

## Review Essay

# Going Back to High School

Joseph E. Illick

High school marks the intersection of the emotionality of adolescence and the rationality of career choice. Years later classmates return to reunions bearing recollections of teen love and boasting the hallmarks of upward mobility. Given the heavy freight of the high school years, it is surprising how few alumni have chosen to write about them.

Some have, but the most notable—or, at least, the most well-known—literary production, *What Really Happened to the Class of '65?*,<sup>1</sup> is hardly more than local gossip. It may be wondered why it was published. The authors, Michael Medved and David Wallechinsky (both class members, the former now a right-wing talk show host in Seattle, the latter secluded in Paris), remind us that this particular cohort at Palisades High School (Pacific Palisades, CA) was the focus of a *Time* cover story on “today’s teenagers.” Admittedly, the youngsters were hardly typical, living in one of America’s most affluent enclaves, the beneficiaries of well-paid teachers and sophisticated parents. Yet the very circumstance of their isolation from the masses and financial security cast them into a unique position: in the years following graduation “through all the upheavals in sex, politics, and life styles . . . [they were] always in the forefront, always on the crest of the wave,” or so the authors assure us.<sup>2</sup>

This is the extent of the historical context provided. The volume consists of thirty personal sketches, each a pastiche of autobiographical testimony and

classmates' recollections, sometimes supplemented by a photo or two. The appeal of such an approach must lie in the reader's ability to recognize and even identify with the subjects based on his/her own high school experience. (Readers of this journal will want to read "Lany Tyler: Homecoming Queen," now Elaine Tyler May of the University of Minnesota's American Studies Department.) This slim fare provoked talk of a TV series; perhaps it was Pacific Palisades' proximity to Hollywood.

A more respectable attempt at dealing with high school and its consequences is writer Elizabeth Fishel's *Reunion. The Girls We Used to Be, the Women We Became*,<sup>3</sup> which focuses on ten classmates from the 25-member Class of '68 at the Brearley School in Manhattan. More affluent than the students at Palisades High, these youngsters were likewise "raised to believe they were among their generation's best and brightest," according to the author, who continues: "my class can be seen as a bellwether for a generation caught without a compass on the cutting edge of uncharted territory."<sup>4</sup>

If 1968 recalls to historians the Tet offensive, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy, and the riot at Chicago's Democratic National Convention, to the Brearley girls it marked the division between "the old, safe, traditional middle-class and upper-class model, silver-spoon fed to them. . . pearls and cashmere and Pappagallo shoes, *The Nutcracker Suite* . . . hot chocolate . . . [and] the exotic, dangerous, and new—love beads and tie-dye and Spartacus sandals that laced up the leg, acid-rock and marijuana brownies."<sup>5</sup> And much more.

Fishel supplies not only the context but also the judgment: "few of this group had found it easy to balance the two; many had found satisfaction in neither."<sup>6</sup> While their parents had felt no need to be experimental and their younger sisters would more successfully accomplish the balancing act, members of '68 floundered. To illustrate this thesis, Fishel depicts the lives of nine of her classmates and herself (about whom she says least) at critical periods in their evolving lives: their twenties, when the issue was separation from home, school and family; their thirties, the time of questing for personal authenticity; and their forties and fifties, when they searched for "a context for the losses and disappointments of midlife without giving way to despair. . . [and] for pleasure and satisfaction."<sup>7</sup> It was in this period, between the 25th and 30th reunions, that the information was gathered from 50 schoolmates.

Fishel discovers among her classmates four distinct styles of seeking: the untraditional traditionalist, who finds a desired security only after extreme experimentalism; the unconventional career-tracker, who achieves professional status through unusual means; the seeker, whose goal of awareness and spiritual transformation is realized through unconventional paths; and the juggler, who strives for balance among marriage, family, and career, looking both backward and forward. It's a little hard to believe that even as few as twenty-five women fall neatly into one of these four categories, but Fishel's taxonomy is at least

efficient, and her stories—which occasionally draw upon the words of her subjects—are interesting.

I had never read *What Really Happened* . . . until I wrote this review. But the year the Palasades book was published I began work on *At Liberty. The Story of a Community and a Generation, The Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, High School Class of 1952*.<sup>8</sup> I labored under the influence of several oral histories: Ronald Blithe's *Akenfield*, Studs Terkel's *Working*, and Roger Kahn's *The Boys of Summer*.<sup>9</sup> Essays in family history by my students at San Francisco State also persuaded me that a great deal of social history lay hidden in the largely neglected lives of ordinary Americans.

I had begun assigning family histories to my students as a stimulant. Their course in American history was a requirement for graduation, but they believed they had heard the story before and were prepared to be bored again. I charged them to gather the facts of their family histories over three generations, data foreign to almost all of them, and use the details on family, ethnicity and religion, work, politics, and residence to create a narrative set in the context of so-called general history (and modeled in a text we usually used for the course, John G. Clark, *et al.*, *Three Generations in Twentieth Century America: Family, Community, and Nation*, 1977.)<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, when I gathered the stories of my Bethlehem High School classmates I had in mind the context—class, ethnicity, gender, region (i.e., neighborhood), categories that are so evident in an industrial city—that would lend their tales a larger meaning. And I included in the book tables concerning residence, linguistic heritage, and occupation. (In addition to conducting interviews with fifty classmates, I asked all class members to fill out questionnaires covering four generations beginning with their grandparents, which 210 of the 554-member class did. I also could draw upon the Bethlehem city directory, of course.)

I wanted to present each classmate's story as I had gathered it—whole, not in segments. Yet I believed that the arrangement of narratives in the book should be, so far as possible, topical. I found my vehicle in the life cycle. After an opening chapter on the community of Bethlehem, I presented those classmates who emphasized the care of their own parents, under the heading "Family." Those who focused on ethnicity and/or socioeconomic class I placed under "Neighborhood," since residential housing was located roughly by nationality of origin and always by class. The succeeding categories were "School," "Work," "Marriage," and "Childhood," i.e., the raising of their own children. At the end of each chapter I included my own experience with each of these matters. I concluded that the lives of my classmates reflected the change from a traditional to a modern society (as the name Bethlehem symbolized both the stable and the steel mill) but that it was difficult in an industrial culture to transcend class lines, which were built into the high school curricula and persisted through career into succeeding generations.

In *New Jersey Dreaming. Culture, Capital, and the Class of '58*<sup>11</sup> Sherry B. Ortner, an anthropologist at Columbia University (though currently visiting at UCLA), takes a broadly analytical approach to high school (and nowhere reveals her own response to those years). She contacted 246 (out of the 304) of her fellow 1958 classmates in the largely Jewish (83) Weequahic High School in Newark interviewed about 100 of them in depth, but she does not reproduce her interviews in the manner of an oral historian (or subject them to psychological interpretation). Rather, she uses snippets of the interviews, with pseudonyms, to lend a personal dimension to her analysis. Ortner observes that she had “originally planned to break up the Class [of 1958] by class and compare how the ‘high-capital’ kids and the ‘low-capital’ kids did,” both in school and later in their lives. To differentiate high from low she calculates the natal family’s place on the socioeconomic ladder, its education and cultural know-how, and the emotional/psychological quality of its interior life. The labels she applies to the Weequahic natal families—business/professional, 27 percent; middle, 44 percent; working, 29 percent—suggest a more conventional approach to class, however. (She notes that although today class is not recognized by those at the top, it was and is palpably felt at the bottom, usually in reference to consumer goods, e. g., who wore cashmere sweaters.)

However, since the consideration of class alone would deny the richness of the high school mix Ortner supplements it with a more individualistic category: attitude/style. In her framework for classifying high school students she posits class as the vertical axis and attitude/style (dichotomized as “tame” versus “wild”) as the horizontal. Popular kids and class officers represent the high capital class and are tame, while jocks and cheerleaders are high capital but wild. Ordinary citizens and eggheads or nerds are low capital and tame, while hoods and sluts, smokers and burners are low capital and wild. (Ortner admits that the labels in the framework reflect the viewpoint of those on top.)

These four types define the symbolic universe within which all high school students—everywhere in the United States, Ortner insists—must operate, either by conforming, resisting, or some combination of the two.

The real game in high school was popularity, achieved by the high capital conformists. The low capital people resisted by rejecting or ignoring the game, playing it at a lower level (through less prestigious activities or offices), engaging in an alternative game (something intellectual or artistic or political that rendered the main game as shallow), or simply by cultivating friendships that superseded the game.

The ostensible purpose of high school was, of course, academic. Three-quarters of the students at Weequahic were in the college preparatory track, while only a quarter were in the commercial/secretarial division. (At Bethlehem High School, one-third of the students were in the academic track, one-third in vocational, and one-third in “general.” There appears to have been no vocational

track for boys at Weequahic; they were overrepresented in the college prep track just as girls were in the commercial.)

Although elsewhere Ortner asserts that class “is always closely entwined with race and ethnicity,” the curriculum does not reflect this generalization since it over-rote class (three-quarters of the students were in the college prep track while only one-quarter of the Class’s natal families were in the business/professional class). But curriculum did reflect the racial and ethnic distributions in the Class.

Sixty-three percent of the class completed college, lower than the number in the college prep track but much higher than the national average (somewhere around 13 percent in the mid-twentieth century). Males predominated, no doubt because they were expected to move on to a job or career while the female emphasis was on marriage and motherhood. What is particularly striking is that 81 percent of Jewish males and 76 percent of Jewish females completed college. (Admittedly, Jews were overrepresented in the college prep track; Ortner does not provide a gender breakdown.)

“In terms of controlling people’s life chances,” Ortner observes, “academic tracks were often much more pernicious over the long run than the social categories pertaining to popularity. Tracks were future oriented. . . .” This assertion is unproven (there is no investigation of where social categories led, so no comparison can be made to the academic side) or perhaps even false (since the college prep track lifted students above their class backgrounds). And the conflict in interpretation among contemporary students of American education—whether schools offers the same opportunities to all students, thus promoting equality of opportunity—remains unresolved in *New Jersey Dreaming*.

It is clear, though, that the Class of ‘58 did very well in the real world. Few were attracted to the Beat generation of the 1950s or the social idealism of the 1960s. Some 53 percent of Class members rose above their origins in the era of postwar prosperity. When Ortner observes that “five out of six people of working-class background stayed in the working class,” she is misreading her own statistics, which show that only five persons of 56 persons formerly of the working class remain there today.

On the other hand she does a laudable job of reaching beyond the parochiality of the Class into social trends and historic changes, conceding that Weequahic cannot be considered unique when it is realized that 1958 high school grads nationwide composed a highly successful age cohort. (Also, she admits to stressing access to the system rather than critiquing the evils of it.) For this rise in status she credits not only national economic trends (affecting the vertical axis of class) but also the horizontal axis of personal “agency,” which she relates to the “American cultural ideology about the unfettered individual and the payoff of personality, brains, and/or hard work.” It would be interesting to know how these characteristics correlate with the tame and wild categories of high school.

Those Class members who were less successful rationalized their repose by noting that happiness was not upward mobility but friends and family. Yet even they were pushed up the ladder by postwar economic expansion and the inflation of the middle class.

Ortner recognizes that prosperity complemented by personal agency is not alone sufficient to explain the heady success of the Class of 1958, however. Consequently, she introduces the issue of identity into the mix. Dividing her subjects into the categories of Jewish men, other ethnicities (usually working-class), African Americans, and women, she points to the bouyant effects of, respectively, the Americanization of immigrants, the labor movement, civil rights, and women's liberation.

The Class of '58 not only rose but also on the way up contributed to "late capitalism," defined in terms such as technological change, globalization, the emergence of a professional/managerial class (to which '58 contributed 220 or 139 members, depending whether you are scanning table 12 or table 22) and postmodern cultural forms, such as divorce. The American class structure, which resembled a top at graduation (large in the middle, small at top and bottom), now looks more like an hour glass with most of '58 in the higher chamber. (Ironically, these people are behaving like "the Old Money, Old Upper Classes of WASP America," setting up trust funds, looking to college legacies, joining clubs and old boy networks. Ortner interviewed 50 class children but decided against including them in the study.)

This is certainly an America we all recognize—and got more than a glimpse of in *American Pastoral*, written by Weequahic High's best-known alumnus, Philip Roth.<sup>12</sup> For these New Jersians, the dreams of success were largely realized. What part high school played in this realization is not, and maybe cannot be, entirely clear.

The four books under review here describe high schools of the 1950s and 1960s that differ in many ways—upper-class and multi-class, public and private, co-ed and single sex, northeast and southwest—and whose graduates have pursued a variety of paths. The high school curricula, as well as extra-curricular activities, both of which relected the economic and cultural melieu of postwar America, affected the paths taken. The relationship between school and society is addressed only implicitly, if at all, in *What Really Happened to the Class of '65*. How the rarified atmosphere of Brearly affected the upper-middle-class lives of its students is not really the story told in *Reunion*, interesting as that story is. Bethlehem High School was the single gathering place for tenth through twelfth graders in that industrial town; the school mirrored its urban setting without changing it in any significant way. Weequahic was only one of several high schools and predominantly Jewish; the upward mobility of its students only reflected the success of a part of the population of Newark. These four books provide us not so much a pattern as a tapestry.

## Notes

1. (New York: Random House, 1976).
2. *Ibid.*, 3-5.
3. (New York: Random House, 2000).
4. *Ibid.*, 9.
5. *Ibid.*, 13-14.
6. *Ibid.*, 15.
7. *Ibid.*, 260.
8. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989).
9. Ronald Blythe, *Akenfield* (New York: Pantheon, 1969); Studs Terkel, *Working; People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do* (New York: Pantheon, 1974); Roger Kahn, *The Boys of Summer* (New York, Harper and Row, 1972).
10. John G. Clark, David M. Katzman, Richard D. McKinzie, and Theodore A. Wilson (Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press, 1977).
11. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).
12. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).