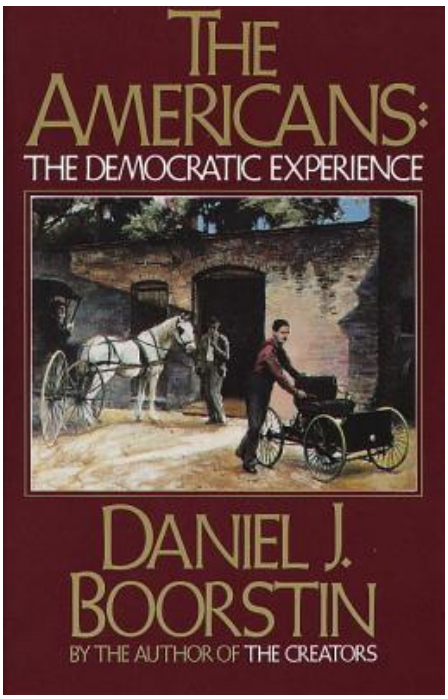

The Americans, Vol. 3: The Democratic Experience

Daniel J. Boorstin

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The Americans, Vol. 3: The Democratic Experience Daniel J. Boorstin
Winner of the Pulitzer Prize. A study of the last 100 years of American history.

The Americans, Vol. 3: The Democratic Experience Details

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Bill says

If I had to pick one author to pick for my 'desert island' library it would be my history-hero - Daniel J. Boorstin who was literally the Librarian of Congress. I cannot remember when I first read this book - high school, college - maybe even just after college, but this book drove in me the desire to be master of 'why things happened the way they did'.

To summarize the book, from the overleaf: "Daniel J. Boorstin's long-awaited full-scale portrait of modern America chronicles the Great Transformation that has come about in our daily lives since the Civil War. It recaptures the drama and the meaning of the countless and sometimes little-noticed revolutions which occurred, not in legislatures or on battlefields but in our homes and farms and factories and schools and stores - making something suprising and unprecedented of our everyday experience."

A review of the chapters gives the reader a preview of the delight to expect: "A Democracy of Clothing", "Goods Sell Themselves", "The Incorruptible Cashier", "Antidotes for the City: Utopia, Renewal, Suburbia", "Time Becomes Fungible: Packaging the Unit of Work".

If you are a trivia nut, and a lover of the little-known - this is the Bible.

Every American should be required to read any of Boorstin's great books.

Christina Gagliano says

Very informative, as all of his books are, but the style is definitely showing its age.

Vivian says

Another wonderful installment of the three-volume history of the U.S. I've learned so much from these books, and, although this last one was written in the late 1960s, it is still very relevant. Highly recommended.

David says

This is a beautifully written in-depth look at how the cultural idea of democratization has affected our society from politics to commerce.

Michael says

By nature episodic, the book is still engaging and thought provoking. The focus is on inventions and attitudes that that really emphasized the values of the New compared to the Old world. Stimulating and insightful; not to be missed.

First Second Books says

Reading this book in the past week, I have learned more miscellaneous facts about American history than I have in the past four years! And it was also fascinating and thought-provoking about the development of our American culture.

Andrew says

Like many of Boorstin's other books this one does not follow a central narrative. Rather it consists of a series of seemingly random vignettes like the development of cattle branding irons, Chicago gangsters, and marriage laws in Nevada. While odd, the anecdotes are nonetheless fascinating and they're all held together by a common theme. For example the previously mentioned anecdotes fall under a section named "The Go-Getters" which is about America as a "developing" country. There weren't yet established laws and customs with regard to the use of Western lands, immigrant groups hadn't yet assimilated, and small Western states like Nevada hadn't found a role in the larger nation and economy. The section tells the story of how different groups responded to the challenges and opportunities that emerged from these ambiguities in law and culture. Likewise "Statistical Communities" covers the development of life expectancy statistics, poverty rates, standardized clothing sizes, I.Q. tests, etc. It tells the story of how statistics penetrated the lives of ordinary people in ways they never had before. Those who want a "standard" history should probably look elsewhere, but it's a good read for anyone interested in quirky, offbeat subjects that other historians generally ignore.

Frank Stein says

There are plenty of simple errors in this book, of date and place, and plenty of vacuous speculation, but overall, this book gives the reader a majestic overview of Americans inventing and creating over a hundred years of history. The themes that tie the book together are thin, but the brief individual biographies of creativity are great. There's the abolitionist "father of life insurance" Elizur Wright, who saw desperate people trading their life insurance policies as a shadow of the slave trade, and who created the first life insurance regulations. There's Willis H. Carrier, a mechanical engineer who created air conditioning to assure consistent color printing in a Brooklyn print shop, and formed a "Rational Psychrometric Formulae" for proper levels of cooling. There's Chester F. Carlson, an employee of Bell Laboratories who in 1938 charged a zinc and sulfur plate and thus created "xerography" (xeros was Greek for dry, or dry printing), but then was ignored until the Haloid Corporation found him in 1946 and started xerox machines.

Boorstin highlights quotidian geniuses such as Luther Childs Crowell (who invented the square-bottomed paper bag), Walter Shewhart (industrial quality control), or Robert Gair (folded cardboard), and myriad other inventors of the mundane necessities of modern life. Yet he also discusses philosophers like John Dewey, advocates for schooling like Jonathan Baldwin Turner, and creative organizations like the Wyoming Stock Growers Association or the American Association of Painters and Sculptors (which put on the Armory Show

in 1913)

The overall theme of the book, such as it is, is that American inventiveness democratized and homogenized American life, usually for the better, but not always. The book contains a hint of wistfulness about lost community and lost authenticity, but overall it is in awe of the transformations these creative people wrought. While the endless stories and biographies about inventiveness can become tedious, they are a worthwhile look at some of the things that probably matter most in history.

Beverly says

Boorstin calls Christmas America's "national Festival of Consumption". My sentiments exactly. The entire book is well-written and interesting though tedious at times, but the last chapter is outstanding. Boorstin compares the American enterprises of splitting the atom with the space program. He shows amazing insight, especially considering he wrote it so soon after the moon landing. I couldn't stop reading the last chapter. Loved it!

Michael says

Listened to via Books-on-Tape

Daniel Boorstin is the most oft cited consensus historian of the post-war period. As critics observe, he is persistently oblivious to conflict and contest in American history. Worse than being reviled, he is ignored by the profession as irrelevant.

Main current of Boorstin's thought is that Americans are a "practical" people. Free from abstract doctrine or theological speculation, the Puritans built a "city on a hill." Celia Kenyon pointed to "the themes of practicality, of realistic adaptation to the circumstances of colonial life, of intelligent and effective amateurism" in his work. As others have pointed out, he was one of the first people to point out the importance of technological innovation throughout American history. In the woods of New England, people did need to be jacks of all trades to survive. This is, as Brooke Hindle and Steven Lubar were to point out later, a source of innovation in America's wooden age. Another problem with Boorstin's approach is the insistence on the irrelevance of ideology to the American experience. The Quakers were the only ideologues in his history. They, like the Civil Rights workers, went to prisons singing. The Quakers are as wrong-headed in Boorstin's views as those who protested for civil rights.

In a review entitled "American Social History: The Boorstin Experience," Kenneth L. Kusmer covers all three volumes and concludes that Boorstin is best when talking about times when conflict was less important than consensus. Unfortunately, there is no time in American History when conflict was less important than consensus. Kusmer points out that the American Revolution flows from his pen as a decidedly un-revolutionary event. On the Puritans he stresses the lack of rancorous contention. The Puritans had the right to get rid of dissenters (Williams and Hutchinson). Religion was the site of social stability not the realm of contested values. When turning his eye to the military history of America, Kusmer tells us that Boorstin is more valuable. He stresses the unschooled and "pragmatic" approach which American commanders took during the Revolution. Unrestrained by the weight of the "old world," they adopted guerilla tactics that enabled them to fight more effectively. (Yet what do we make of the Prussian drill master who trained

Washington's troops?) Also points usefully to the American way of war as a defense of the home land, partially explaining the difficulty with LBJ faced in fighting the Vietnam war.

On the Civil War, he contrasts Northern practicality with Southern ideology. As Eric Foner has shown, Free Soil ideology was as much a motivating force in the North as white supremacy was in the South. He ignores blacks, indians and women as makers of history at all turns. His work is solidly "middle class," what one would call Whiggish, in the first two volumes and turns a bit pessimistic in the third. The rise of the New Left and anti-Vietnam protest disillusioned him it seems. In the third volume he was less celebratory. The imperative of technology seemed to be pushing us forward, making life more second hand ... the immediacy of experience was fading, and so too was the practical amateurism that forswears the ideological.

Lisa says

Splendid!

Beth Allen says

This is a re-read. This whole series is really eye-opening. It was written a while back, and I've read criticism that its view of history is far too centered on dead white males (which if I do a count of people mentioned is true). But still I think the way Boorstin categorizes and investigates the forces of what made the US what it is, holds truth.

Al says

Another re-read of one of my key undergraduate texts. The book is an example of intellectual history - as opposed to social history of political history. As such, it is a treasure store of information on those aspects of American colonial life that are often given little attention elsewhere - the development of American schools and universities, the practice of law and medicine in the colonies, the history of books and newspapers before the revolution, as well as a host of other areas of interest.

A personal favourite is the author’s analysis of the development of the English language and dialect in the colonies.

The author dislikes the Quakers, praises the Virginians and, unusually, downplays the role of European enlightenment ideas on the politics of the Revolution. Compelling reading.

Chelsea Ursaner says

Sometimes I really loved this book (particularly because I'm a data person and he spends a lot of time talking about Statistical communities, i.e. the development of IQ tests to measure intelligence, GDP to measure

economies, etc), but it bothered me that he didn't stick to the theme of "the democratic experience". He was all over the place and would just throw in the word "democratic" every now and then. Not Boorstin's best work, in my opinion.

James says

More a collection of runnning observations and short essays, but all of it interesting and illuminating. Interestingly, the chapters on the 20th century's evolution of mass communications brought some of the same hopes and fears -- by contemporaries and the author -- that we've seen with the internet, social and smartphones.
