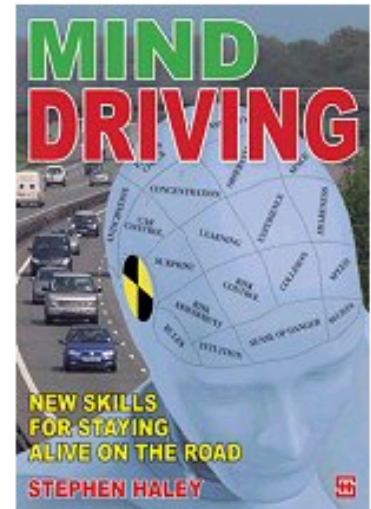


Mind Driving

by David Finlay (10 Oct 06)

This is the best book I have ever read on the subject of road driving, and perhaps the most important that has ever been written. As early as page 14, author Stephen Haley says, "By now you will know that this book is unlike any other you will find on driving." There are 183 pages to go, and his claim holds true for all of them.

One of Haley's central points is that passing the standard driving test is merely the beginning of the story. It *allows* you to drive without an instructor sitting beside you, but the techniques you have learned up to this point give only a very basic idea of *how* to drive.



This is already well-known. The problem is that most newly-passed drivers are not shown how to advance their skills from this point onwards. Too often the assumption is that they will learn by trial and error, but what if "error" means a major, expensive, damaging, perhaps injurious, possibly fatal road accident? There must be a better way.

In fact there are several better ways, but they all involve extra levels of instruction. Not everyone will have the inclination to use them, and making them compulsory for all the drivers in the country would be massively expensive. Everyone can, however, buy and read this book. I wish they would.

Haley deals with the subject brilliantly. First, he establishes that the most important outcome of any road journey is to arrive safely. He then assesses the current situation of road safety and the way it is affected by driving standards. After that, he breaks down the act of driving into eight core skills - beliefs, sense of danger, rules and regulations, learning from experience, fitness check, observation, risk assessment and control, and car control - and in most cases reduces each of these to its component parts, establishes the way in which they can be improved, and then rebuilds them in such a way that they become part of an expert driving technique.

I say "in most cases" because Haley devotes varying amounts of attention to each subject. By far the largest section in the book is the one devoted to risk assessment and control, which could almost be a book in itself except that it has to be seen as part of the bigger picture.

Haley has much less to say about rules, regulations and fitness checks, for the very good reason that these subjects are already dealt with in great detail elsewhere (the Highway Code, for example), and have to be well understood before the driving test can be passed.

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He does not discuss car control to any great extent either, because this is "already a major and essential part of traditional driver training". I think Haley is on unsteady ground here, since there is in fact far more to car control than is ever hinted at during standard driving lessons. Ironically, the very few pieces of advice Haley gives on the subject (concerning steering and braking) are quite valuable, and he also makes it clear that relying on good car control at the expense of the other seven skills is no recipe for a safe driving career.

I don't know Haley, but I suspect that he would welcome my challenge to his treatment of car control. In other parts of the book he invites disagreement quite happily, on the basis that the person doing the disagreeing is now thinking about their driving - exactly what they should be doing, in other words.

In any case, there is enough excellent advice here to make a major difference to anyone's driving. The more people that read it - and, crucially, use it as a starting point for improving their technique, rather than simply using it as a motoring Bible - the safer our roads will be.

If all drivers in the UK read this book and used it as it should be used, the effect on our motoring lives would be startling. Journey times would fall, fuel consumption would decrease, everyone would be more relaxed, road rage would be a thing of the past, insurance premiums would plummet, and death and injury on our roads would vanish. I suspect also that speed limits would become merely advisory, and that nobody would have a problem keeping to them when they were obviously appropriate to the conditions.

All this is possible, but it's not going to happen. Too many people are so scared of, aggressive about or indifferent to driving that they will ignore the existence of this book and continue to be a risk to themselves and other road users. We will never reach the Utopia implied by *Mind Driving*, but those of us who read it and take note of its message will at least have the advantage over those who don't.

Mind Driving: New Skills For Staying Alive On The Road, by Stephen Haley, is published by Safety House at £12.99. ISBN 1 873371 16 0. More details at www.driving.org.