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*For some, cars are giant, shiny badges of machismo or material success.*

*For others, they have become an everyday adjunct to life, as necessary as dental work but slightly more fun.*

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# START ENGINES

Whether you regard them as expressions of your libido or extensions of your overdraft, cars are hard to ignore.

They're the subject of politics, lust, envy, aspiration and necessity. They're symbols of liberation and progress that stop you getting where you want to go as their numbers have multiplied like super-viruses and clogged up the roads.

Cars are the result of genius, megalomania, vanity and insanity, and have the capacity to both fascinate and bore. Visit one of Britain's few remaining pubs and in the corner of the bar will be a man with a brown nylon tie and his own tankard who knows everything about the Triumph Herald. Go to the car park of your local supermarket after it's shut and you'll find spotty boys in hoodies and saggy-arsed jeans who wish Jeremy Clarkson was their dad. They'll have memorised the top speed of every Lamborghini built since 1998, but have to content themselves with wheel-spinning a 12-year-old, wheezing, 1000cc Vauxhall Corsa until one of its drive shafts snap or they collect a shopping trolley as a bonnet mascot. Or both.

Car bluffing starts early, and the high cost of motoring is hardly a disincentive to drive. If you're under 25, then your first car will cost many times more than it's worth to insure for a year, sadly not because miserable, middle-aged insurers are jealous of your youth and vitality but because they reckon (with some justification) that you're an adrenalin-addled nutter who will wrap it round a Bentley at the first opportunity.

But this won't put you off car ownership. Quite the contrary. It will make the prospect of getting behind the wheel of your own car even more alluring. And you will remember that seminal moment for the rest of your life. Indeed, you can still recall those looks of admiring envy from other car owners when you first screeched to a halt on that garage forecourt, narrowly missing the tiers of wilting flowers and charcoal briquettes, as you casually stepped out of your wheezing runabout, and struck a noble pose of devil-may-care insouciance.

With the myopia of youth, you will have failed to notice that your audience's lips were collectively mouthing the word 'tossler', but no matter. You were finally there, you had joined the brother/sisterhood of car owners, and the road of freedom stretched out ahead of you with all its shimmering promise of limitless adventure.

For some, cars are giant, shiny badges of machismo or material success. For others, they have become an everyday adjunct to life, as necessary as dental work but slightly more fun.

Then there are car enthusiasts, for whom anything with a wheel at each corner is utterly fascinating. They