



By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age

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Originally published in 1985, *By the Bomb's Early Light* is the first book to explore the cultural "fallout" in America during the early years of the atomic age. The book is based on a wide range of sources, including cartoons, opinion polls, radio programs, movies, literature, song lyrics, slang, and interviews with leading opinion-makers of the time. Through these materials, Boyer shows the surprising and profoundly disturbing ways in which the bomb quickly and totally penetrated the fabric of American life, from the chillingly prophetic forecasts of observers like Lewis Mumford to the Hollywood starlet who launched her career as the "anatomic bomb." In a new preface, Boyer discusses recent changes in nuclear politics and attitudes toward the nuclear age.

By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age Details

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From Reader Review By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age for online ebook

Zach says

This is one of those studies that is kind of mind-boggling in its comprehensive approach to such a wide variety of subjects, any one of which could have filled a book or two on its own. Boyer traces American reactions to the atomic bomb in the first few years following the moment it first exploded into the national consciousness following Hiroshima. Although Boyer never phrases it as such (not being That Kind of Academic, even though at heart I would say this is more a work of cultural studies than of history), this rupture arguably marks the achievement of the absolute totality of modernity, with the destructive power of the modern mechanism finally overlaid on the entire globe. As Boyer makes clear, this rupture was obvious to most Americans at the time, which renders the fact that it has largely disappeared from the public consciousness kind of unsettling, to say the least.

Anyway here is a list off the top of my head of subjects that Boyer adroitly covers:

- calls for international control of the bomb/world government
- the scientists' movement for peace
- propaganda regarding the peaceful uses of atomic energy
- the impact of the bomb on social science
- the psychological impact of the bomb
- the bomb and science fiction
- the arms race
- the impact of the bomb on religion and moral discussions

My one complaint is that after the thematic sections, the chronological chapters toward the end just felt like a retreading of the same material-although even there, the cyclical nature of the public concerns were fascinating to observe.

Katrina Mann says

Explores American attitudes towards the nuclear bomb, including cultural expressions and opposition activism.

Dave says

Paul Boyer focuses his attention on the reaction of Americans to the atomic bombs in the five years after the first two were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (1945-1950). It may be surprising to know that even at that early date, there were many who felt it was wrong to use this new weapon. It was also interesting to note that, even though the United States had a monopoly on the bomb during this period, a common reaction among the public was already fear - thinking that if we would drop this bomb on others, others would not

hesitate to use it on us. In fact, many writers and letters to the editor cast the U.S. as almost the victim in this situation. It was also amusing to see almost every professional group, from philosophers to scientists to attorneys giving advice on how to live in this new nuclear age. All in all, a very interesting look at a very short slice of time.

sinfull_scarlet says

A little slow going, but interesting historically.

Asim Kazi says

Author does a good job of outlining the climate and political policies that lead to the dropping of the Atomic Bomb.

Hotavio says

By the Bomb's Early Light is an interesting account of the the effect the atomic bomb had on American society from 1946-1950. Specifically discussed are the early efforts to utilize post-Hiroshima guilt to eliminate nationalism and make the atomic bomb international property. Boyer then highlights fluctuating American sentiment toward the bomb. Perhaps it is more in personal taste, but I wouldn have preferred Boyer to fully utilize the fascinating pop-cultural evidence that he provides in his photographic illustration sections. What did such artifacts reveal about American thought on the bomb? He successfully analyzes musical and literary works for their meanings, why not mass produced items or consumables? Though some chapters could be combined and shortened, By the Bomb's Early Light is a new angle in which to view this segment of American history.

sdw says

This is an impressive book. Boyer examines the various American responses to the dropping of the atomic bombs from 1945-1950. I don't know how he ever figured out how to organize this book and which of his vast vault of cultural materials to include. There are chapters on the responses of specific groups: scientists, social scientists, psychologists, religious figures, science fiction writers, etc. There are chapters based on themes: how Americans responded ethically to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, utopic visions, Prometheus fears, etc. While doing all this, Boyer still manages to mark change over time - as the government succeeded through manipulation in shifting America's fears towards American's hope. For some reason I found the discussion of the scientists' movement extremely compelling and also enjoyed how psychologists were employed in the post-war expert boom to try to manage public fears.

One thing I learned: the fears of radioactive fall-out were 1950s fears more than 1940s fears.

This is a book filled with small fascinating tid-bits of information, and references a ton of tracts from the immediate post-war period I now what to go read.

