

Motorcycles Speak Louder Than Words, by Jack Riepe

A review by Wes Fleming #87301

THE FIRST FREEZING COLD DAYS finally descended on the city of Richmond, Virginia, my hometown for both the last year and the next 20. I edged up to the bar inside Babe's of Carytown and the bartender, 60 if she was a day, asked without looking up, "The same?"

"Yeah," I said. "But make it with the good stuff this time, not that rotgut you gave me the first time," I continued, completing the coded sequence.

She put a glass on the bar in front of me. It didn't matter what was in it. "That'll be six dollars," she said, her voice lowering conspiratorially as her eyes darted furtively from side to side.

I handed over a \$10 bill and she turned her back on me. Now it was my turn to look around. I used the pretense of adjusting my helmet as it sat on the barstool next to me; tucking my gloves inside it gave me an excuse to check out the clientele.

At the table behind me, three women engaged in an agitated discussion about Richmond's new express bus lane construction that has gone on months past its deadline. One of them had those giant, tribal-looking plugs in her ears, they must have weighed a pound each. I wondered if they banged on the edges of her jaw when she walked.

Next to them, standing in the least well-lit corner of the establishment, were two tall, wispy blondes, aggressively making out with each other. One of them wore Crocs, an odd choice at the front end of central Virginia's rainy cold and flu season, but I couldn't judge the guy. I walked in here looking like an out-of-place member of the Village People in my motorcycle gear. Nobody looked twice at my chaps and boots bottom half, but I could tell plug-ears knew enough about motorcycle riders to

know that my textile Firstgear jacket marked me as a guy who didn't ride anything made in or even remotely near Milwaukee.

"Here's your change," the bartender said, interrupting my reconnoiter. She handed me a USB thumb drive, as black and mysterious as the guy making out in the corner that *wasn't* wearing Crocs. Noticing she wasn't handing me the four dollar bills I expected, I looked at her with surprise. "Riepe says hello," she said, smiling at long last. "Tell that cigar-chomping son of a bitch we're even."

Nearly speechless, I could only sputter as she moved sideways to take care of the next customer. Her mission complete, she was suddenly as indifferent to my presence as rain clouds are to a motorcyclist aiming for the distant horizon. Her debt to Jack Riepe repaid, she no doubt felt the weight of a thousand gin and tonics lift off her shoulders. She could live out the rest of her days with a modicum of joy at knowing she could put Bayonne, Riepe, and whatever had brought the two of them together behind her.

I took a circuitous route home, making sure I wasn't being followed by anybody from one of the rivals of the Zadic & Develle publishing house. It hadn't escaped me that their sea-monster-and-clipper-ship logo was embossed on the flat surface of the USB stick the bartender passed me.

It took serious effort to go through my usual coming-home routine when all I wanted to do was rush upstairs, close my office door and plug the USB stick into the \$250 throwaway, air-gapped computer I got through a Craigslist ad I was sure a desperate junkie posted with the sole purpose of funding his next fix. It's not that I didn't trust the bartender – I didn't – but I damn

sure didn't trust Riepe. Who knows what he put on that stick. Would I survive? Would my family disown me? Would my government declare me a traitor, hunt me down, and send me off to Guantanamo Bay for the rest of my pitiful life?

There was one file on the USB stick. I couldn't resist. I double-clicked on "OPEN_ME.PDF" and waited for the bits and bytes to reveal Riepe's master plan to me in all its glory.

What greeted me that day was an advance copy of Jack Riepe's next book, *Motorcycles Speak Louder Than Words*. It is a sequel to *Conversations With a Motorcycle*, but it is not a typical sequel. You need not have read *Conversations* to understand and enjoy *Louder Than Words*, but if you have, there is a large amount of comfort in coming into this book already knowing who most of the characters are and some detail about the places and situations mentioned in this book.

The critical characters from *Conversations* are back – Jack, Cretin, Spider and the Equestrian – and of course, the specter of the Dark Secret hovers closely at every turn. The stories related by Riepe in *Motorcycles Speak Louder Than Words* will be familiar to anybody who has read the other book, but here they take on added depth and a richer context as Riepe expands and explains more about what happened in, around, through, beneath and above them.

Readers of *BMW Owners News* will of course be familiar with Riepe and his particular style of storytelling. Riepe writes in a fashion that is both elegant and brutal, fleshed out and flayed away at the same time. You should know that if you already dislike Riepe's storytelling style or if you are easily offended by foul language and frank descriptions of public nudity, you'd be well



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advised to give your pre-ordered copy to a friend who appreciates those things.

Riepe's main character Jack – ostensibly himself – is a fledgling writer trying to prove himself to be a grown-up – a hard drinker, a cigar-smoking barfly, a talented writer and a gifted lover. To do that, Riepe (and the narrator) must be fully honest with both himself and the reader. That means exposing every thought of a young, horny, male motorcyclist on his own and in his early 20s. The narrator is interested in just three things – writing the perfect story, riding his motorcycle, and getting laid as often as is humanly possible. Knowing Riepe, I have no doubts this is the most autobiographical aspect of the book.

One of Riepe's strong points as an author is his ability to describe something powerfully with a minimum of

words. What appears to be a run-of-the-mill tree-lined boulevard in Bayonne, New Jersey, instead becomes a metaphor for Jack's impending life-altering choice. It is through the descriptive paragraphs framing Bayonne scattered throughout the book that we come to a deeper understanding of Jack's personality, torn as he is between his past and his future.

Motorcycles play a central part in this book, and none is more central than the author's self-aware Kawasaki H2. The early-1970s 750cc two-stroke was no-one's vision of motorcycling perfection, but its three-cylinder engine and funky steering geometry exist in Riepe's world as the narrator's perfect foil. He describes it at one point by saying "an upright player piano could take a turn better than the Kawasaki," and he's not wrong. His motorcycle is sentient; it talks to him, often dispensing the best advice he can handle.

During an existential crisis, the motorcycle asks Jack, "Do you have any idea how crazy you sound?" The H2 is pushing Jack to reexamine his path in a romantic entanglement, quickly moving from physical to emotional for the young writer. Jack is struggling to find the woman's place in his life, but he doesn't yet accept the reality of his situation. While Jack has been thinking he's the main character in his own life story, the truth is that he's the love interest in somebody else's life story. His realization of this is tinted with bittersweet awareness, bacon, a savage beating in a bar fight, a haze of two-stroke exhaust, and two rainy camping weekends.

At its most philosophical, *Motorcycles Speak Louder Than Words* will cause even the most jaded among us to reevaluate our motivations

for our romantic choices and engage in an in-depth examination of the fundamental nature of attraction, how love (or at least the perception of love) can be bent by our minds and genitals, the reasons we seek companionship in the first place, how and why we struggle with it when we find it, and perhaps most importantly, why many of us hold on to an escape plan for as long as we can before finally giving in to the near-inexorable impulse to forsake all others and focus on The One.

I know from my conversations with Riepe that late in the book's development, he angered his publishers by adding more than 30,000 words to the narrative, delaying its publication by six months. I'll be damned if I can tell you which ones were added, because the story is seamless from start to finish, a testament to Riepe's skill with narrative storytelling. This is the book's shining moment – because even if you never heard of the previous book, *Motorcycles Speak Louder Than Words* holds its own as a tale of personal growth. We often feel as if we're the only one going through what we're going through, and while that might be true as an archetypal concept, Riepe shows us through Jack's journey that we are not alone – even when we might make the choice to exist as a solitary, unattached individual.

As Riepe writes towards the end of the book, "Motorcycle headlights put everything in the bike's perspective." In *Motorcycles Speak Louder Than Words*, Riepe puts everything in a young motorcyclist's perspective, and it is through watching his growth that we can find room in our lives for love, pain, gin, cigars, sex and the occasional motorcycle.

Motorcycles Speak Louder Than Words contains foul language and adult situations involving sex, alcohol, drugs, motorcycles and violence. It may not be suitable for children, anybody who has never ridden a motorcycle, and those lacking a sense of humor. It is available through the author's website, jackriepe.com, as are his other books. Once you finish this book, you'll feel the urge to track down copies of Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* and John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. These books are not available through Riepe's website. ☺

