

Memories of a Rare Alfa Romeo

Story and Photographs by Peter Darnall

Books have always been special to me. I still have many of the books that I grew up with and really enjoy looking through them from time to time. I don't think I've ever thrown a book away—that just wouldn't be right. The bookshelves in our house are all full. The coffee table in the living room always has a book or two on it. They aren't there for display. These books are being read and being savored as books were meant to be.

Then there are a few books that are just special. My copy of *The Racer* falls into this category and it sits in a place of honor. The book is quite worn now. The scotch tape holding the torn jacket together is brittle and has turned yellow with age. The “Ex Libris” stamp with my name on it is still there proudly displayed on the inside of the front cover. Good thing—I probably wouldn't have the book today if that stamp hadn't been there.

Let's start in the beginning . . .

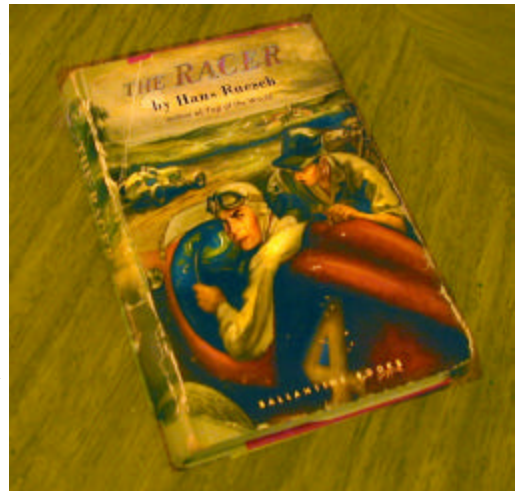
It seems like only yesterday, but it was over a half a century ago. The spring of 1954, to be exact, and I was fifteen years old at the time. I can still remember the bookstore owner's disapproving frown as he followed me to the magazine rack and watched me take down the latest issue of *Photography* magazine. Out of the corner of my eye, however, I caught a glimpse of something interesting. I put the unopened magazine back on the shelf and walked over to the new book display. It was the book's cover that had drawn me like a magnet—an artist's rendition of race cars against a background of a winding road racing circuit. What a find! My whole world revolved around sports cars and road racing at that time. I paid the \$1.50 price and walked out with my new purchase.

Take my word for it, you can judge a book by its cover.

The Racer was written by Hans Ruesch. This is a novel that contains wonderful descriptions of Grand Prix racing in the 1930's. In fact, this book really became my window into that Golden Age of Motor Racing. I would have given anything then to have seen those cars in action.

Hans Ruesch knew this era of Grand Prix racing from personal experience. He competed during this time in over 100 events, sometimes as a member of Scuderia Ferrari. Scuderia Ferrari was the racing division of Alfa Romeo and this was the heart and the soul of the Italian racing effort. Ruesch was driving at the very top level! He eventually purchased a surplus 8C-35 Alfa Romeo from Scuderia Ferrari and used it to campaign with considerable success across Europe as an independent.

The book's main character is Erich Lester. His ruthless driving style had earned him a position on the dominant German team. His ambition to be the best costs him dearly and he is badly injured in a crash. If this scenario sounds familiar, you might have seen the movie. In



***The Racer* by Hans Ruesch**

1954, **20th Century Fox** produced a motion picture called *The Racers*. The movie, which starred Kirk Douglas and Bela Darvi, was based on the book *The Racer* by Hans Ruesch. I've read the book from cover to cover several times over the years. Thumbing through the pages now brings back the exact feelings I felt when I read the book for the first time.

That's when the trouble began. . .

I was well into the story. Erich Lester was on the pole position and was starting his first race for the German team. The text on page 61 reads: "... *at five seconds the starter began counting on his outspread fingers, closing one after the other, and Lester released his hand-brake. The car began nosing forward...*" I remember a smell of stale cigarette smoke and garlic filling the air. An arm suddenly appeared from above and grabbed my book. An angry voice rasped, "I'll take that book, young man."

My world of motor racing was suddenly shattered. I'd been reading my book in Physics class and hadn't noticed that the teacher, "Wild Bill" Emery, had walked up behind me. Wild Bill now had my book in his right hand and was holding it up like a trophy. The whole class was laughing—not a good moment. I was sent to the principal's office and was not see my book again for a long time.

It took a written note signed by my parents and a lot of talking on my part to get my book returned. It had been in exile for about six months. Wild Bill's drawer was crammed full of reading material and other paraphernalia which he had taken from students over the years. Fortunately my "Ex Libris" label on the inside cover had my name on it providing positive identification. My book was grudgingly handed back but it had suffered considerable damage during its captivity.

Today the torn cover appears to me like a mark of honor, akin to the dueling scars sported years ago by young Austrian university students. As I hold the book now, the memory of that day in Wild Bill Emery's class returns—like a succubus.

Wait, there's more . . .

It was a warm day in late fall a couple of years ago. I was with my friend, Peter Giddings in the paddock area at Thunderhill Raceway Park. Peter is a well-known car collector and a highly skilled racing driver. A considerable crowd was gathered around his latest automotive acquisition. It was a very special Alfa Romeo Grand Prix car of mid-thirties. The Ferrari emblem on the hood stood out in sharp contrast to the maroon color of the body. Here was the real thing—a documented Scuderia Ferrari Alfa Romeo. It's the only 8C-35 in existence with matching serial numbers on both the engine and the chassis. The legendary Italian ace, Tazio Nuvolari, had taken this Tipo C into battle with the German super cars.

Here was the exact car that Hans Ruesch purchased from Scuderia Ferrari long ago. Unbelievable!

The car was every bit as impressive as I had envisioned it would have when I read my



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book, *The Racer*, for the first time many years ago I won't forget that weekend at Thunderhill. The Tipo C ran perfectly that day. From my vantage point beside the road, I remember the spine-tingling exhaust note echoing off the surrounding foothills as the car approached. Then a rush of air as the Alfa flew by. In the open cockpit, Peter's arms were sawing away at the large steering wheel, working to finesse the Alfa in a superb four-wheel drift on the last turn before the long straight. Then the acrid smell of blended fuel and hot lacquer lingering on long after the Alfa had screamed past.

If you get a chance to see this Alfa in action, don't miss it!

—Peter Darnall



Peter Giddings at speed in the Tipo C at Thunderhill