Most of us have an inflated sense of our competence behind the wheel, Tom Vanderbilt tells us in "Traffic." And that doesn't even begin to address potential dangers from drowsy or distracted drivers on the road.

Traffic, Vanderbilt points out, is "a living laboratory of human interaction, a place thriving with subtle displays of implied power." Unlike the bar in "Cheers," on highways and interstates "no one knows your name."

At about 20 mph, drivers lose a great lubricant of human cooperation, the ability to make eye contact with other motorists. This anonymity often breeds aggression, especially if there are no passengers in the car.

Why not cut off or curse at a speed demon you'll never see again? Why not blow a gasket when you're stuck in a traffic jam and a "late merger" jumps the queue?

Motorists, moreover, use an imperfect calculus in deciding what's risky and what's safe. They use hands-free phones but then spend more time talking on them. Fortunately, they also exercise more caution as they feel a greater sense of danger.

In snowstorms, for example, the number of fatal crashes goes down. To provide a manifest reminder of mortality and reduce deaths by at least 25 percent, Vanderbilt suggests requiring motorists to wear helmets, which, after all, are cheaper and more reliable than side-impact air bags.

Driving remains dangerous because it's an "overlearned" activity engaged in without much conscious thought. Bored and overconfident, drivers exceed the speed limit because others are doing so as well. They listen to the radio, gaze out the window, talk and, in at least one case,
work on a laptop.

Next to drinking, Vanderbilt concludes, "distraction is the single biggest problem on the road" and "we have little concept of just how distracted we are."

"Traffic" is full of fascinating facts and provocative propositions. Drivers, we learn, overestimate their speed on tree-lined roads. The daily round-trip commute clock, virtually everywhere in the world, is 1.1 hours per day. Since roads and parking-lot spaces in the United States are underused more than 90 percent of the time, the answer to congestion is not more of them, but more efficient use of them.

And carpools (or more precisely, family "serve passenger" trips) may be a "good idea gone bad."

A delightful book, "Traffic" is not up to speed on grammar. Apparently, Vanderbilt and the Knopf copy editor who worked on these pages do not know that plural pronouns cannot co-exist with singular antecedents. In the same way that a person without "metacognition" will be "less able to judge the correctness of grammar," Vanderbilt writes, in an all-too-typical and unintentionally apt example, "a driver who is not fully aware of the risks of tailgating ... is hardly in a good position to evaluate their own relative risk."

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