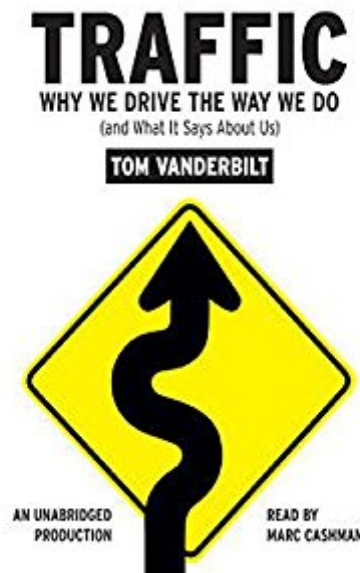


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# Traffic: Why We Drive The Way We Do (and What It Says About Us)



## Synopsis

Would you be surprised that road rage can be good for society? Or that most crashes happen on sunny, dry days? That our minds can trick us into thinking the next lane is moving faster? Or that you can gauge a nation's driving behavior by its levels of corruption? These are only a few of the remarkable dynamics that Tom Vanderbilt explores in this fascinating tour through the mysteries of the road. Based on exhaustive research and interviews with driving experts and traffic officials around the globe, *Traffic* gets under the hood of the everyday activity of driving to uncover the surprisingly complex web of physical, psychological, and technical factors that explain how traffic works, why we drive the way we do, and what our driving says about us. Vanderbilt examines the perceptual limits and cognitive underpinnings that make us worse drivers than we think we are. He demonstrates why plans to protect pedestrians from cars often lead to more accidents. He shows how roundabouts, which can feel dangerous and chaotic, actually make roads safer and reduce traffic in the bargain. He uncovers who is more likely to honk at whom, and why. He explains why traffic jams form, outlines the unintended consequences of our quest for safety, and even identifies the most common mistake drivers make in parking lots. The car has long been a central part of American life; whether we see it as a symbol of freedom or a symptom of sprawl, we define ourselves by what and how we drive. As Vanderbilt shows, driving is a provocatively revealing prism for examining how our minds work and the ways in which we interact with one another. Ultimately, *Traffic* is about more than driving: it's about human nature. This book will change the way we see ourselves and the world around us. And who knows? It may even make us better drivers. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I live in Los Angeles, and my daily commute subjects me to this city's infamous traffic. So why in the world would I want to read a book about traffic? After all, I live it every day. Well, whether you live in a crowded city or a small town off the interstate, Traffic turns out to be an interesting, worthwhile look at humans and their machines, what happens on the road, and why. Traffic hooked me right off the bat with its provocative starting point: you're on the freeway in the right hand lane. A sign indicates that the lane is ending and you should merge left. Do you merge at the first safe opportunity and get mad at the drivers who keep zooming past on the right until the last possible merge point? Or are you one of the drivers who waits until that endpoint, where you have to stop and wait for your turn to merge? Tom Vanderbilt used to be an early merger, but then he changed his ways. Once you read the facts behind his decision, maybe you'll change your ways too. Vanderbilt explores this and other conventional wisdom of the road. He also looks at traffic from an engineering point of view. For instance, how much good do all those speed limit, caution and warning signs actually do? What would happen in a busy, urban environment if we just took those signs away and let people figure things out for themselves? (It's been tried and the results surprised me.) Have we collectively done the right thing by widening our roads, adding bike lanes, crosswalks and protected turn arrows? By the time I reached the end of this book, I had plenty of food for thought.

While the topic of the book is nominally "traffic", the real topic is about human psychology and how it deals with the situations involving traffic. The material is chock full of "things that make you go, 'hmm.'" In spite of being intriguing, the information the author conveys is rarely useful information. The reader will likely be left unmoved by the author's reasoned advocacy of late merging, for instance. Similarly, the style of writing feels like that of a news or talk show, where the announcer/host will "tease" an interesting bit of info, run a commercial, discuss things about which you don't care, run another commercial, and then, in the last 2 minutes of air time, give you the anticlimactic answer to the story headline you found interesting enough to make you sit and watch. Unfortunately, most of the book is like this, and the cool things that the author has to say are just that. Cool, but not quite meriting a book. Of the book's 400 pages, nearly 100 are end notes. I am happy that the author's work is well-sourced (books of this genre often lack sources, preferring

to rely on anecdotes), but it conveys how the author had to work fairly hard to turn a very large set of disjointed facts into any sort of readable narrative. In this regard, the author's narrative is interesting and readable. It definitely made me keep reading the whole way through. At the end, however, I felt kind of empty and unenlightened, so I had to sit back and figure out why. The reason appears to be because it's like a long magazine article: interesting, longer than a newspaper story, full of interesting insights, but in the end, it's light fare.

I have been accused of being an aggressive and unsafe driver, much to my chagrin. I know I am aggressive, but unsafe? That I take exception to. It is true however that your own perception of how you drive is much out of whack with your passenger's perspective. *Traffic - Why We Drive The Way We Do (and What It Says About Us)* by Tom Vanderbilt seeks to explore this most mundane of everyday activities. Driving and Traffic are technically separate but closely related subjects and Mr. Vanderbilt provides a fascinating discussion of both. Traffic begins with Mr. Vanderbilt's admission of being a 'late-merger', someone who waits till the last moment before exiting a closed lane and merging into a parallel one. There are some drivers who choose to merge early, as soon as they see a sign indicating their lane is closed ahead (or is exit only etc.), others wait right up to the last second and then indignantly try to merge into the freer flowing traffic of the next lane. The first few chapters of the book focus on driving, taking into account factors like cognition, culture, human psychology (and psyche), self perception of who you are and who you want to be, reflex times and the meaning of gestures and signals. Chapter Five is provocatively titled 'Why Women Cause More Congestion Than Men (and Other Secrets of Traffic)' - but don't get offended yet, the author goes on to explain why that is so. Women continue to handle a lot of 'non-work' trips, taking kids to school and soccer practice for example. Women also tend to be engaged in what Vanderbilt calls "serve-passenger" trips, where they are taking passengers to places they don't have to be themselves and they tend to make several stops thus 'chaining' multiple trips.

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