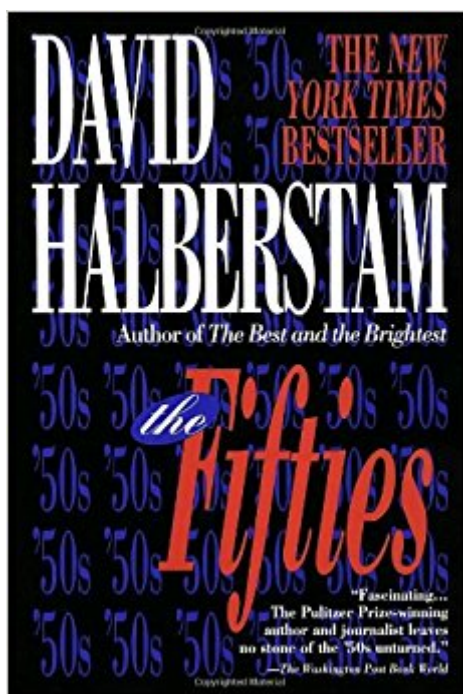


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The Fifties



Synopsis

The Fifties is a sweeping social, political, economic, and cultural history of the ten years that Halberstam regards as seminal in determining what our nation is today. Halberstam offers portraits of not only the titans of the age: Eisenhower Dulles, Oppenheimer, MacArthur, Hoover, and Nixon, but also of Harley Earl, who put fins on cars; Dick and Mac McDonald and Ray Kroc, who mass-produced the American hamburger; Kemmons Wilson, who placed his Holiday Inns along the nation's roadsides; U-2 pilot Gary Francis Powers; Grace Metalious, who wrote Peyton Place; and "Goody" Pincus, who led the team that invented the Pill. A NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

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Customer Reviews

This is a delightful and encyclopedic survey of the major events and personalities in the United States in the 1950s. The title is, therefore, a bit of a misnomer. The book is not about the decade on a global scale, but merely the fifties in America. Halberstam writes of the decade in a clear, fast-moving prose, and despite the book's enormous bulk, is actually a remarkably fast read. Halberstam offers no explicit themes or theses, but if there is an overarching implicit theme, it is the Fifties not as a time of innocence as frequently assumed, but a time of viciousness, meanness, and loss of whatever remaining innocence American might possess. Indeed, the book ends with Eisenhower looking at Nixon and Kennedy, and exclaiming that he didn't like either of them. What THE FIFTIES primarily does is hold up a mirror to the fifties, and reflects the major events and especially the major figures of the decade. In fact, while specific events do receive attention, the book is essentially a succession of character sketches, and even the major events

themselves are discussed through focusing on particular individuals. What is amazing is what a satisfactory job Halberstam does of writing about both unfamiliar and famous individuals. By and large, Halberstam deals with just about every major figure one would expect. If I had any complaints--and these would be minor--I would argue that some major art forms received almost no attention in the book. For instance, while he has a full chapter on the bestseller PEYTON PLACE and writes about pulp master Micky Spillane, there is no discussion of any major writers. Nor does he write about cinema in general (though James Dean, Marlon Brando, and Marilyn Monroe receive attention), or changes in art. Elvis Presley and Sam Phillips receive a chapter, but surprisingly little about the development of rock and roll is mentioned apart from that. I think there are two reasons for this. First, even though the text runs to around 730 excluding notes and index, a book of this scale can't deal with everything. Second, despite the book's enormous scope, Halberstam isn't determined to write about every aspect of the fifties, but only on every aspect that was distinctive of the decade and made it unique in comparison to what came before and that led to what would come after. Implicit throughout the book is the question, "What made this decade unique and different?" By the end of the book, the reader will have read about Truman, Ike, Korea, Matt Ridgway, McCarthy, Elia Kazan, Orville Faubus, Holiday Inn, MacDonald's, Little Rock, Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus boycott, the Kinsey report, the development of the Pill, Tennessee Williams, the Dulles brothers, Robert Taft, Adlai Stevenson, Jack Kerouac and the Beats, Oppenheimer and Teller and the Super, Hoover, MacArthur, Giap, Charles Van Doren and Herb Stempel, the CIA, Levittown, Francis Gary Powers, Werner von Braun, Kelly Johnson, Martin Luther King, Emmitt Till, John Chancellor, Harry Ashmore, Lucy, Milton Berle, and a vast host of other major and minor figures. I recommend this book as strongly as possible both for those who either lived through the decade or through the wake of the decade, or those who know little or nothing about it. At the end of the book, I was convinced that the Fifties was perhaps one of the two or three key decades of the century, and perhaps the decade in which the world we know now, dominated by TV, mass communication, fast food, sexuality, celebrity, massive military expenditures, computers, advertising, and technology, was born.

Honestly, this book should be required reading for all of our high school students. It is far better than any traditional school texts we had covering this era. "The Fifties," is a finely written history of the decade that the author considers "seminal in determining what our nation is today." The author combines a very engaging historical narrative with deep social commentary that illuminates the controversial & complex events & people which made the 1950's so important to the USA. From the unexpected victory of Harry Truman over Republican rival Thomas Dewey in the 1948 Presidential

election, the Korean War, the firing of General Douglas MacArthur, Alger Hiss, Whittaker Chambers, the Sputnik satellite launch 1957, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, & the burgeoning Civil Rights movement. To the rise of Senator McCarthy, Khrushchev, & Fidel Castro taking over Cuba in 1959. Mr. Halberstam argues persuasively that despite its tranquil facade, that the 1950's was a time of huge social upheaval. He goes about this by pointing out the leaders of the anti-establishment movement. Such as Allen Ginsburg, Jack Kerouac, & the Beatniks. The latter's philosophy would come to full bloom in the "hippie" culture of the 1960's. The influence of Katherine McCormick & Margaret Sanger led to strides in birth control & Feminism. While Television helped the Alpha entertainment careers of Steve Allen, Sid Caesar, Desi Arnaz, Lucille Ball, & Milton Berle. TV also helped popularize the meteoric popularity of Rock & Roll & its main icon Elvis Presley & the new fast food culture. Which saw the steady growth of the original California based McDonald's Hamburger chain after the McDonald brothers sold it to entrepreneur Ray Kroc. Lastly, this was the decade that saw the huge rise in the interstate highway system that led to our car culture & enabled millions of Americans to travel around the country easier than ever before.

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