

BOOK REVIEW

The shattering: America in the 1960s, by Kevin Boyle, New York, Norton, 2021, 480 pp., US\$32.00 (hardcover), ISBN 9780393355994

In *The Shattering*, Kevin Boyle writes that “no one was sure why” the University of California administration cracked down on student activism to precipitate the 1964 Berkeley Free Speech Movement (164). It is a conclusion, or better said a lack of one, that runs through the entirety of this puzzling survey of 1960s United States history. Repeatedly, Boyle refuses to develop deeper interpretations of a dizzying, fascinating, maddening, and still-crucial decade. We never quite learn what broke into pieces in the shattering of the 1960s in the United States or, more crucially, *why* it did. Perhaps driven by the recent fetishization among superstar academic historians to write condescending forms of “popular” history, Boyle’s book winds up potted history – or, given the title, we might call it broken potted history. Something’s shattering here, but what it is ain’t exactly clear.

While Boyle makes a few analytic gestures in the Preface, his arguments mostly disappear as the storytelling takes over. Instead, Boyle’s book treats readers as if they are incapable of handling any kind of more complex analysis whatsoever. Intended for the masses, the book oddly winds up talking down to them. The result is a supercilious form of narrative history that masquerades as populist and accessible. Boyle claims *The Shattering* will “set aside the consensus politics and put in its place the particular interests of the postwar era’s rapidly expanded middling classes: ordinary Americans with jobs to keep, kids to raise, pensions to build, mortgages to pay, and memories of harder times to put behind them” (xiii). Then, rather than bring this contention to fruition, he opts for a cinematic prose style. The book pans in and out on vignettes about various everyday Americans with the goal of becoming a kind of sepia-toned Ken Burns documentary about the 1960s, or perhaps a Steven Spielberg epic. There are everyday people in the book, to be sure, but they are often nostalgized and reduced in stature. They become the “little people,” the “common folk.” They are precisely not at the center of the story, but rather side actors, quaint in their dreams, their activities, their hopes, the meanings of their lives, but they are not the makers of history in this book. Instead, their stories become mere background set pieces for what occupies the core of the tale: a political history of presidents and the consensus politics they strived to establish (in Johnson’s case) or abandon (in Nixon’s). While there are some wonderful passages on figures such as Norma McCorvey, who would become the “Jane Roe” in the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court case (305–307), *The Shattering* seems most at home in the Oval Office (or in Richard Nixon’s case, in the secret Executive Office Building room from which he often worked).

To be fair, in the Preface, there are stabs at larger arguments, but they are more areas of focus than interpretative claims. Boyle identifies three topics that his “narrative form” will address: the civil rights movement, Vietnam, and the shifting ways in which the law handled its citizens’ sexualities (xv), yet he is hesitant to offer readers access to reasons for why these topics are the most crucial ones. Even less so does he propose how they arose from deep grooves and structures of ideology and culture in the history of the United States. If these were the three key “challenges,” as he calls them, in the US during

the 1960s, we never really learn why they mattered most – or how different interpretations of their significance continue to ricochet around both academic corners of scholarly history and among the broader populace to this day. Instead, time and time again, things just sort of happen in *The Shattering*.

True, the book displays a knack for sharing uncanny, telling details. Boyle is particularly adept at noting how diverse events were happening simultaneously. This is part of what lent the 1960s its feeling of velocity and tumult, of things shattering. In the end, however, the book is “Great Man” history in disguise. As much as it starts in the quotidian space of places such as working-class Eddy Street in Chicago and then gives us glimpses of civil rights activists, hippie scene makers, or everyday people swept up in dramatic legal challenges to existing American jurisprudence, Boyle returns repeatedly to the highest levels of governmental power as the key site of the crackup in his tale of disintegration.

Refusing to interpret but only narrate, *The Shattering* raises many questions. The US rebuilt the economies of the defeated Axis powers after World War II, but why did it do so? The children of radical parents, known as “red-diaper babies,” arrived on college campuses in the early 1960s “determined to build a new Left to replace the old one their parents had lost,” but why (151)? SNCC’s various factions debated integration compared to Black Power in 1965, but how come these were the terms of the debate (212)? Was it merely the ghost of Harry Truman’s unpopularity that led Lyndon Johnson into the Vietnam War, or was he driven by ideologies of American exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny dating back to the nineteenth century, if not earlier (179)? When antiwar activists among the Democrats would not endorse LBJ’s Vietnam policy in 1968, and presidential candidate Hubert Humphrey got trapped between the doves and the hawks, why were both sides so dug into their positions that they destroyed their own Party’s chances at retaining the Executive Office (295)? How come the more mainstream Moratorium protest against the Vietnam War gained traction when the radical resistance to the war did not (320)? Why, on the other hand, when it came to challenging anti-abortion laws, did “mobilization [breed] resistance” and the movement expand (326)? When white parents shifted from outright racism and “massive resistance” to flipping the script on the “color-blind” concept of racial equality in order to block school integration and equal access to education, how were they able to believe in such logical legerdemain (312)? Richard Nixon established diplomatic relations with China after making his career as a staunch anti-communist, but other than the surface-level presidential reelection calculations that led him in this direction, how was it that such a sudden ideological pivot could occur (373)? We get lots of action in *The Shattering*, but quite little in the way of explanation.

A synthetic survey does not have to be an advanced PhD seminar, but lack of interpretation, intended to make a narrative history more understandable, instead often becomes mystifying. Part of the problem might be Boyle’s privileging of political history over cultural or intellectual history. Political expediency seems to suffice for causality in the book: LBJ, Nixon, and others do things to win votes, enough said. However, this leaves out the far more fascinating contradictions of American ideologies, beliefs, and concepts of the very nature of American life itself lurking below the surface, where they often guide political choices and decisions. How was it, for instance, that anxieties about difference, whether political (McCarthyism) or cultural (homosexuality) or political and cultural (racism, sexism) erupted to shape American life in the 1960s? In *The Shattering*, ideological and cultural factors simply are. They exist. They are static. They do not warrant further examination. This leaves a reader grasping at straws. Why did some attitudes change so dramatically (on racism, on the Vietnam

War, on sexuality, on myriad other topics) and other ideologies and beliefs remain intact? In *The Shattering*, who knows?

The book really comes off the rails when it turns to popular culture. Here, Boyle sometimes even gets his facts incomplete or downright wrong. More crucially, his sense of significance is off. When dipping back into the 1950s to track the rise of rock and roll, *The Shattering* points to Elvis Presley's cross-racial appropriation of the song "Hound Dog" from rhythm-and-blues star Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton; what Boyle forgets to mention is that the song was written for her by two young Jewish songwriters, Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller (40). The color line was already growing murky by the time Presley exploded on the scene. Worse, Boyle has the audacity to call Chuck Berry's songs "facile" instead of recognizing how brilliantly Berry fused country and western, pop, and blues sounds into sly commentaries on postwar adolescent life, racial relations, sexuality, even politics (40).

The problems continue in the treatment of the counterculture. By ignoring more recent scholarship and relying mostly on journalistic accounts by conservative writers such as Joan Didion and Tom Wolfe, Boyle presents an outsider's perception of the counterculture's quest to understand the stakes of freedom in Cold War America. He gets a few facts wrong (Ken Kesey did not organize the Trips Festival, but rather the Acid Tests, 207, 220–221). More problematically, he imagines that bohemians in places such as San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury neighborhood wanted to "smash out the windows of mainstream America and climb through the gaping frame to freedom" (321). The problem is that counterculturists did not seek to break mainstream American life or try to escape to freedom (or, *qua* Erich Fromm, from it). They attempted to realize core American ideals of freedom. Dressed in American flag suits, Kesey and his Merry Pranksters explored the possibilities of self and collective transformation within a maelstrom of technological mediation, exploring a kind of acid-tinged funhouse version of mainstream life. They wanted in, not out. In the Haight, the Diggers did not shatter the glass at their Free Store; they constructed a giant picture frame, a "Free Frame of Reference," through which visitors could step if they wished to do so. Their investigations into American freedom had enormous and lasting reach into mainstream America, yet Boyle dismisses them as marginal outsiders. *The Shattering* dimly registers the irony of these bohemians creating rebellious forms of culture *within and for* mainstream American consumerism (318), but it provides little explanation as to how the counterculture took on the very contradictions and complexities of the US as a whole in the 1960s.

Whether with the counterculture, the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, the legal struggle to stop the policing of sexuality in the United States, *The Shattering* never quite coheres as a survey of 1960s America. Is this the point of the title? We cannot know because unlike other surveys of the decade, *The Shattering* does not make an argument.¹ It just "tells the story." Themes lurk among the fragments: the enormous hope for democracy during the era; the curious similarity between the legal push for individual privacy (when it came to sexuality and reproductive rights) that ran parallel to the assertion of the right to engage in secret, covert military operations by those in public office; or the notion that when, in 1968, the US polity had a great fall, all the King's men could not put it together again. Any one of these could form a central core for the book, but by not addressing deeper interpretive questions, the 1960s crashes to the floor in *The Shattering*. We are left with a trail of unexamined shards that Boyle seems to want to sweep under the rug – or perhaps into the dustbin. The result is a strange shoulder shrug of a book that narrates the historical ruptures of the decade without ever fully confronting them.



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Note

1. See, among many other books, Matusow, *The Unraveling of America*; Gitlin, *The Sixties*; Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams*; Farrell, *The Spirit of the Sixties*; Marwick, *The Sixties*; and DeKoven, *Utopia Limited*.

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