

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

BUG:

The Strange Mutations of the World's Most Famous Automobile.

By Phil Patton. Simon & Schuster. 248 pp. \$25

DISASTER IN DEARBORN:

The Story of the Edsel.

By Thomas E. Bonsall. Stanford Univ. Press.

230 pp. \$35.95

In *Bug*, Patton plays Herodotus and regales readers with tales and customs of the folks behind the Volkswagen Beetle. Conceived as “The People’s Car” at the behest of Adolf Hitler in 1937 and still being built to this day, the Bug is an entertaining piece of practical whimsy that is well served by its latest chronicler. Patton, an elegant design writer who often covers the car industry, displays his considerable wit and erudition in a book filled with pithy and pointed recaps of everything from Nazi industrial policy to the design of Swatch watches to a postmodern reading of the “Love Bug” movies. He cites naturalist Sue Hubbell, artist Albrecht Dürer, Kafka protagonist Gregor Samsa, and novelist Vladimir Nabokov in four successive sentences.

But considering that a car is his ostensible subject, Patton displays curiously little interest in the Beetle as a machine, pre-

ferring instead to focus on its marketing and Larger Meaning. In fact, the liveliest section of his book tracks the creation in the 1990s of the New Beetle, a car for the upwardly mobile that has virtually nothing in common with Ferdinand Porsche’s original masterpiece other than general design language. (The New Beetle is essentially a VW Golf in funkier duds.) Patton seems more energized by this case study of the modern synergy between styling and marketing than he is by the genesis of the old Beetle, which was the product of the Teutonic ascendancy of engineering over styling.

Like the New Beetle, the Edsel was an attempt to refashion an existing car (a mid-priced Mercury) to appeal to a new market. But, in a story that has generated perverse fascination ever since the car debuted in 1957, the Edsel became the industry’s most infamous failure. Automotive historian Bonsall’s leaden, academic postmortem will scare away all but the most determined readers. Car industry types will enjoy some fine material about, for example, General Motors’ seminal system of sharing car bodies. But Bonsall’s conclusion—that the Edsel was “a modest success” unfairly killed by beancounters—seems as fanciful as the myths he sets out to debunk.

Bottom line? The Edsel was a mediocre, overpriced, notoriously homely product that deserved to fail. The Beetle, on the other hand, was a masterwork of industrial design—cheap to build, easy to maintain, utilitarian, robust, and, above all, fun. Sure, the brilliant Doyle Dane Bernbach ad campaigns in the 1960s helped sell the car, and so did a smiley-face personality that made its otherness palatable to the masses. But if the Beetle and the Edsel teach us anything, it’s that product comes first.

—PRESTON LERNER



Ferdinand Porsche (left) gave this scale model of the Volkswagen to Adolf Hitler for his birthday in 1938. The Führer was clearly charmed.