

NASCAR in fiction: Sharyn McCrumb's got a new one out

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Like the stock car driving hero of her new novel, “Once Around the Track,” Sharyn McCrumb has made a bold move toward an open space in her field. Also like her modest protagonist, Badger Jenkins, she is doing what she likes in her life, regardless of marketing advice.

McCrumb, beloved author of Elizabeth McPherson mysteries (“If I’d Killed Him When I Met Him”) and literary ballad novels (“The Ballad of Frankie Silver”), has fallen in love with NASCAR. As a result, she has become the bard of motorsports.

Dead-on and hilarious

“Once Around the Track” is not McCrumb’s first novel with a NASCAR subject. Her previous novel, “St. Dale,” followed a group of die-hard fans to Dale Earnhardt sites, consciously creating a modern “Canterbury Tales.” “Once Around the Track” does not have such a literary model. Instead, it focuses directly on a driver and fosters a hilarious scenario.

The driver, Badger Jenkins, mild-mannered country boy who transforms into the “Angel of Death” when he dons his firesuit, breaks back into the Cup racing elite thanks to a new sponsor, Vanganya, the woman’s Viagra. The sponsors come up with the idea of providing him an all-woman pit crew.

Badger is very likable, has flaws that make him real and representative, and carries the book. Despite some cartoonish characterization (the owners of the racing team are as crass as their glittering assets), dropped balls (parents’ reactions to the sponsor) and repetitive mantras (Badger “actually looked taller” in his gear), I like this book even more than “St. Dale.” It’s very entertaining and, as usual for McCrumb, most informative.

NASCAR-ology

“NASCAR isn’t like it was in the old days,” Badger tells his escort-for-the-day, engine specialist Rosalind Manning, on the way to a children’s hospital. “Now a driver can’t make all that much of a difference. Now it’s all about multicar teams pooling their research and about testing time in the wind tunnel. Engineering tricks.”

Team Vanganya’s underdog status fuels much of the drama as Badger’s crew goes from one race to another. The efforts of the engineering staff to do what the big boys do — that is, cheat in new ways that haven’t been covered by rules yet — makes interesting reading. On the way, we learn about restrictor plates, tire soaking and shock absorbers.

We also learn about the differences between the Cup Series tracks; and primarily, how great a sport stock car racing is. Those the least bit familiar with popular culture might know that NASCAR is second to the NFL in television ratings and tops in sports arena per-event attendance. For a slightly deeper understanding, one might turn to Rosalind's defense of NASCAR.

“Let's see you get in your car and drive for five hundred miles without getting out, and the longest you can stop is 13 seconds ... Forty-two other cars are coming at you at the speed of three miles per minute. And the temperature in your car is over one hundred degrees. The g-forces pull your body to the right while you are trying to turn the wheel to the left to make the turns ... and if you are strong enough not to wreck, your body will feel like you spent three hours tumbling in a clothes dryer.”