

# *Ford v Ferrari*: Life at high speed

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## *Ford v Ferrari*

In the mid-1960s, Detroit-based Ford Motor Company decided to attempt to unseat Italy's luxury sports car manufacturer Ferrari as the reigning champion of Le Mans, the famed French 24-hour sports car race. Ferrari won the event six years in a row, 1960-1965.

Director James Mangold's new film *Ford v Ferrari*, written by Jez Butterworth, John-Henry Butterworth and Jason Keller, is a dynamic, but somewhat formulaic, recounting of this episode.

In 1963, in order to elevate Ford's prestige, Vice President Lee Iacocca (Jon Bernthal) pitches Henry Ford II—"the Deuce"—(Tracy Letts) the idea of purchasing the nearly bankrupt Ferrari company. The autocratic Ford agrees and Iacocca is dispatched to Italy to present the proposal to Enzo Ferrari (Remo Girone), the firm's founder. The latter, after getting a better offer from Fiat, sends Iacocca packing, but not before he caustically derides his American counterpart ("Tell him he's not Henry Ford. He's Henry Ford the second") and his company.

Now Ford is determined to challenge and best Ferrari. From here on, however, the film becomes a match not so much between Ford and Ferrari, but between Ford's self-serving, myopic management and two mavericks hired to build the Ford race car: a former legendary race-car driver who now designs cars, the American Carroll Shelby (Matt Damon), and the volatile, immensely gifted British race car driver Ken Miles (Christian Bale).

While the Deuce wants to win Le Mans, he is impervious to the machinations of his senior executive vice president Leo Beebe (Josh Lucas), who desires to control the project, whatever the consequences.

Orders come down from on high that Miles cannot race the Ford car at the 1964 Le Mans. As a result, the Ford team suffers a humiliating defeat. But even at the 1966 Le Mans, when Miles is setting records, Beebe has the driver slow down so that the three Ford cars can cross the finish line simultaneously. Because of a technicality, Miles is

robbed of his justly deserved win. (Tragically, he died on a test track while driving a Ford car at more than 200 miles an hour only two months later, at age 47.)

Le Mans is a tremendous test of endurance, for driver and vehicle, and speed. The winners in 1966 covered 3,010 miles (4,844 kilometers) in a single day, longer than the distance by highway between New York City and Los Angeles. The record distance at Le Mans, set in 2010, is 3,362 miles (5,411 kilometers), or an average speed of more than 140 miles per hour over the course of 24 hours. (Each winning car had two drivers in the first several decades of the event; since 1985 three has become the norm.)

Ford's win in 1966 (and the following three years), like every other team's, depended on the cooperation and collaboration of designers, engineers, mechanics, drivers and many others. It represented something of a high-water mark for the postwar American auto industry (or perhaps a last creative gasp), roughly parallel to the success of the US space program. Ford (the only US-based constructor to win the event) has not won Le Mans since 1969, and Ferrari has not taken first prize since 1965. Porsche and Audi have dominated the event in recent decades, with 32 wins between them since 1970.

Automobiles and filmmaking are both products of modern industrial society. The world's first generally recognized motoring competition took place in 1894. The first public screenings of films at which admission was charged occurred a year later.

However, the artistic union of the two technologies has not necessarily spawned interesting drama. Too often, the dozens of films on the subject (featuring, among others, James Garner, Paul Newman, Steve McQueen, Jeff Bridges and Al Pacino) have been little more than a scaffolding for race-track action and are accordingly forgettable. One exception is Howard Hawks's relatively modest *Red Line 7000* (1965), a film that generates more genuine excitement and intensity out of the cars than in them, or, more accurately, integrates the emotional and physical-mechanical elements into a whole. In artistic

fashion, the various racing car sequences, in fact, express or indicate stages of the different emotional entanglements (between the leading male and female characters) and take them forward. But Hawks's artistry and urgency are in short supply at present, to say the least.

Mangold's *Ford v Ferrari*, at its best, is thrilling, taut entertainment. The racing scenes with Bale at the wheel are well-constructed and tension-filled. In one sequence, the Deuce (Ford), who shows up to check out his race car investment, blubbers like a baby when Shelby takes him for a fast drive. Bale and Damon give it their all, and this is the film's strongest feature. Overall, the energy and talent of the fine cast tends to uplift the generally predictable narrative.

Furthermore, the highly technical cinematography renders the experience of the film a predominantly sensual one. The heart pounds while the brain remains in low gear. Beyond dramatizing the racing scene, the movie favors the plebian over the aristocratic; American ingenuity over European stagnation and the workingman over the out-of-touch capitalist. *Ford v Ferrari* has decent but not earthshaking instincts.

### ***The Professor and the Madman***

*The Professor and the Madman* is directed by Farhad Safinia (under the pseudonym P. B. Shemran) and concerns the creation of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*). It is written by Safinia, and Todd Komarnicki, based on Simon Winchester's 1998 book *The Surgeon of Crowthorne*.

In 1872 London, former Union army surgeon Dr. William Chester Minor (Sean Penn) is found not guilty of murdering George Merrett (Shane Noone) by reason of insanity. Concurrently, James Murray (Mel Gibson), a self-taught Scottish lexicographer and philologist with an astonishing fluency in languages, proposes to a group of Oxford scholars to create "a plan for the life of each word," starting with "the birth record." He declares that his goal is "to offer the world a book that gives meaning to everything in God's creation. At least, the English part of it."

To accomplish this monumental task under the scrutiny of skeptical, and in some cases, hostile Oxford overseers, Murray sends out a call throughout the English-speaking world for volunteers "to achieve something unprecedented. To organize the world of words. And make them universally reachable and useful." He looks at the undertaking as "dictionary by democracy."

Imprisoned at the Broadmoor psychiatric facility, Minor is being treated by superintendent Dr. Richard Brayn (Stephen Dillane), who writes: "How can a man of such a high breeding have regressed to animality?" But when Minor gets wind of Murray's plan, he becomes one of the project's most effective and prolific compiler of quotations that illustrate the way in which particular words originate and are used. He is not only given access to a vast library of books in the prison, but is regularly visited by the widow (Natalie Dormer) of the man he murdered, who brings him additional literature. (In 1899, Murray commended Minor for his enormous contribution: "We could easily illustrate the last four centuries from his quotations alone.")

Murray remained the primary editor of the *OED* until his death in 1915. He sought and obtained the release of Dr. Minor from the psychiatric hospital, who was deported back to the United States where he was diagnosed with schizophrenia. He died in 1920 in Hartford, Connecticut.

*The Professor and the Madman* is elegantly written and treats its subject matter seriously. Gibson and Penn are convincing as protagonists in an unusual partnership, with the former giving a restrained and nuanced performance. The look of the film is visually striking.

Both the wonderful Jennifer Ehle as Ada Murray and the equally fine Dormer as Eliza Merrett seem a bit extraneous to the plot, as if inserted to fill a quota. But Steve Coogan as Frederick Furnival, one of the co-creators of the *New English Dictionary* and Murray's backer, effectively sheds his comic skin, and adds a muted regality to the production. Ioan Gruffudd, who plays Murray's stalwart assistant, also performs well.

Notably, the compassion and respect Murray feels for his brilliant, but mentally impaired collaborator gives the narrative its emotional weight. This type of sympathetic portrayal runs counter to today's environment of gross intolerance towards the most vulnerable sections of society.

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