting in the highways, and how they came to do it. The author covers the human aspect too, including when big city people realized the big roads were going to cut into their back yards and destroy their parks and neighborhoods. It's just too much to list here. It took me weeks of reading to get to the end, but that was only because I had interruptions. If you want to read how and why our country established the road and highway system we have now, and formed the USDOT, and also learned from some big mistakes, this is a must read. .

I think this is an important book that presents the definitive history of how the interstate highway system came to be and how America was changed by it. It is chock full of well researched and referenced facts and details, but therein also lies its weakness. As a textbook it is an admirable work, but as a piece of popular non-fiction it is probably more than most people want to know, way more. Unfortunately, this reader found it to be intensely boring for far too many pages. I longed for an abridged edition of perhaps 100 pages less that would tell the main story with fewer side paths. On the plus side, the sections that deal with the resistance the road builders encountered in many urban areas were a revelation and explains why so many of these urban interstates are such disasters. Clearly, one size does not fit all when it comes to road building. He also highlights why so many of these roads are now falling into ruin and our government's woefully inadequate programs for maintaining them. Simply put, roads have a lifespan like everything else and must be periodically rebuilt at high cost if they are to continue to serve their intended purpose.

This is an interesting modern history well told. Since I live in Baltimore I really enjoyed the parts about the initial plans and the many political battles to reach the eventual plan that included the largest tunnel of it's time, eight lanes under the waters of Baltimore's Inner Harbor. I have traveled a lot during an eighty odd year lifetime; both before and after the building of the interstate system. When I drive the highways now I am much more conscious of its excellent design features like the long straight stretches that could be used as airplane runways or the gentle curves that help to prevent boredom. Modern Americans probably have no appreciation of how difficult and slow road travel was before the interstate system was built. There is still an untold story of how much the interstate system has changed America. Perhaps Mr. Swift can do a sequel.

A fascinating read with so much background I never knew about how the Interstate highway system evolved. Swift doesn't try to disguise the ugliness the roads caused as they split the downtowns and suburbs of zillions of American cities. He wrestles with how the job got done and what we had before that time. I often think of his book as I'm driving from city to city now and what a fix we would be in without those concrete ribbons. I do not believe more lanes of concrete and asphalt is the answer to the nation's growing needs in solving its mass transit problems in the future. But we would surely be getting absolutely nowhere today if we were trying to do it on a single- or dual-lane highway in each direction. That's about all most of us had in the 1950s. And earlier in that century people drove on dirt, gravel and mud, as Swift clearly recalls. A good read for anybody who rides the highways today.

As someone who has been interested in roads, highways and maps for years, I was excited to read this book, but quickly got bogged down in it and soon was simply reading just to finish it. While the author had obviously done a lot of research for this book, it seemed like he wanted to show that off and went over some of the same plot points over and over again. Also, the book seemed to skip around chronologically a bit, and once it got up to a certain point in the timeline (around the 1970s), it was like the author just lost interest and rushed to end the book -- which is the time period I was really looking forward to hearing about, since it seemed like that was when a lot of the actual construction of the interstates took place.

It's hard to believe that something as ubiquitous as our interstate highways took such a long time in coming to be. The long march from conception to actuality is detailed in a highly personal and entertaining way. Enjoyable read.

Maybe I purchased this book with the wrong intentions. I was hoping to learn more about America's highway system and its future. This book spends a majority of time on the distant past, detailing all the politics and power struggles that arose throughout the decades long quest to design and then build the interstate system. If you're into detailed history and the politics of how big projects come to fruition, then this book will meet your every need. If you're more like myself and prefer a more general look at the interstate system that's current, then you'll be terribly disappointed. The engineering buffs will also be disappointed, because again, the majority focuses on the political aspects, with very little to satisfy those looking for details of the actual construction. Sad to say, but I really forced myself to finish the book.

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