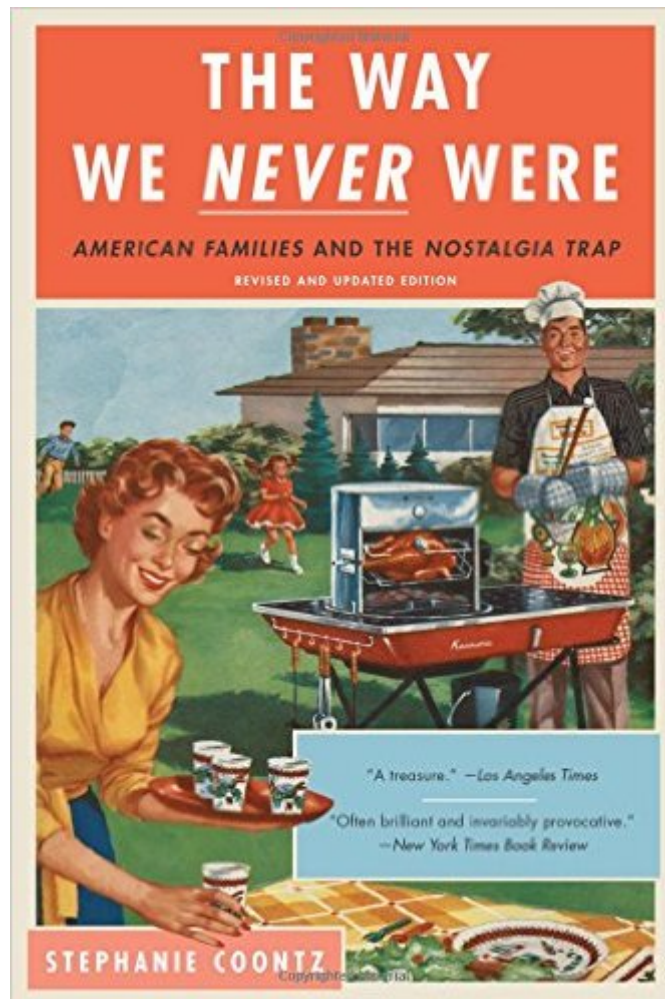


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The Way We Never Were: American Families And The Nostalgia Trap



Synopsis

Leave It to Beaver was not a documentary, a man's home has never been his castle, the male breadwinner marriage is the least traditional family in history, and rape and sexual assault were far higher in the 1970s than they are today. In *The Way We Never Were*, acclaimed historian Stephanie Coontz provides a myth-shattering examination of two centuries of the American family, sweeping away misconceptions about the past that cloud current debates about domestic life. The 1950s do not present a workable model of how to conduct our personal lives today, Coontz argues, and neither does any other era from our cultural past. This revised edition includes a new introduction and epilogue, looking at what has and has not changed since the original publication in 1992, and exploring how the clash between growing gender equality and growing economic inequality is reshaping family life, marriage, and male-female relationships in our modern era. Now more relevant than ever, *The Way We Never Were* continues to be a potent corrective to dangerous nostalgia for an American tradition that never really existed.

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Customer Reviews

I was born in 1970, and my childhood memories are of sun-bathed days riding my bike and playing with my friends in the safe streets of rural England. Mummies and Daddies formed coherent units, there was a real sense of community, and life has been downhill from there. Right? Except that, as an adult, I know better. One couple across the road were staying in a miserable marriage in which affairs were used to express anger; another neighbour beat the living daylights out of his wife; two children from my school walked miles to the police station to report that they were being beaten and

starved; paedophile rings were being dealt with; cases of incest, rape, and violent crime were not so unusual; and the fact is that I have no memory of these things because they were kept from me. The argument that the past was better because one remembers it being so does not, I fear, hold water. Historians and sociologists fight a losing battle against nostalgia and the very human desire to return to a golden age when things were simpler, more wholesome, easier to deal with than the realities we face as adults. Books like Coontz's 'The Way We Never Were' are vital to understanding and facing the complexities of the world instead of retreating in fear to a world of projected simplicity and order that never really existed.

Americans, especially those of the conservative persuasion, tend to idealize the 'Fifties as Paradise Lost: schools taught readin', 'ritin', and 'rithmetic; sex was confined to the bedrooms of married couples; teenagers were virginal and children docile; God's in his heaven, Eisenhower's in the White House, all's right with the world ...In fact, as Coontz points out, the era wasn't all that innocent (her statistics on teenage pregnancies and shotgun weddings are a real eye-opener). Furthermore, the myth of the suburban two-parent, two-child family, self-sufficient economically and emotionally, was not only fostered and perpetuated for economic reasons, but a historical anomaly even in the U.S. (not to mention the rest of the world). What Roberta Pollack Seid did in "Never Too Thin" for the MetLife weight tables, and Susan Faludi did in "Backlash" for the assertion that "a single woman over 40 has more chance of getting killed by a terrorist than of getting married," Stephanie Coontz does for the nuclear family. Her political agenda shows at times, but in general the facts she marshals are persuasive no matter whether you agree with it or not.

This book is a gem! Here is a thoroughly researched explanation of many of the attitudes toward family that pervade the American psyche today and keep us from moving forward. Growing up in a "broken" home, under non-traditional circumstances, I always felt like a freak -- like my family and I were substandard. I looked upon my parents as failures. As I read this book, I came to understand what they were up against as a young couple coming of age in the '50's -- trying to live up to an unrealistic and, ultimately, detrimental image of what a family was supposed to be. Thank you, Ms. Coontz, for allowing me to see my parents as people, and to find a new love and respect for them. And, for helping me to reconsider my own value system.

Since its inception, the religious right has attempted to convince America that the world would be better and all of our social problems would be resolved if we could magically transport back to the

1950's as represented in *Leave it to Beaver* and countless other comedies designed to "imitate" the emerging WASP middle-class suburban lifestyle. Yet as Stephanie Coontz points out, this was a Hollywood myth that never existed in real life. Instead, women were maimed from illegal abortions, gays were bashed at an alarming rate, schools were segregated, the disabled were hidden and sexual and domestic violence supposedly did not happen to "good" people. Telling it like it really was is not a PC fairy tale, but a practical reality if we are to finally confront and undo some of America's social problems. Politicians, particularly on the right, have been successful in exploiting and appropriating this myth for their own personal means precisely because there have been few watchdogs to challenge them. Were this possible, we would discover the new left had its roots in the backlash against Senator Joe McCarthy and his communist witch hunts. The cover picture with a young Robin Morgan is particularly ironic in light of the fact that the former "Mama" child star reincarnated herself as one of the most prolific and articulate leaders of the new left and women's liberation in the 1960's. Family Values have become such an emotional election issue because we are not really sure what they mean. Sure, any politician (indeed most do out of a fear of being perceived as anti-family) can embrace the concept and even make a career out of such proclamations, but our realities have been less than stellar pictures. The section on teenage pregnancy and unwed mothers confirms that the higher rates occurred before the legalization of birth control and the relegalization of abortion and the only difference is that girls who chose to keep their babies are not shipped off to maternity homes or forced to leave school. Additionally, she points out the young girls who engage in sexual activity are not feminists because they are more likely than non-sexually active peers to have very strong dependence needs and desires as well as traditional gender roles. I also believe Coontz should have done more investigating on the prevalence of childhood sexual abuse and the legal system that essentially encouraged it by allowing it to go unchecked. In the greatest of ironies, the decade where GLBT Americans enjoyed the least amount of rights was also the times when childhood sexual abuse was the highest. However, I realize Coontz was trying to provide a general overview with this book and believe that the subsection could provide enough material for a separate book of its own. While I realize it may be difficult for some readers to reconcile starry-eyed visions with this more pragmatic account, the resulting intellectual growth is a concise picture of what America was really like. Perhaps now, the religious right will quit screaming and join the proactive discussion on family life.

Engaging and sheds light on so many of our current thoughts about the dreamworld of the 50's. It is thoroughly researched and well written. The preface to the newest edition fills in to take us to the

21st century.

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