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Book Review / The Fifties

Barry Fast
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Book Review

Column Editor: **Barry Fast** (Academic Book Center)

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All the History That's Fit to Remember?

Review of David Halberstam's
The Fifties, Portrait of a Decade.
Villard Books, 1993. 0679415599;
800pp; ill. with photographs

by **Ellen Duranceau**
(MIT Libraries)

Halberstam is a self-professed "child of the fifties," and in this fascinating account of the era that shaped his values, he captures in riveting, intimate detail the social forces that characterized the decade. This was an era, according to Halberstam, marked by unparalleled economic expansion, which fueled the creation of a large, comfortable middle class; "an era of general good will and expanding affluence," an era of optimism and faith in the establishment; an era in which the "American Dream was to exercise personal freedom not in social and political terms, but rather in economic ones." His compelling book explodes the myth of the tranquil '50s and will appeal not only to his fellow children of the fifties, but to those who came of age before or after this transitional time.

Pulitzer-prize winning journalist and author of a trilogy on power in America (*The Best and the Brightest*, *The Powers that Be*, and *The Reckoning*) along with nine other books, Halberstam dramatizes the social changes building during the '50s behind a facade of relative calm, changes that seeded the turmoil of subsequent decades. These included technological advances that propelled a vast array of social and political changes, including the development of the birth control pill, unprecedented computing power, television, and the hydrogen bomb with its previously unimagined destructive power. In addition to technological changes, massive social transformations also occurred, including the creation of the suburb, the widespread availability of the automobile and use of the

interstate highway system, an expanding post-war economy, and the beginnings of the civil rights movement. Halberstam treats all of these major themes against the backdrop of political events, from the elections of '52, '56, and '60, to the development of the National Security Complex and the US's first covert operations (especially those in Guatemala and Cuba).

Halberstam's genius is not so much in the breadth or depth of the coverage —although these are both impressive qualities and important merits of the book—but in his ability to create character and come to make the reader know the specific individuals that propelled (or were propelled by) social change in the '50s. Behind every movement, every trend, every change, Halberstam portrays a human being, someone who captures the essence of the era. We learn what Harley Earl, the tyrannical GM designer of sleek, powerful cars and wearer of blue suede shoes, was really like; we find out that McDonald's got its start through the vision and back-breaking labor of two brothers, Dick and Mac, and the ambitious man they sold their franchise rights to, Ray Kroc, who was so driven by the desire to create and sell the perfect burger, so maniacal about quality control, that he spent hours in his retirement timing employees at a restaurant through a telescope and calling the manager when service was slow.

And there is more, much more. We find out what Senator Joseph McCarthy was really like: a boozing, insecure bumbler full of self-deceit and a pathetic, childlike desire to please. We learn to see and understand the moral anguish of Robert Oppenheimer, developer of the atomic bomb, and his rift with fellow physicist Edward Teller, who, unlike Oppenheimer, refused to grapple with the moral implications of his science; here we see Richard Nixon, scorned by those around him, unwanted even by Eisenhower, the man who had selected him as his Vice President, driven by a

need to prove himself worthy, and able, if not to be honest, at least to manipulate an audience, as he did in the famous "Checkers" speech. We see the world through the eyes of the capitalist par excellence William Levitt, the developer who saw that hundreds of thousands of veterans would want a place where they could finally get down to the long-delayed business of life — starting a family — and created the suburb to meet their needs. We feel the tension between Truman and General Douglas MacArthur, when he ran amuck in Korea and pushed the US to the brink of World War III by provoking the Chinese; we see Martin Luther King learn to reach his people and showcase civil rights issues so they would play well on television and reach America's hearts for the first time; we see the budding genius of Tennessee Williams teamed with the intense creativity of Elia Kazan, director of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and enjoy mini-analyses of the hearts and minds of actors and artists who redefined popular culture in the '50s: Marlon Brando, Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, Lucille Ball, and Elvis Presley. We learn what family life was really like for the Nelsons, cast as themselves in "Ozzie and Harriet," and how it was that Betty Friedan, a housewife, began her research into the role of women and "the problem that had no name," which would, in the '60s, be published as *The Feminine Mystique*. And we learn first hand the tragic story of Grace Metalious, who pried herself out of poverty by writing the scandalous, trend-setting *Peyton Place*, and then succumbed to alcoholism. (And here along with Metalious' story, almost as an aside, we learn of the major shift in publishing from the world of the genteel hardcover publishing to the blockbuster paperback.)

If Halberstam, with his journalistic hesitance to judge or draw conclusions for his readers, never suggests that the particular individuals he depicts made the fifties what they were, his book nevertheless makes clear that these individu-

als did indeed capture the zeitgeist of the '50s. And it is their compelling stories that makes *The Fifties* read like a novel, complete with fascinating characters, heart-warming and thrilling tales of heroism, dedication, vision, and belief, built into storylines that together create a full portrait of the decade. We feel each of the stories deeply, from the overwhelming horror of the first explosion of the hydrogen bomb, to Alfred Kinsey's obsessive quest for full knowledge of male sexuality, and beyond to the great quiz show scandal in which American innocence succumbed to the shock of learning that the immensely popular quiz shows were rigged, the down-to-earth yet aristocratic American genius, Charles Van Doren, a faker and cheater.

It is impossible to capture here the richness of detail which Halberstam brings to each of these stories, or how each carries its own significance in demonstrating a crucial social passage. Each tale is a small revelation about American and Americans. The understanding Halberstam provides comes not from pronouncements, but from his allowing us

to see, feel, and hear events. He places them in context, so that we understand how one particular incident — such as the murder of Emmett Till for whistling at a white woman — was quintessentially representative of the beginning of societal change. Halberstam does this over and over again, showing how a single event epitomizes a social trend that was the beginning of something new, something that had not come before. Whether it was the first retail discount chain, the first time Americans saw the pain of racial inequality in their own living rooms through the televised reporting of the attempt to block school integration in Little Rock, or the influence of the mechanized cotton picker on the movement of Blacks northward to the cities, each of these social transitions is captured in a single, pure, characterizing episode. There is nothing staged about this; rather, the book demonstrates Halberstam's power as a researcher and cultural interpreter, and his knack for seeing the universal in the particular, for picking just the right story to characterize a general shift in sensibility.

Halberstam insists on showing, not telling; it is in the rich, flowing detail of the decade that we learn what the fifties were really about.

When he is done, it is impossible to see this period as one of calm conformity and passivity, as I have often imagined it, having watched too many "Leave It To Beaver" episodes at an impressionable age. The danger in reading this book is not that you will find that the '50s were the quiet, tranquil decade they have been portrayed to be, but that you will begin to believe that it was a time of such vast significance that no issue or problem we currently grapple with did not have its origin in the '50s. But the magic of this book is that it tells us in part how we came to be where we are now, and makes us feel not too cynical, or too ashamed, about how it happened. This is a book that makes us look lucidly at a decade, and, without flag-waving or sugar-coating, makes us feel proud of what was accomplished, and how far we have come. And, so, we have reason to be thankful for writers like Halberstam. ♣

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