

## Book Review- Racing with Rich Energy: How a Rogue Sponsor Took Formula One for a Ride.

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***Book Review- Racing with Rich Energy: How a Rogue Sponsor Took Formula One for a Ride.***

By Elizabeth Blackstock and Alanis King.

Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2022. Pp. V-viii, 1-195, Appendices 197-211, Chapter Notes 213-278, Index 279-284. Paperback, \$29.95, Kindle \$13.49.

In autumn of 2018, the Haas Formula 1 team announced its new title sponsor, a little known British energy-drink company called Rich Energy. Haas would replace the red, white and black colors of its owner's firm, the Haas machine tool company, with the black and gold corporate livery of Rich Energy. The arrangement was said to be a multi-year deal, bringing needed resources and additional legitimacy to an underdog team. However, midway through the 2019 season, Haas's Rich Energy sponsorship came to an abrupt end.

Elizabeth Blackstock and Alanis King first reported on this strange event in April, 2019 for the automotive website Jalopnik.<sup>1</sup> Their lengthy investigation asked, "What the hell is Rich Energy, anyway?" – and answered, "an enigma," one with an allusive product, little money, a cast of shady characters, a tortured back story and public relations that bordered on magical thinking. Even so, to anyone who uses social media regularly or follows modern politics, the fraudulent Rich Energy escapade might seem uncomfortably familiar. Which raises the essential question, so what? Just what is the significance of Haas's several month dalliance with Rich Energy? The authors only suggest an answer with their article's cursory concluding comment that, "Formula One is no stranger to unconventional sponsors."

There is a long tradition of journalists turning a compelling news story into a book. There are names for this sort of transformation. Literary journalism, creative non-fiction, narrative and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://jalopnik.com/what-you-find-when-you-look-into-rich-energy-the-myste-1833303620>.

long-form journalism are some. The attraction is obvious: more time, information and effort will make a good thing even better. There is also the appeal of being able to use literary devices that might be unavailable to a journalist writing straight news accounts organized like an inverted pyramid on deadline. But the would-be author must consider whether the story merits book-length treatment. Sometimes the original report says most of what is worth saying. And there is the danger that a book's elaboration and context building can actually smother the essential point with a cascade of more or less related facts, losing both the analytical line and readers' attention. Unfortunately, Blackstock and King's book pads a brief, freakish moment in F1 sponsorship economics with endless details about Rich Energy's charlatan CEO, William Storey, before and after his affiliation with Haas, without making clear why the episode matters to a larger understanding of F1 culture or history.

The book opens by showing that online forums had initial doubts about Rich Energy's credibility, while Haas defended its due diligence. It was, a journalist tells Blackstock and King, "the only story that anyone cared about." While this media fascination was transient, the book inflates it by discussing other problematic motorsports sponsors and team owners (the Onyx team, Leyton House, Zloop, etc.); F1 scandals – "tax evasion and blatant racism, sexism and anti-Semitism" – that include McLaren's Spygate and Renault's Crashgate; a passing reference to names "connected with Formula One" that appeared in Jeffrey Epstein's Little Black Book; and F1's alleged history of "covering up" problems that are "mostly buried." F1 is, the book claims, a sport with a "shiny veneer of extravagance" where the "tendrils of corruption might have lingered just beneath the surface." Its nature is bound to attract "unsavory people and brands." And yet only near its end does the book report in a single paragraph that the Haas team owner,

Gene Haas, was convicted in 2007 of avoiding \$34 million in US federal taxes, resulting in a total \$75 million fine plus back taxes and interest and a two-year jail sentence. Most of all, Blackstock and King have a book because they are willing to go into the tall grass in search of William Storey, someone with a self-serving explanation for every one of his many dubious enterprises. But arguably someone with only a glancing relevance to F1.

What, then, is the book's response to the critical question about giving 284 pages to Rich Energy, so what? That F1 is a slick but sleazy motorsport? That team sponsors and owners wield sometimes destructive economic power? That modern day pirates like Storey make trouble wherever they go?

This is a book by reporters who have doggedly amassed a considerable amount of often obscure information about Storey and Rich Energy. While this might not hold a reader's attention from beginning to end, it may someday be historically valuable in ways not now obvious. After all, the small amount of motorsport history produced by professional historians relies upon – to paraphrase the historian John Heitmann – the accounts of journalists and enthusiasts for its most informed work. That might include *Racing with Rich Energy*.