

FICTION: Fast women, NASCAR-style
ONCE AROUND THE TRACK by Sharyn McCrumb

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By JUDITH CHETTLE
SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

It's only fitting, perhaps, that an acclaimed Southern writer should put a feminine face on NASCAR. And Sharyn McCrumb's new novel, "Once Around the Track," is a beguiling tale of an all-woman NASCAR crew determined to make a good showing for their wealthy backers.

McCrumb has done her homework, and it shows. There is an informed grittiness to this essentially sweet tale of women who love the sport and the men who drive the cars. She talked to professional drivers, visited race shops and rode in a race car at Lowe's Motor Speedway so that she could appreciate both the racing itself and the maintenance required.

With characters that range from society women to a diner waitress, McCrumb tells one of those stories with numerous subplots that somehow are all resolved satisfactorily by the end.

The novel opens as applicants stream in, after a group of wealthy women investors, hearing that NASCAR is hot, decide to invest in an all-woman NASCAR crew. Their reasons for signing on are varied: Rosalind, an MIT graduate, wants to use her engineering skills; Melanie hopes to be the team's publicist so she can sell an expose of the sport to "Vanity Fair"; and Taran, a besotted young fan, is drawn to their choice of Badger Jenkins as their driver.

Badger was once a big name in racing but is currently less in demand, though women still swarm around him. A sweet-natured Georgia boy who is happiest fishing alone on his lake, Badger is a pussycat out of a car, though once in the driver's seat, he becomes a menacing, awe-inspiring figure.

But Badger, who spends rather than saves, needs money for retirement.

Badger, who knows this may be his last shot at racing in the big time, begins to work with the crew members as they learn to work with the speed and coordination that racing requires. McCrumb deftly evokes the tensions between the owners, who want a win so they can brag about their sharp investment, and the crew members, who are loyal to Badger, whether he wins or not.

At the heart of the story are the young women who are drawn to racing and to Badger. Even initial skeptics such as Melanie change their attitude to racing and Badger, who sometimes is almost too good to be true.

But this is a minor quibble in a heartwarming story that celebrates loyalty and love for racing cars, rather than just winning prizes. Fans will especially enjoy this book.

Judith Chettle is a Richmond-based book reviewer and writer.