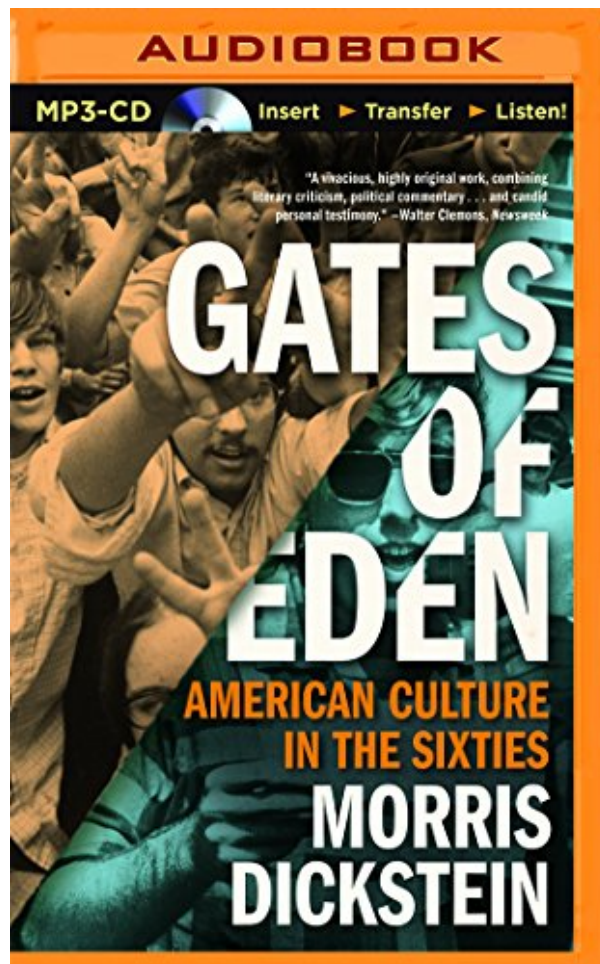
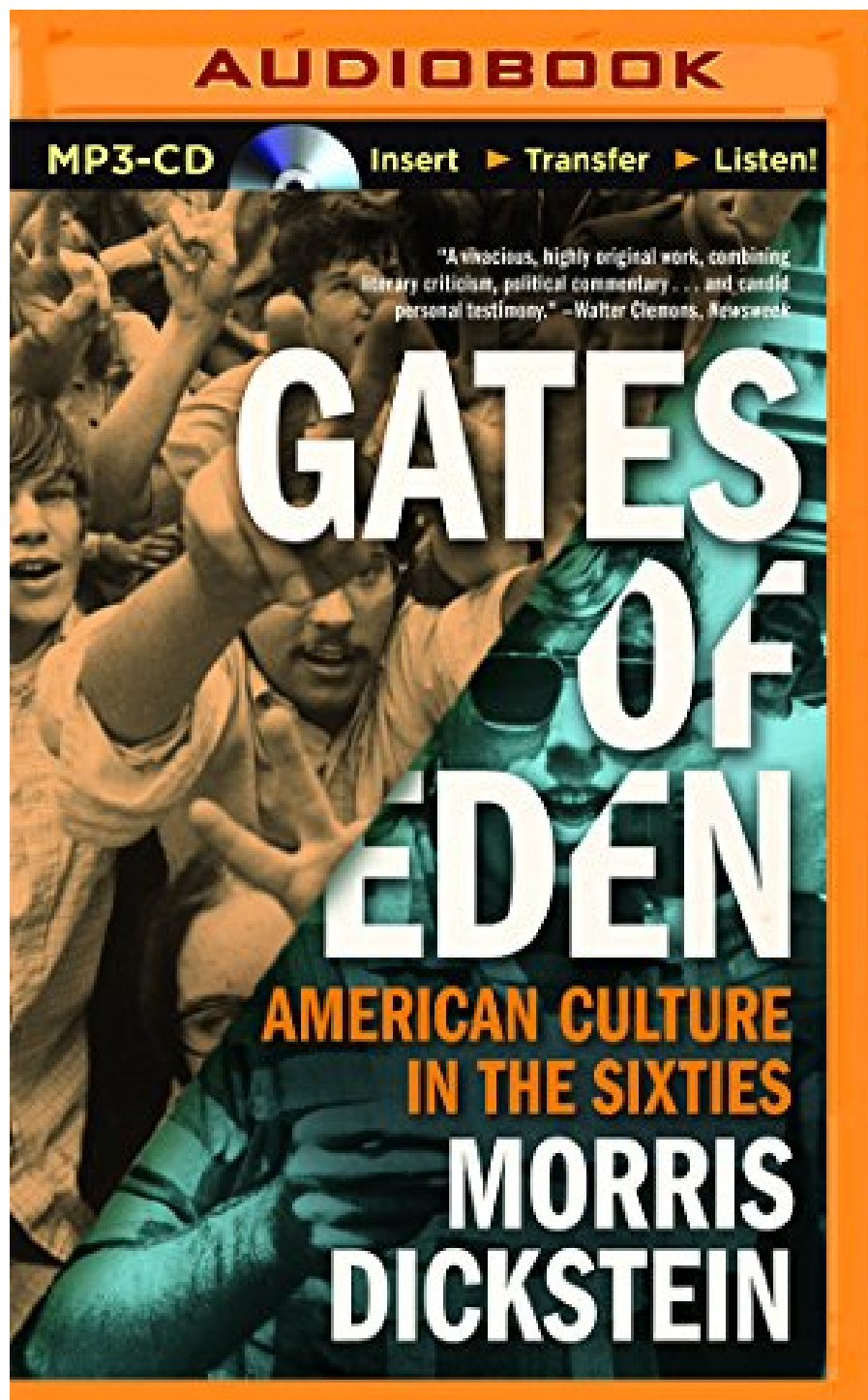


GATES OF EDEN: AMERICAN CULTURE IN THE SIXTIES BY MORRIS DICKSTEIN



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Review

"A vivacious, highly original work, combining literary criticism, political commentary...and candid personal testimony." (Walter Clemons Newsweek)

"With excellent literary judgment and judicious sympathy [Dickstein] covers politics and culture...the 'new journalism,' fiction, rock music, black writing and black nationalism, and concludes with an autobiographical sketch that nicely reveals the relationship of the observer to the things observed." (Christopher Lasch New York Times Book Review)

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About the Author

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Widely admired as the definitive cultural history of the 1960s, this groundbreaking work finally reappears in a new edition. The turbulent 1960s, almost from its outset, produced a dizzying display of cultural images and ideas that were as colorful as the psychedelic T-shirts that became part of its iconography. It was not, however, until Morris Dickstein's landmark *Gates of Eden*, first published in 1977, that we could fully grasp the impact of this raucous decade in American history as a momentous cultural epoch in its own right, as much as Jazz Age America or Weimar Germany.

From Ginsberg and Dylan to Vonnegut and Heller, this lasting work brilliantly re-creates not only the intellectual and political ferment of the decade but also its disillusionment. What results is an inestimable contribution to our understanding of 20th-century American culture.

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Most helpful customer reviews

14 of 15 people found the following review helpful.

Still Relevant in 2011

By Richard B. Schwartz

The Gates of Eden was shortlisted for the National Book Critics Circle Award and deserved that honor. (Susan Sontag's *On Photography* won.) A study of the sixties, its materials are largely cultural, though there is political, historical and personal matter as well.

A child of the 50's writing in the 70's, Dickstein is able to put the period in perspective. The Harvard trade paperback provides a new introduction, with an additional 20 years of insight. All of the chapters are strong, but the material on beat poetry and experimental fiction is particularly interesting. He is (forgivably) less acute when he discusses popular music. Dickstein is an old-fashioned, judicial critic. He is crisp and clear in his evaluations and he does not hesitate to state his judgments and preferences. He attacks (Tom Wolfe, e.g.) when he feels it is necessary and he separates wheat from chaff (with Barthelme, e.g.).

Most important, his historical assessment is balanced. He sees the strengths of the sixties but he also sees the period's radical shortcomings. Since the sixties are the great dividing force of our time it is appropriate to position him. Moderate with leftist inclinations, he is conservative in his intellectual posture. One of the characteristic moves of the sixties was to associate traditional literary study of classic texts (perceived, at Columbia, as a countercultural activity) with conservatism. Dickstein recounts the horror felt by his colleagues when they saw their activity characterized in this manner. His touchstone character in this regard is Lionel Trilling; Dickstein charts the roots of Trilling's views and the changes those views underwent as they received criticism from radical students.

The book illustrates that it is possible to separate scholarship and teaching from politics, even when politics are a strong interest. With all of the screeds concerning a politicized, radical academy, some tend to forget that one might vote on the left but see the merits of great books and traditional modes of scholarship. Dickstein considers himself non-traditional, but he looks very traditional from the perspective of 2011. "Traditional" in the 1950's meant philology. Dickstein would be 'nontraditional' in his use of, e.g., popular culture, but he looks very traditional today and his willingness to take stands, draw distinctions and trace explicit historical patterns is refreshing and helpful.

This is a fine book on an important subject. Contemporary readers should not be put off by its 1977 date; it remains very relevant today.

5 of 6 people found the following review helpful.

The Decade of 'Do your own thing' described and analyzed

By Shalom Freedman

This look at the cultural and social meaning of a decade was actually written in the decade following it. Dickstein sees the sixties as a transformational decade in American life and surveys its meaning in poetry and fiction, in politics and journalism, in the general social life of the United States. In doing this he mixes his analysis with autobiographical experiences and reflections, indicating his own inherent conservatism opened up to many of the new developments in the Age. The transition from the staid conformist fifties to the radical sixties is one which left in Dickstein's analysis a lasting effect on American culture. For the idea of the all importance of 'personal self- fulfillment' which was a leading idea of the Sixties has persisted in American life. Dickstein is at his best in his analysis of Literature, and I found the chapter on Rock Music a bit shaky, though I am no means a maven myself in this area. He writes with clarity and perception, and for those interested in knowing about this tumultuous decade in a deeper way this book is highly recommended.

1 of 2 people found the following review helpful.

Highly literate account of American culture in the sixties.

By John Martin

Gates of Eden is a highly intellectual account of American culture in the 1960's by Professor Morris Dickstein. The current edition, published in 1997, is an updated version of the original which was published in 1977. The first part of the book is centered on the 1950's and Dickstein focused on the strong anti-Communist sentiment and political morality of that period, and in particular on the work of Allen Ginsberg. The 60's he says ushered in a "new sensibility," and "brought government into the economic and political lives of Americans and out of their personal and private lives." A number of authors and works are cited including Paul Goodman (*Growing Up Absurd*), Joseph Heller (*Catch-22*) and the works of Kurt Vonnegut and John Updike. One chapter is devoted to black (dark) humor, another to journalism, still another to African-American writing, including references to the works of Richard Wright, James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison. Another chapter covers music including Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, The Rolling Stones and The Beatles. The closing chapter covers such experimental fiction as the writing of Donald Barthelme.

Garden of Eden will appeal primarily to people with a high degree of knowledge of American literature and culture, particularly as it relates to the 1960's, a dramatic period in American life. The average person will find it too challenging. I rate it at three stars for this reason. It is interesting to note that other reviewers list it at either five or three, which speaks to my concern noted above.

See all 5 customer reviews...

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