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EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Book Notes:
Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

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First thing's first:
Let's Leave Fantasyland Behind

As we read in last week's ***Book Notes XXIV: Rocky Dies Yellow***, unreality can be a charming, even an enlightening, place to visit. As Lawrence Ferlinghetti evocatively described:

#20
The pennycandystore beyond the El
is where I first
fell in love
with unreality
Jellybeans glowed in the semi-gloom
of that September afternoon ... [1]

But it is no place to live.

As Kurt Andersen argues, living in unreality is what many Americans have been doing since before there was an America. Although Spanish explorers and conquistadors scouring Florida and then the west and French voyageurs exploring the valley of the St. Lawrence and what came to be known as the Ohio Country got here first, Andersen focuses on the English who settled North America. Their home eventually became the United States, which for brevity's sake we'll simply call "America."

As Andersen writes, "In the beginning, it didn't even have a real name: *The New World* was a placeholder, like the generic proxy NewCo that corporate lawyers nowadays temporarily assign to businesses their clients are creating. To its prospective white residents, the New World was practically an imaginary place. For them, America *began* as a fever dream, a myth, a happy delusion, a fantasy." [2]

The principal feeder of those fantasies was Richard Hakluyt, a 16th century seeker of royal favor who would have been completely at home on Don Draper's ***Mad Men's*** Madison Avenue. Hakluyt was a real estate promoter before the genre was conceived. Of course, you could say he invented it and its subsequent spawn. All of those timeshare hucksters, suburban home builders promising you your own small piece of paradise and reality TV make-over artists suggesting that, "Yes, even your small bungalow can become a McMansion."

Although he never got to America himself, Hakluyt "was among the most excited and influential of England's America enthusiasts." [3] He wrote two immensely influential books promoting exploration of the New World: *Divers Voyages Touching Upon the Discoverie of America* and *The Principal Navagations, Voiages, Traffiques and Discouries of the English Nation*. Cherry-picking reports of earlier explores, Hakluyt fed adventurer's (and the desperate's) dreams of a better tomorrow with promises of an earthly paradise where "gold, silver … precious stones, and turquoises, and emeralds … have been found." [4]

Hakluyt's patron was Sir Walter Raleigh, he of "the cape and puddle" anecdote preventing Queen Elizabeth I from muddying her foot. Raleigh "was a charming, larger-than-life up-and-comer – a stereotypical go-go American before English America even existed." [4] Raleigh told Elizabeth exploring America was the path to Spanish-style riches.

She bought his pitch.

Although Raleigh's Roanoke Colony failed, he inspired James I, Elizabeth's successor, to found the Virginia Company of London and the Virginia Company of Plymouth that set in motion the English dash to America in pursuit of realms of gold.

Although these first dreamers of the golden dream found no gold, their name remains in Plymouth, Massachusetts and the state of Virginia. The latter itself is a bit of tangled fantasy, for it honors Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen, who, almost certainly, was no virgin. Well, maybe technically, but untangling the myths of her relationships with Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester, and, then, later the young Earl of Southampton are fodder for a future ***Book Notes.***

But colonies need colonizers – who were the first settlers? Well, fantasists of two sorts. Religious zealots fleeing persecution and desperate people fleeing poverty.

Sound familiar? Some things never change.

Quoting Walter McDougall's history of America, ***Freedom Just Around the Corner***, Andersen writes, "Most of the 120,000 indentured servants and adventurers who sailed to the (New World) in the 17th century did not know what lay ahead but were taken in by the propaganda of the sponsors." [6] Or, as historian Daniel Boorstin remarked, "American civilization has been shaped by the fact that there was a kind of natural selection here of those people who were willing to believe in advertising." [7]

Which is to say, people who have a predisposition to believe in fantasy – bunkum – hokum – anything promising something better than their current reality. And, once engrained, this fantastical tendency to abandon, in Karl Rove's memorable phrase, "the reality-based community" for a reality of alternative facts proves extremely difficult to refute. For, as Francis Bacon noted, "when it is once adopted. an opinion (either as being the received opinion or as being agreeable to itself) draws all things else to support and agree with it." [8]

If fantastical thinking colored America in the beginning, is it now and shall it forever be? The answer to the first question is "Yes"; to the latter "Probably."

Before we tackle the future, however, let's review Andersen's major points. Divided into six parts, ***Fantasyland*** is a survey of American history organized around the central conceit tracing America and Americans' pre-occupation with magical thinking. The latter of which can be positive, for example, Master Card and Gannon University ad campaigns' slogan "consider the possibilities."

Or very dangerous if one loses one's moorings in the "reality-based-community."

Part One "The Conjuring of America: 1517-1789," surveys
America's early settling and then the founding of the United States. Andersen oversimplifies in pursuit of his argument, saying that America's earliest settlers were God-crazed cults and gold-crazed adventurers – the first in New England, the latter in Virginia. Unfortunately, he's right, but in saying so he leaves out the commercially minded Dutch in New Amsterdam, the "friendly people" of William
Penn's Quaker Pennsylvania and Delaware, not to mention the Swedes and others in the Jerseys (as New Jersey was originally called).

In the founding, however, was planted the seed that would later find its fulfillment in Madison Avenue promoters and Hollywood dream weavers.
Among ***Fantasyland's*** charms are the epigraphs with which Andersen begins each section. For example, *Part One*, relative to planting of seeds, begins with a quote from Alexis DeTocqueville's ***Democracy in America*** that is worth repeating in full:

"The entire man … is to be seen in the cradle of the child. The growth of nations presents something analogous to this; they all bear some marks of their origins. If we were able to go back … we should discover … the primal cause of the prejudices, the habits, the ruling passions, and, in short, all that constitutes what is called the national character." [9]

Part Two: The United States of Amazing: The 1800s continues the exploration by focusing on two threads. One thread, going back to *Part One* and The First Great Awakening, traces Americans' religious zeal. Although founded by apostles of The Enlightenment, rationality and science, these champions of freedom of thought ironically "liberated people to believe in anything whatsoever." [10] As a result, in Andersen's telling, 19th century America was awash in religious sects, including the Shakers, who through sexual abstinence extinguished themselves; Mary Baker Eddy's Christian Scientists; Joseph Smith's Mormons; the Second Great Awakening; end-of-the-world prophecies; and the Cane Ridge birth of revivalism and camp meetings.

The 19th century's second thread proved the veracity of P.T. Barnum's shrewd insight concerning "the perfect good-nature with which the American public submits to a clever humbug." [11] Homeopathy, mesmerism, medical fads, "get rich quick" dreams of the California Gold Rush, the Lost Cause nostalgia for the defeated Confederacy, and the pastoral fantasies of Daniel Boone and Henry David Thoreau all blossomed in the fertile soil of Americans' yearning for make-believe. As did the emergence of large-circulation magazines and newspapers giving birth to the mass media with dubious editorial standards promoting the nascent entertainment industry of P.T. Barnum's *American Museum* and Buffalo Bill Cody's *Wild West Show*.

If ***Fantasyland*** has a flaw, it is that it could have benefited from an editor. Particularly evident in *Parts Three, Four,* and *Five*, the text is overly long, seems to have been rushed into publication to catch the wave created by President Donald Trump's unexpected 2016 election victory and Andersen's determination to share with you every tidbit he and his research assistants uncovered. One can almost see the note cards' shadowy outlines as facts tumble across the pages.

Echoing Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice," *Part Three: A Long Arc Bending Toward Reason: 1900-1960* traces reason's comeback in the early 20th century with the passage of the Pure Food and

Drug Act, the founding of the NAACP, Gilbert Seldes's ***The Stammering Century*** debunking the 19th century's magical thinking, the founding of the ACLU, and spiritualism's waning.

As the century wore on, however, there were conspiracy theories, the rise of Jim Crow amidst the triumph of southern nostalgia for the Lost Cause and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. Most people don't realize that religious fundamentalism and biblical inerrancy are modern phenomena that emerged in the early 20th century as a counter to the 19th century's scientific study of Biblical scripture. So, too, arose Pentecostalism, which roared out of Southern California to become a major protestant movement by mid-century. As did modern celebrity culture, the progeny of the marriage of advertising to the fiction industry triumvirate of movies, recorded music, and radio.

All were subsumed by the beast that combined all three – television.

Television pushed reason back on its nether side as fantasy flourished, for as Aldous Huxley noted in ***Brave New World Revisited:***

"The early advocates of universal literacy and a free press ... did not forsee ... the development of a vast mass communications industry, concerned in the main neither with the true nor the false, but with the unreal ... In a word, they failed to take into account man's almost infinite appetite for distractions." [12]

Which distractions reached their apotheosis in "the Sixties" and their aftermath. *Part Four: Big Bang: The 1960s and 70s* might be best characterized as the era when everyday life was supplanted by everyday fictions. That is, "the Sixties" were the time when people decided to either enhance reality (drugs – *see all the pretty colors?*) or to replace it altogether with alternative realities, which ranged from the banal to the socially dangerous.

Among the banal 1960s off-shoots are theme parks, Civil War reenactors, Renaissance Fairs, *Dungeons and Dragons*, fan fiction, cosplay, themed restaurants, malls, and architecture. Las Vegas combined them all into one vast, easily commercialized package. If one cannot go to Paris, then go to Vegas and see the fake Eifel Tower. On a personal note, once in Las Vegas on a morning stroll down the Strip, I saw a casino built as some sort of ersatz Egyptian or generic Middle Eastern castle. I walked up to it, tapped its sides. Not stucco, certainly not stone, but only drywall (relatively safe in a place where it rarely rains) coated with some sand-infused paint. It won't weather very well – certainly won't last three thousand years, but for some fantasy seekers escaping the mundaneness of their Main Street hometown, the illusion will hold for the necessary day or three.

Not so banal, their aftershocks defining America down to today, was the explosion of *areligious* religious movements: no God, no guilt, everything feels good. They range from serious attempts to understand Eastern religions and to fuse that understanding with western religions to the greater benefit of both to the not so serious but very popular excursions into New Age thinking, which leaves adherents on a metaphysical island untethered from any "reality-based community."

The counterculture encouraged free thinking and finding one's own truth, which combined with serious academic attempts to understand the nature of truth, led to a questioning of science and the rise of anti-vaxxers. It also led to a growth in conspiracy thinking, for if truth is elusive – perhaps non-existent – how can anything be verified?

If nothing can be verified, then, unfortunately not in Cole Porter's coyly teasing sense, anything goes. For, as Thomas Pynchon said in ***Gravity's Rainbow***, when "… nothing is connected to anything" it results in "a condition not many of us can bear for long." [13]

Which explains the explosion of make-believe and "See, I'm a Trekkie just like Captain Kirk", conspiracy theories, fake science, and the dubious politics of the past 30 years. They are all phenomena Andersen traces out in *Parts Five and Six* that bring his tour of Fantasyland down to the present.

Reality TV is the ultimate make-believe, so that the real no longer seems real compared to the make-believe version of itself. *Survivor is an example. Although* I admit I have only seen it in snippets, I never forget that there's a camera present. I must ask, if there is a camera present, then how dangerous can it really be? If it is really dangerous, then the real star is the unseen camera operator. Or, further images of reality masquerade as reality: the *Real Housewives* of whatever suburb or major metropolis and *The Apprentice*, in which a serially bankrupt tycoon plays a role that launched a political career.

Conspiracy mongering, from "who shot Kennedy" to ***None Dare Call It Treason*** to QAnon, from ***Horseman of the Apocalypse*** to the ***Last Days Handbook***, from the Illuminati to the New World Order, from birtherism to ***The Greatest Hoax: How the Global Warming Conspiracy Threatens Your Future***, from child abduction panics to recovered memory witch hunts flourished during this period and continue to flourish in the present.

Why?

Andersen traces its roots back to Protestantism and every man his own priest. I understand the point he is attempting to make, but think he obscures it with his anti-religious arguments.

The phenomenon is more general.

When Gutenberg invented the printing press, he broke the power of the priesthood. When highspeed printing arrived in the 19th century, it began to lessen the power of the editor. That movement was set back temporarily in the early 20th century by the new electronic media, which paradoxically was everywhere but controlled by a very few. The controllers, both benign and malign, were the return of the editors – of the gatekeepers.

That dam broke again in the 1990s with the Internet, which gave every person access to unlimited information and to a web of like-minded thinkers they previously had little hope of ever finding. As a result of social media's free-for-all, Andersen argues, "delusional ideas and magical thinking flood from the private sphere into the public, become so pervasive and deeply rooted, so normal, that they affect everyone." [14]

Rooted in his deep history of American magical thinking, Andersen argues that two changes in American culture brought America to *Fantasyland's* full flowering: the counterculture of the 1960s and the advent of the Digital Age, sometimes called the New Media Age or the Information Age.

In several previous ***Book Notes*** we have explored the impact of the 1960s and the counterculture. In particular, we have discussed how the Sixties "do your own thing" melded into the 1980s and 1990s "greed is good" ethos and the rise of an Ayn Rand-inspired libertarianism to transform the flower children Baby Boomers of the 1960s and 1970s into the most conservative generation in American history. A toxic brew of post-truth, hyper-individualistic magical thinking resulted, eschewing all forms of social control in pursuit of one's innermost self, particularly if that pursuit can be conducted in a luxury automobile on the way to one's sanctuary in a gated-community insulated from all those "others."

That such magical thinking could work was made possible by the internet and the World Wide Web's elimination of all gatekeepers checking the veracity of social media postings. From "don't trust anyone over 30" and other pillars of authority, boomers, themselves now far past 30, and their descendants have created a culture in which people have learned, or think they have learned, that nothing can be trusted.

As Pynchon said, it is a situation within which it is difficult to live. The absence of truth does not mean one lives on a continual knife's edge of existential becoming, a balancing almost impossible to sustain.

No, it means one creates an alternative explanation to guide one's thinking.

Presto, people create their own story to account for their own experience. If it does not mesh with their neighbor's story, well, too bad for the neighbor. My story must be the one true story.

Why?

Because it is my story and, as Francis Bacon predicted almost 500 years ago, I will marshal every shred of real and imaginary evidence I can to support it. I will bend, twist, and adapt reality to fit my story. If I say I found golden tablets of a lost book of the Bible in the fields of western New York, then I did. If I say I was abducted by little green men in a saucer-shaped spaceship, then I was. If I say the first black president of the United States was not born in the United States, then he wasn't.

If I say it, it must be true.

Why is any of this important?

Because we do not live in Fantasyland. We live, as Karl Rove noted, in the "reality-based community." Rove said those of us who still make decisions based on evidence garnered from the "reality-based community" were out of touch. That is not how the world works anymore. It works by manipulating people's imaginings of how the world works.

Note: Rove never said the "reality-based community" did not exist. He just said it was irrelevant because that's not how decisions are made in fantasyland.

In short, most people live in fantasyland. Getting them to buy Product X or to vote for Candidate Y is no longer, if it ever was, a matter of convincing them of Product X's superior quality or the aptness of Candidate Y's policy proposals.

No, it's a matter of convincing them that the product will fulfill their fantasy sense of themselves, of convincing them that the candidate also shares their same sense of unreality.

If they live in a lily-white suburb but fear an invasion by masses of darker-skinned folk from the inner city, then feed their fear even if they have a greater chance of being invaded by marauding Canadians than folks from the other side of town.

Andersen's ***Fantasyland's*** central conceit explains much of what has happened in America in the past 50 years by linking it to key threads in the history of America – the baleful combination of American idealism and optimism with a tendency to lose one's grip of what Machiavelli called "the actual truth of the matter."

This, as I am developing in my ***The American Tapestry Project***, which airs on the second Sunday of each month at 4 p.m. on WQLN 91.3 FM and can be subsequently found on their website here, is critical to America's future.

Why?

Because the culture wars are really a debate, a war, a fight over whose story defines America and what it will become. If we are to have another 200-plus years of freedom, equality, and opportunity, then we are going to have to agree, more or less, on what constitutes the American story.

To do that, we are going to have to leave *fantasyland* behind and return to the "reality-based community" and get our story straight with all its blemishes and virtues. We are going to have to realize that we are all in this together regardless of whether we like theme parks or not, regardless of whether we are awaiting the rapture or simply trying to get from today into tomorrow as best we can by following the ethic of the Sermon on the Mount – love thy neighbor as thyself.

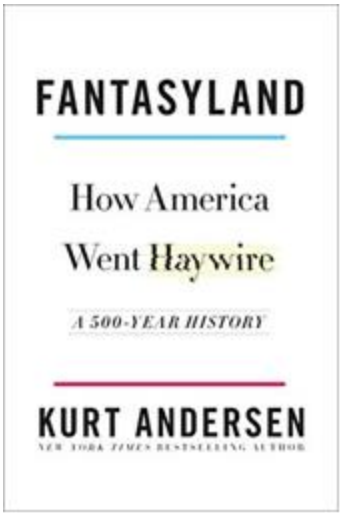
The first step is to come to grips with fantasyland, to understand its origins, its limits, and dangers, and to once again think clearly about how we got to now and how we'll get to the future.

A start is understanding the American story –
both its fantastic episodes and its authentic chapters and stories of real people building a real society based on freedom, equality, and opportunity.

A good place to start might be to join me on ***The American Tapestry Project*** at WQLN and, coming later this fall, to livestreams on the Jefferson Educational Society's Facebook page and website.

Ah, *fantasyland.* Even at Disney World they occasionally turn out the lights.

Unreality is a great place to visit, but no place to live.



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End Notes

1. Ferlinghetti, Lawrence. *"#20,"* in A Coney Island of the Mind. (New York: New Directions, 1958), p. 35.
2. Anderson, Kurt. ***Fantasyland: How American Went Haywire: A 500-Year History.*** Paperback Edition. (New York: Random House, 2018), p. 15.
3. Ibid., p. 19.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., pp. 19-20.
6. Ibid., p. 22.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., p. 23.
9. Ibid., p. 13.
10. Ibid., p. 52.
11. Ibid., p. 55.
12. Ibid., p. 115.
13. Ibid., p. 171.
14. Ibid., p. 321.

Photo: https://www.goodreads.com/book/photo/35171984-fantasyland