



Wade Lanning

In American popular culture, the Corvair has too often been the Rodney Dangerfield of domestic automobiles: it don't get no respect. Unsafe, weird, failed—these slights and more have unfairly dogged the Corvair in the decades since production ended. Mustang, Corvette, and Camaro owners don't need to explain why they made one of those marques their hobby. Corvair owners, on the other hand, are constantly explaining. Which is part of the fun of owning a Corvair.

But with the publication of *Lifemobile*, a wonderful new novel by Jonathan Rintels, the popular misconceptions about Corvairs may at last give way to a more thoughtful consideration of the car's merits. Rintels, a member of the Central Virginia Corvair Club and a writer of film and television for over three decades, has crafted a fascinating and moving story based on his real-life experiences with

his son after he brought home a 1965 Corsa convertible that he had purchased on eBay. I had the honor of reading the manuscript of the book and could not put it down. I highly recommend it to all who own Corvairs, as well as all who do not.

I am not alone in praising this warm



and funny book. In a review sure to please Corvair fans, Robert Bianco, the television critic of *USA Today*, writes:

“In this lovely first novel from Jonathan Rintels, what begins, literally and figuratively, as a reclamation project for the much maligned Corvair grows into a sweet, moving celebration of the bond between fathers and sons—the way their flaws can magnify each other and their virtues can save each other. Written with a deft touch, an engaging wit, and a sure eye for what will ring warm and true, this is an incredibly engaging story that anyone would treasure. It might even make you go out and buy a Corvair.”

Lifemobile tells the story of Benjy Bennett, an honor student with Asperger's Syndrome (sometimes called “high functioning autism”), who upon graduation from high school hopelessly despairs that “there's no place in this world” for someone as different as him. But then his widowed



father brings home a “Deathmobile”—his joking term for an old Corvair, famously characterized by Ralph Nader as “unsafe at any speed.” When Benjy learns that the U.S. government ultimately found Nader’s charges untrue, and that the car was no deathmobile at all, he decides that the Corvair is “not disabled, just different,” as he is, and has been unfairly stigmatized by a world that does not understand it, just as he has. The different boy becomes the different car’s champion, determined to prove to the world how wrong it is about both of them. Taking Benjy and his father on a wild and emotional ride full of colorful characters and comic adventures, their Corvair becomes their “Lifemobile,” ultimately helping them both discover Benjy’s own uniquely satisfying place in this world.

As might be expected for a book in which the central character proclaims that the Corvair is “The Greatest Car in the History of the Universe,” the reaction of the Corvair community to *Lifemobile* has been extremely positive. Rintels appeared at the Virginia Vair Fair in May to sign books, and he will be reading from *Lifemobile* and signing books at the CORSA 2012 International Convention on July 28 at 10:00 AM. More about the book can be found at its website, <http://jonathantintels.com>, where it is available for purchase. An e-book version suitable for the Kindle, iPad, and Nook is also available.

I asked Rintels to tell us the story of how he came to write *Lifemobile*:

Two years ago, I bought a Corvair on eBay. As both my children will attest, I often do silly things. But I’d grown up with Vairs; in 1959, when I was four, my father had excitedly brought home a gray 1960 four-door. I fondly remember riding in what my family called the “cradle”—the shelf behind the back seat—and blissfully

dozing off to the whine and vibration of the engine beneath me. But in 1965, on our way home from church, that Vair’s engine suddenly dropped to the street—a catastrophic failure that might have caused lesser men to consider buying a different make of vehicle. Not my father! Less than 24 hours later, he excitedly brought home a new blue 1965 four-door Monza.

Why, 45 years later, had I now suddenly bought my own Corvair? Recall that in 2010, GM was bankrupt, and some industry observers, including noted journalist Paul Ingrassia, placed part of the blame for the company’s woes on the GM-Nader controversy over the car’s safety. Wrote Ingrassia in his book *Crash Course*, “It’s almost impossible to overstate the magnitude of the Corvair debacle for General Motors, indeed for the entire American auto industry.” At the same time, Toyotas were racing out of control due to sticking accelerators. Some called them the most dangerous autos on America’s highways since—you guessed it—the Corvair.

I had never driven my father’s Corvair; just before I was about to receive my learner’s permit, a drunk driver crashed into and totaled it while it was parked at the curb in front of our house. With the Corvair suddenly back in the news after so many

decades, I became curious about the car and wondered why my father was such a Corvair fan. So, I bought my own Corvair, a ’65 Corsa convertible. Black with a white top. I think I like looking at it as much as I like driving it. Not that it’s perfectly restored or in cherry condition, far from it. But I consider the late model such a gorgeously styled car; to me, it’s a finely sculpted work of art and one of the best automotive designs ever to come out of Detroit.

When I brought my Corvair home, an uneventful and enjoyable thousand mile drive in just over a day from Kansas City to Virginia, my son wanted nothing to do with it. “It’s just an old car, Dad,” he repeated over and over. My son has Asperger’s Syndrome, or what some call “high-functioning autism.” He can be pretty rigid at times, and when he makes his mind up about something, that’s usually it.

But not this time. Somehow, I ended up telling him about Nader, *Unsafe at Any Speed*, and the harm they did to the Corvair’s reputation and sales. Then I told him what most people don’t know; that many years after Nader’s book, the U.S. government found the Corvair was as safe or safer than comparable cars of its time.

“So Corvairs weren’t really unsafe,” he said. “They got stereotyped because they were different. Like me.” Finding a kinship with this car, he was suddenly fascinated by all things Corvair and wanted only to ride in our Corvair. To my astonishment, he even volunteered to help me work on it. Never before had he volunteered to help me work on anything. Since then, we’ve spent a lot of extremely high quality time together in our Corvair. It turned out that buying it wasn’t so silly after all. In fact, it changed our lives.

That was how I came to write *Lifemobile*, a story about a father, his special son, and a special car that changes their lives forever. ⊕

