

BOOK REVIEW

How to Live Well Without Owning a Car: Save Money, Breathe Easier, and Get More Mileage Out of Life**By Chris Balish****Ten Speed Press, 2006, 216 Pages**

Reviewed by Carleton Wong

Want to be a millionaire? Pay off all your debt decades before your buddies? Retire early? Be healthier? Chris Balish says you can, and he's not selling you any pills or pyramid schemes. Instead, you can do all of this – and more – by reading *How to Live Well Without Owning a Car: Save Money, Breathe Easier, and Get More Mileage Out of Life*.

The mere thought of not owning a car in the United States today is blasphemous. Cars are engrained in the average American's daily life, Balish claims. However, his extensive research through personal interviews (over 200 people contributed to his manuscript, evident from the dozens of quotes from car-free lovers scattered throughout) show that living car-free (or even car-lite, as he calls it) is not only possible – it works.

Balish quickly addresses critics, stressing that there is no need to *own* a car, but you may need to *ride* in one. This is where car-sharing, carpooling, renting, or even catching a cab comes in. On paper, they may look expensive – but they don't come close to the cost of actually owning a car. This is the underlying sell in Balish's book – the fact that you can save a ton of money by not owning. One assumption he makes is that to become a millionaire, you would need to invest your savings into the stock market and expect an 8 percent return. Whether or not this is optimistic is not the point – Balish wants you to know that the money really does add up over time.

The first half of the book attempts to convince you *why* you should live car-free. Balish includes the obligatory chapter on the environmental consequences of owning a car, such as natural resource consumption and pollution. The exhaustive list of *things you won't miss about owning a car* will have you thinking about your own quality-of-life. Balish also includes a car cost worksheet for you to calculate how much money you actually spend when owning a car. The next time you shop for a car, look at the asking price –then *double* it. That's how much the car will actually cost, and Balish covers this in detail.

The second half of the book provides tips on *how* to live car-free – bicycling, walking, using mass transit, even socializing and going on dates without a car, while still having a great time. Balish offers a barrage of creative car-free tips and outlines the important steps and points you should consider – including grooming and cleaning tips when you get to the office in a sweat.

Academics be forewarned – Balish’s work offers little in terms of academic revelations, and his book would never be mistaken for a thesis. But that was never its intention; the book was designed to reach out to (mostly) everyone to challenge our intrinsic desire to own a vehicle, whether you’re a scholar or not. The problem with his get-rich-quick-by-saving-your-own-money scheme is that you have to live in the right place to really make it happen. Do you live in a city, or a mixed-use development? Do you have reliable access to public transportation? But most importantly, as Balish bluntly asks, can you get over your own ego?

Living car-free is certainly not for everyone, but reducing your dependency on the automobile may be. Balish’s “personal finance and lifestyle” guide, loaded with quotes, statistics, and illustrations, makes it perfect for the coffee table. Whether your guests are car-free or car-enthusiasts, you can be sure that the topic will spark some interesting debates. Another tip from Balish - if anyone ever teases you for not having a car, ask them how much gas prices are these days. That should take care of it.