IN PRINT

History lessened

By Chris Rasmussen

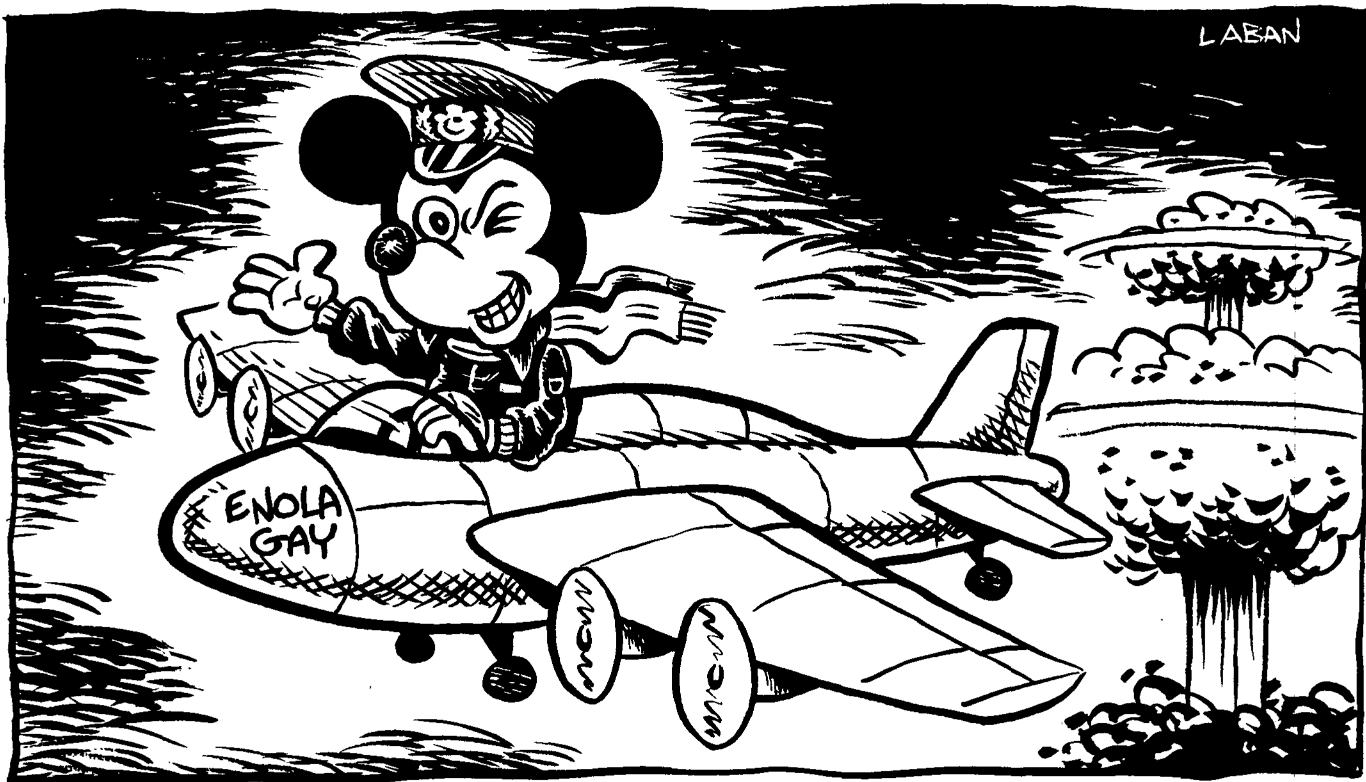
Americans, according to Mike Wallace, fail to take their nation's history seriously. "The past," he writes, "is not our favorite tense." Indeed, ours is a culture not merely indifferent to history, but downright historicidal, determined to erase unpleasant episodes and to sever the past from the present.

But how are we to reconcile Wallace's statements with the lively controversies that have swirled around prominent depictions of American history in recent years? The National Museum of American Art's exhibit of *The West As America*, Oliver Stone's film *JFK*, educators' attempts to devise national standards for U.S. history and the Smithsonian's exhibit of the *Enola Gay*—all have occasioned rancorous debate. For a nation that doesn't take its history seriously, the United States has had its share of historical controversies.

Wallace contends that recent arguments over American history stem from a widespread reluctance to grapple honestly with the past. Recoiling from their nation's record of misdeeds, too many Americans have traded the complexities of history for mythic accounts of their heritage. In these wishful formulations, prosperity, along with liberty, was gradually, ineluctably extended to an ever-growing proportion of the citizenry.

Historians' efforts to challenge this fairy tale—by suggesting that the United States has not been an altogether harmonious society or a nation that has always hewed to its professed principles of liberty and equality—have provoked a powerful response. *Mickey Mouse History*, a collection of articles and addresses on public history, attempts to explain the origins of our culture's peculiar antihistorical bias and how it can be resisted.

Mickey Mouse History is perhaps a misleading title for this anthology. Two of Wallace's 13 essays discuss Disney's saccharine depiction of history in its theme parks, and its ill-fated attempt to build a historical theme park, "Disney's America," within shooting distance of Manassas National Battlefield Park in Virginia. The remainder of the essays range widely over a variety of issues pertain-



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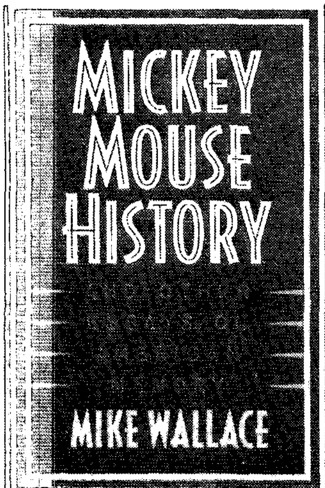


Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory
By Mike Wallace
Temple University Press
318 pp., $18.95

ing to the presentation of history, including museumship, historic preservation of old buildings and Ronald Reagan's cavalier disregard for the facts of American history. Collectively, Wallace's engaging, impressively researched and sometimes polemical essays provide a remarkably thorough overview of the development and current state of public history in America, as well as a number of suggestions for fostering Americans' appreciation of history.

Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, both academic historians and museum curators, inspired by the civil rights movement, antiwar protests, feminism and other challenges to the American status quo, began to explore previously neglected historical subjects: workers, African-Americans and women, for instance. They also began to criticize some of the dominant groups and institutions in American society. When these efforts to rewrite America's past reached a broader audience outside the academy, they provoked a ferocious backlash from those who resented virtually any criticism of the United States.

Despite the controversy such "new" history may have stirred, professional historians and curators have never managed to capture the popular appeal of uncredentialed historians with an altogether different view of America's past. Two of the most influential historians of our era, it turns out, were Walt Disney and Ronald Reagan—neither of whom wasted a minute in a tedious graduate seminar or set foot in, much less hunkered down in, a moldering archive. They achieved their influence by purveying a nostalgic, irrepressibly cheerful version of American history to tens of millions of citizens. Both the theme-park mogul and the actor-turned-president offered Americans not accurate versions of history, but myths designed to celebrate a supposed common heritage.

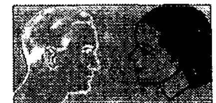
Disney's depiction of the past, Wallace writes, is just plain "bad history," which "dulls historical sensibility and invites acquiescence to what is." As president, Reagan sought not only to boost defense spending and redistribute wealth upward, but also "to wage symbolic war on the terrain of history" by attempting to refute—or at least deny—the more critical histories of America being crafted by professional historians.

To combat such historicidal onslaughts, Wallace argues, historians and curators must strive to present their subjects in ways that connect the past to the present. History museums, for example, should be "civic galleries" that encourage viewers to think critically about contemporary issues.

Undoubtedly, such exhibits would provide a welcome antidote to the historicidal epidemic that has blighted many Americans' knowledge of their history. But Wallace's insistence that history must invariably be depicted with an eye toward present concerns may itself be insensitive to the integrity of the past. The 18th-century contention over the rights and duties of citizens during the American Revolution, or the postwar debate over whether women should retain their wartime jobs after World War II, are indeed instructive today; but each is also the product of its distinct era. While the past is certainly not unconnected to the present, it is indisputably different. Encouraging museum visitors to stretch their historical imaginations, and to envision people, ideas and eras that are unlike their own, might prove almost as valuable as Wallace's insistence that public history be used to inform contemporary political debates.

Wallace's final essay, on the battle surrounding the National Air and Space Museum's 1995 *Enola Gay* exhibit, demonstrates just how stubbornly complicated both the past and public history can be. Scheduled to coincide with the 50th anniversary of World War II's end, the museum's exhibit about the plane that dropped the first atomic bomb

SHERRYL KLEINMAN



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on Hiroshima was originally designed to explore important historical and ethical questions about the use of nuclear weapons. Despite the curators' earnest efforts to incorporate the views of World War II veterans, the proposed exhibit ran afoul of some staunch proponents of President Harry Truman's decision to use atomic weapons against Japan. These critics objected that the exhibit's curators had no right to broach questions about whether the use of atomic weapons was necessary, useful or moral—even though these questions were discussed by politicians, military leaders and scientists before Truman decided to use the bomb. Lobbyists for the aircraft industry, members of Congress and conservative newspaper columnists, many of whom had never personally seen plans for the exhibit, soon began to assail its interpretation of the war's end. On the other side, historians, museum workers and people active in the peace movement decried the attack on the curators' freedom of interpretation and expression.

After months of debate and repeated efforts to make the exhibit palatable to all, the museum finally surrendered almost unconditionally to its critics. The Smithsonian mounted an exhibit that deliberately skirted virtually every consequential historical and ethical issue, instead allowing the mute fuselage of the *Enola Gay* to "speak for itself." In countless discussions, curators sought the counsel of diverse interested parties to explore the enormous range of issues and potential interpretations the exhibit might afford. But the exhibit's nuances were lost in the clamor of protest—protest that had little to do with any real historical interest.

Despite the distressing result of the *Enola Gay* exhibit, Wallace concludes his book on a hopeful, if not altogether optimistic, note. Persistent controversies over the past, he reasons, may suggest that Americans do care about their history after all. Although veterans' groups, conservative congressmen and columnists succeeded in imposing their interpretation of World War II on the Smithsonian's exhibit, their efforts galvanized a host of scholars and curators—despite their differing views about the dropping of the atomic bomb—to speak out for "curatorial freedom."

"The Battle of the Enola Gay," as Wallace calls it, was only one skirmish in a much larger culture war being fought over the meaning of past, present and future. Still, one wonders whether adopting this bellicose language fosters the creation of a culture more congenial to history, one capable of encompassing a wide array of historical interpretations. Wars, after all, have proved almost universally inhospitable to free expression, and are usually fought until one side is vanquished. Replacing the culture war with a cultural debate may be an important first step toward replacing our historicidal culture with one in which public history can thrive. ◀

Chris Rasmussen is completing a book on state and county fairs in the Middle West.

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SPEED READ

Raised by Wolves
By Jim Goldberg in collaboration with Philip Brookman
Scalo Publishers in association with the Corcoran Gallery of Art/The Addison Gallery of American Art/Zurich Museum of Design
320 pp., $45

Tweekie Dave is in love with Echo. They're teenage runaways whose daily routines include shooting up heroin or speed and turning tricks, mostly without condoms. "Baby, I'd do anything for you," Dave tells Echo in *Raised by Wolves*. "Maybe I should go out with that fat faggot, then murphy him for $200 and give it all to you." Dave and Echo go steady for a short time, more a pal thing really, and then she moves on to other boys, and he pines.

In a full-page photo, Dave's shirt is pulled up, revealing a huge scar on his emaciated stomach. On the opposite page, a message in his scribble: "My mom was a 15 yr old Junkie slut who I ain't never seen. My old man is a biker from hell/ thé fucked up assholeshotmeinthe gut when I was 12 yrs old/ Aint gone home since or had one."

Raised by Wolves, by Jim Goldberg in collaboration with Philip Brookman, records in text and photography the experiences of urban runaways in Los Angeles and San Francisco. A national tour of the photos originated at the Corcoran Gallery, where Brookman is curator of photography and media arts. It will be exhibited at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art from June 19 to September 11, 1997.

The photography is dominated by stark black-and-whites. The text, an extended question-and-answer dialogue, meshes with the visual images ambiguously. Confusion is a major rhetorical element of *Raised by Wolves*. The shifting juxtaposition of what we know about these kids, and what is puzzling about them, makes the work simultaneously disturbing and enthralling.

The book's most harrowing questions center on Dave. First we wonder whether he's actually dying, as he claims. If so, what is it that plagues his gaunt, needle-pricked body—hepatitis, leukemia, AIDS? How did he get that gruesome scar? That story about his father—the work of a resentful teen imagination? We assume that Goldberg himself couldn't gather all the answers, though in Dave's case, some of them inexorably develop during the course of the author's investigation.

Goldberg's reportage and interviews are heavily steeped in the kids' grueling circumstances—prostitution, drug abuse, homelessness, the threat of AIDS. As he makes clear, the runaways are exploited routinely, on the streets every day and then in the media, which have done more to sensationalize their condition than to come to their aid.

Goldberg's approach maintains a balance between manipulation and empathy. He has walked the fine line between showing how most of us view these kids as freaks, and becoming a freak-show huckster himself. While he shocks us with the details, we never catch him displaying them for their shock value. Instead, we see the internal logic of the runaways' descent to the streets, and we understand how public remedies have failed to help them.

Goldberg became friends with many of his interviewees, and the notes they exchanged with him add a compelling personal quality to the portraits he creates. Some are brief jottings, others long pleas for salvation. Combined with the photos, they can convey optimism as well as despair. One girl, smelling a rose, eyes lifted hopefully, writes, "I want to get married and have at least four kids with 10 dogs, and live in a mansion with a jungle greenhouse with a pet jaguar."

Our culture teems with stereotypes of young people: skateboarding punks, the overtly sexualized child models of Calvin Klein ads, and rappers, metalheads and other calculated misfits from the music scene. The ironic, recklessly casual look exploited by those who market to young people is adopted by some of the runaways in *Raised by Wolves*. But unlike the kids paid to pose in sexy ads, Goldberg's kids are posturing for free, on a street corner. The implicit point Goldberg communicates is that, for all we know, the teens in those ads—both the characters portrayed and the models being photographed—may well be just as tormented as the runaways in Goldberg's interviews.

In *Raised by Wolves*, punk is less an aesthetic statement than an authentic expression of life on the streets. And where marketing caricatures mimic various forms of rebellion, Goldberg's kids are the real thing. He speaks with Blade and Tank, two lovers. Blade tells her boyfriend: "I can do a fuck of a lot more doses than you, dude." Afterward, Goldberg will buy them cigarettes and hair spray for Tank's mohawk.

Eventually, Blade regales Goldberg with a nihilist tableau, evoking the apparent passing of an earlier punk generation: "I saw Johnny Rotten at The Scream. And afterward, you know, I was like going to see him. I walked into his hotel room and he was in there with two chicks and fuckin needles everywhere. It was a gnarly scene."

Gnarly, indeed. And like many of the similar scenes of futility that arrest our interest in youth culture, it begs the question—what lies at the end of all those gestures of rebellion? A more confident culture than ours might hold out the promise of maturity, compromises, the eventual anodynes of creeping middle-aged security. But our commercial celebration of the kids' culture, with its suggestion that all this is simply to be outgrown someday, is itself a dead end. The marketing of ever younger kids as ever more reliable authorities on the nihilistic gestures of hipness keeps the culture itself in a calculated, perpetual adolescence. As Goldberg shows, grasping the problems of street kids requires responding to them as something more than figures of pathos or prurience—comprehending something of their real choices, and imagining futures that they often can't. —Jeffrey L. Perlah

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