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Book Review / The Fifties

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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 eco-
nomic expansion, which fueled the cre-
at ion of a large, comfortable middle class;
“an era of general good will and expan-
ding 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 po-
litical 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 sub-
sequent decades. These included tech-
nological advances that propelled a vast
array of social and political changes, in-
cluding the development of the birth con-
trol pill, unprecedented computing
power, television, and the hydrogen
bomb with its previously unimagined
destructive power. In addition to tech-
nological changes, massive social transfor-
mations also occurred, including the cre-
at ion of the suburb, the widespread avail-
ability 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 op-
erations (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
deck 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 fran-
chise rights to, Ray Kroc, who was so
driven by the desire to create and sell the
perfect burger, so maniacal about qual-
ity control, that he spent hours in his
retirement time on employee issues at a restau-
rant 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
bumbling 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-de-
layed business of life — starting a fam-
ily — 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 cre-
avtivity of Elia Kazan, director of A Street-
car Named Desire, and enjoy mini-analyses
of the hearts and minds of actors and
artists who redified popular culture in
the ’50s: Marlon Brando, Marilyn Mon-
roe, James Dean, Lucille Ball, and Elvis
Presley. We learn what family life was
really like for the Nelsons, cast as them-
selves in “Ozzie and Harriet,” and how it
was that Betty Friedan, a housewife, be-
gan 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 pov-
ety 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 nev-
ertheless 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.