

Note: This is an essay about Growing Up Southern in the Sixties, a complete novel by Janet A. Martin that is currently in search of a publisher. Interested parties may contact Ms. Martin at jamcommunications@mac.com Thank you for your comments. —JAM

GROWING UP SOUTHERN IN THE SIXTIES



A Novel Essay By Janet Martin

“Once upon a time, there was a private college campus in Atlanta where gusts of the Sixties scattered lives like the pages of a newspaper blown across a green Southern lawn

With all the published ink—histories, novels, political and social analyses—one might ask why does the world need another book—and fiction, no less—datelined the 1960s?

Three reasons, I would suggest:

- © Interest
- © Relevance
- © Truth

Today more than 70 million strong in the United States, the generation called “Boomers” with collective childhood memories of bomb shelters, circular felt “poodle” skirts and 45-inch record discs, also remember their college years as the Sixties. Demographically described as a “pig moving through a python,” this group, according to Ken Dychtwald in *Age Power*, has “radically transformed every stage through which they have traveled.”

It is the impressionable young people who came of age then—as human barometers of the times—who most interest me. According to William Strauss and Neil Howe, authors of *Generations: The History of America's Future 1584 to 2069*, a relatively small number—10 to 15 percent—of these people became “screaming radicals or ‘freaked out’ hippies.” Yet the authors suggest that the remaining 85 to 90 percent silently endorsed their protest. On the sidelines of anti-war violence in Chicago streets, among the strikers on Columbia’s campus in New York, crowing around the police in People’s Park in California and witnessing an ocean of grief at the funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr., in Atlanta, huge numbers within the majority of this young generation sympathized privately with causes their more vocal peers defined as “righteous.”

Thus, causes labeled as equal opportunity, gender equity, disarmament, peace and respect for Mother Earth, all pointed to the same mantra:

The world is not working; find a better way.

The present decade, from 2000 to 2010 marks the 40th anniversary of every major event—serious and whimsical—of the years 1960-1970, “The Sixties,” a decade recalled almost daily by the national media and celebrated by anniversary books and motion pictures. Recall is inevitable; its events echo with consequence. Witness how events and trends today often had their genesis or their germination in this bygone era:

- © The civil rights movement, with Martin Luther King, Jr., urging civil disobedience personified by the quiet example set by Rosa Parks on a public bus. At the same time, “black power” advocate Stokely Carmichael and Black Muslim leader Malcolm X urged aggressive, even violent action.
- © The feminist movement, focused in prior decades on the right to vote, turned afresh in the early Sixties to social, sexual and intellectual freedoms. Two books—Helen Gurley Brown’s *Sex and the Single Girl* in 1962 and Betty Freidan’s *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963—led the way.

© The global environmental movement, which most agree Rachael Carson launched with *Silent Spring* published in 1962 as a wake-up call to the dangers of insecticides.

© International competitions that erupted in major arenas including land, space, weaponry, power and influence:

- Land – exemplified by Cuba
- Space – Russia's 1957 Sputnik launch to the American moonwalk by Apollo 11 in 1968
- Weaponry – the nuclear arms race tempered by negotiations, treaties and pacts, erupting among nations dubbed “world powers” or “rogues”
- Influence – Vietnam with its concomitant U.S. citizen protests of U.S. service people killed within the undefined purpose of an undeclared war.

© Distrust of government, spawned by suspicions of official lies in the Warren Commission Report; by false reports such as Vietnam body counts; and by excesses of presidential power culminating in the Watergate scandal.

Most shocking is the decade's level of violence: war, massacres, national assassinations, riots and civil demonstrations. And, yet, within this troubled milieu, we meet a new class of adventuresome, youthful “hobos,” in numbers not seen since the 1930s, when unemployed young people traveled the country. This time, the youths are products, not of poverty, but of the middle class and often from college campuses. Footloose, many are avoiding the draft, their values afloat as they test new substances like LSD, not yet banned by the federal Food and Drug Administration, which by then had begun to recognize publicly the health risks of cigarettes.

Ultimately, looking back, I set out to research answers to a few rather large questions. They are these:

© What happened to the vast majority of young people coming of age in a time that historian Todd Gitlin describes as “a cyclone in a wind tunnel . . . when history comes off the leash, when reality appears illusory and illusions take on lives of their own . . . “?

© How were relationships altered, plans modified, careers changes, and marriages affected among middle-classes in the Sixties, the first generation in history when college students outnumbered farmers?

© What happened to co-eds who married college-graduate men and began their lives as co-professionals, only to find that “co” did not necessarily mean equal within either the domestic or the professional sphere?

We have heard the Sixties themes of the rich, the poor, the African-Americans, the feminists, the musicians, the anti-war activists, the Vietnam vets. Even student radicals of the period have penned their tales. But non-radicals, so-called non-reactives, by and large, have not. The majority of Sixties youths did not take the cultural upheaval “to the streets” so much as to take it into their kitchens, homes and jobs.

Drawing on a decade so rich, with so much of lasting interest and influence, my novel – with a working title “Growing Up Southern in the Sixties” – records the mostly untold story of slower but fundamental change in the South. It follows specifically a first generation of new women married to the last generation of “old” (traditional) men and the events that proceeded from those surprising matches. Not before, nor since, has a generation seen so many divorces.

Ask a Boomer today about the 1960s and he or she will tell you a story. Likely as not, the story will be personal as well as political. Those days it was hard to see the yarn of living—public and private—as anything but entwined. Although it may seem naïve in retrospect, nevertheless collective optimism overcame widespread disillusionment and fear. When yesterday’s youth murmured privately or shouted publicly, “We can change the world!” they believed it.

Growing Up Southern in the Sixties is not a biography, not a memoir, not a history. It is all three. This work of fiction places vital characters within a recognizable, compelling picture of the times. These characters, composites of truth, represent the 85 to 90 percent of those quiet “hippies” who were too bland to make the magazines, too calm to land in headlines and too many to count. Unseen, unrecognized, and, until now, unsung, they were like the ocean’s undertow: their pull was immense.

As with other periods of iconographic significance—the Roaring 20s, the Great Depression, and the World War II generation, to name a few—the decade of the Sixties captures the imagination with its own, sizzling brand. Those of us who emerged still wear its stripes.

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