The Ride of Many Lifetimes

A deep dive into Steve Larsen's multidimensional memoir, *My Heart Has Been in It From the Start.*

Full disclosure: Steve Larsen and I both contributed to Motorcycle Consumer News back in the day, so anyone who read that magazine and remembered our contemporaneous bylines might imagine we were part of a close-knit cadre with an enduring camaraderie over the decades, one that should prompt me to recuse myself as unable to deliver an impartial review of his new book. That fantasy would be incorrect. MCN was an extremely loose collective of writers scattered all over the globe, with–at most–only two full-time staff in California. I rarely had any contact whatsoever with this cohort, aside from a week each summer spent with the few who'd participate in the annual bike testing tour up PC1 to Monterey, Calif., for the AMA Nationals at Laguna Seca Raceway. I recall just one face-to-face interaction with Steve when he intercepted us at some point on one of those rides. Although we didn't talk long, I've always remembered him for the depth and intensity, maybe density is the best descriptor, of that short conversation–and for the bright yellow Acura NSX he was driving at the time. We haven't chatted in the 20-some years since then; there's no basis for my recusal. The following review, glowing as it may be, is not a favor to a dear old friend.

Consistent with my first and only impression of Steve the person, "density" is an apt concept with which to begin a description of *My Heart Has Been in It From the Start*. This multidimensional memoir is heavy, both concretely and metaphorically. At nearly an inch and a half thick, it consists of 93 chapters and 524 pages, with only a sparse smattering of photos.

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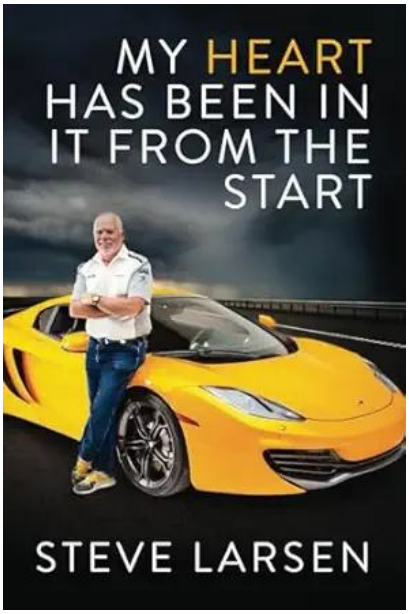
Fortunately, Steve's writing style is clean, straightforward and down-to-earth, like a conversation with a genuinely brilliant person who articulates their ideas and experiences in simple language that belies the complexity of their mind. I think this is how you can tell someone really knows what they're talking about. Just as the most accomplished athletes make superhuman feats look easy, people like Steve communicate with a graceful efficiency that somehow allows the conveyance of very rich material without bogging down in convoluted explanations or circuitous, overwrought verbiage.



My Heart Has Been in It From the Start is available on Amazon and elsewhere in paperback ($18.99) or hardcover ($28.99).

Mark Barnes is a clinical psychologist and moto-journalist. To read more of his writings, check out his book Why We Ride: A Psychologist Explains the Motorcyclist's Mind and the Love Affair Between Rider, Bike and Road, currently available in paperback through Amazon and other retailers.

In addition to his many other areas of competence, Steve is an accomplished and prolific writer, with several hundred articles published in the motorcycle enthusiast press alone, and more publications in business development and leadership, personal growth, and other areas. By "dense," I mean the book is cram-packed with a vast amount of insight, numerous compelling narratives, countless thought-provoking questions and observations and much poignant human drama. The writing delivers all this fluidly and enjoyably, the polar opposite of an arduous slog through some dense tangle of esoteric ideas.

Though not tangled, the life dimensions Steve lays out are intimately interwoven, albeit also quite diverse. The book is divided into six sections, covering his survival of three (!) open-heart surgeries, the rollercoaster of his career as a Silicon Valley tech pioneer, the gut-wrenching joys and sorrows of familial connections and losses, the anguished yet ultimately liberating journey from doctrinaire religion to spiritual enlightenment, a long-term enthusiasm for exotic sports cars (especially yellow ones), and the reason you're reading this review here–his intense passion for all things motorcycling. A blurb from Bill Dragoo (of Dragoo Adventure Rider Training) states, "Steve Larsen takes us on the ride of a lifetime." I disagree–Steve takes us on the ride of many lifetimes, all of which have somehow been his to live. If you're a normal person and want to feel small by comparison, this is definitely the book for you. However, if you can keep your envy from interfering, Steve will transport you through a multitude of thoroughly engaging encounters with all manner of living, from the singular to the mundane, with humor, humility and sincere wonder. Your life may not have the same breadth as his, but you'll recognize him as a fellow traveler contending with the unpredictable–even unimaginable–twists and turns which feature in everyone's unique journey. If there's an overarching moral to Steve's stories, it's that life is best lived by embracing daunting challenges as opportunities for growth and exploration. His seemingly limitless vitality has allowed him to demonstrate this again and again across more domains than most will get the chance to sample, but the lesson is universal and can be applied wherever we are. Truly inspirational.

Okay, so the book is wide-ranging, almost encyclopedic, but what about the motorcycle stuff? Well, there's a lot of it–21 chapters spanning 118 pages, enough to be a book in itself. Steve covers all the bases, from traveling (as a spectator) with the Dakar rally, to learning how to pull wheelies at Keith Code's famous California Superbike School, to training for weeks on end with the most elite corps of motorcycle police officers. Travel stories take us along on rides through New Zealand, South America, Europe and some terribly inhospitable areas of the USA. On-road, off-road, racetracks, touring, even moto-trials–Steve has done it all and obtained a great deal of top-notch rider training in the process. He's a real-deal virtuoso motorcyclist, and his superlative skills as a writer allow us to participate in his exploits both contemplatively and viscerally.

All that said, I do have one minor complaint. With so much wisdom and emotion coursing through the book's text, the photos are incongruously flat. Printed in black-and-white on the same plain, porous paper as the rest of the book, they're unavoidably grainy and their size seems to have been kept to a bare minimum, making some a bit hard to make out. It's not that they detract; indeed, they augment and complement the prose, but when the words deliver such detailed and well-illuminated imagery, it would be nice if the actual images had similar production values. No doubt many of the older photos could not have achieved this, even if printed in color on glossy paper, and I'm sure such inserts would have greatly increased the cost and complication of producing the book. But hey, any credible review has to include some criticism, right?

I haven't come anywhere close to doing justice to the contents of this book, but I hope to have made crystal clear this is a chance to access the incredible life of an extraordinary human being who happens to love motorcycles with tremendous passion. You will feel like you really know Steve Larsen by the end of his book, and you will want to know him even better. Had it been available for me to read before my brief encounter with its author, I would have made sure our interaction wasn't so brief.