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The Publication of “Hiroshima” in *The New Yorker*

Overview

A year after World War II ended, a leading American weekly magazine published a striking description of what life was like for those who survived a nuclear attack. The article, simply titled “Hiroshima,” was published by *The New Yorker* in its August 31, 1946 issue. The thirty-one thousand word article displaced virtually all other editorial matter in the issue.

“Hiroshima” traced the experiences of six residents who survived the blast of August 6, 1945 at 8:15 am. There was a personnel clerk, Miss Toshiko Sasaki; a physician, Dr. Masakazu Fujii; a tailor’s widow with three small children, Mrs. Hatsuyo Nakamura; a German missionary priest, Father Wilhelm Kleinsorge; a young surgeon, Dr. Terufumi Sasaki; and a Methodist pastor, the Reverend Mr. Kiyoshi Tanimoto. The article told the story of their experiences, starting from when the six woke up that morning, to what they were doing the moment of the blast and the next few hours, continuing through the next several days and then ending with the situations of the six survivors several months later.

The article, written by John Hersey, created a blast of its own in the publishing world. *The New Yorker* sold out immediately, and requests for reprints poured in from all over the world. Following publication, “Hiroshima” was read on the radio in the United States and abroad. Other magazines

reviewed the article and referred their readers to it. The Book-of-the-Month Club sent a copy of the article in book form to its entire membership as a free selection. Later that fall, “Hiroshima” was published as a book by Alfred A. Knopf and has remained in print ever since.

“Hiroshima” was not the first exposure that readers had to the events that took place on August 6. Many articles in the popular press described the destruction of the city, such as a *Collier's* story published in the spring of 1946 crammed full of details about the power of the atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (“at a distance of 4,200 feet—about eight tenths of a mile—the pressure was 2,160 pounds a square foot”) and anecdotes about the horrific effects of nuclear weapons on human beings (“Men in black-striped shirts were burned in strips. Heat stenciled dress figures onto the bodies of women.”).¹ *Collier's* also included an artist’s rendition of the effect of a nuclear blast on downtown Manhattan. But most of these stories steered clear of details that would help readers identify with the dead or the survivors. Usually, “the statistics of devastation and death were simply recited as prefatory to a plea for international control, civil defense, or some other cause. On a canvas whose broadbrush background scenes were already familiar, Hersey etched several vividly realized foreground figures.”²

The direct effect of “Hiroshima” on the American public is difficult to gauge. No mass movement formed as a result of the article, no laws were passed, and reaction to the piece probably didn’t have any specific impact on U.S. military strategy or foreign policy. But certainly the vivid depictions in the book must have been a strong contributor to a pervasive sense of dread (and guilt) about nuclear weaponry felt by many Americans ever since August 1945.

¹ Robert DeVore, “What the Atomic Bomb Really Did,” *Collier's*, 2 March 1946, p. 36.

² Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), p. 207.

Historical background – *The New Yorker*

The New Yorker was founded in 1925 by Harold Ross as a sophisticated urban weekly that combined humor, fiction, poetry, art, reporting, criticism, and a guide to New York cultural events. It attracted some of the best twentieth-century writers available: E. B. White, James Thurber, S. J. Perelman, Rebecca West, A. J. Liebling, and Eudora Welty are a few of the names associated with the magazine.

Although *The New Yorker* had an elitist reputation it made its own contribution to the war effort. A twenty-four page “pony edition” containing no advertising was widely distributed to overseas troops, along with equivalent editions of *Time* and *Newsweek*, and other popular magazines. “By the end of the war, the pony edition [of *The New Yorker*] had a larger circulation than its parent.”³ By 1946 *The New Yorker* had a paid circulation of about 300,000, mostly outside of the New York metropolitan area.

Historical background – John Hersey

John Hersey was born on June 17, 1914 in Tientsin, China to missionaries Roscoe and Grace Baird Hersey. He lived in Tientsin until he was ten years old and then returned to the U.S. with his parents. Hersey attended Yale and then went on to graduate study at Cambridge. He obtained a summer job as a secretary for Sinclair Lewis in the summer of 1937, and, that fall, started work at *Time* magazine. Two years later he was transferred to *Time*'s Chungking bureau. During World War II he covered the fighting in both Europe (Sicily) and Asia (Guadalcanal), writing articles for *Time*, *Life*, and *The New Yorker*. Hersey's first article for *The New Yorker* was a piece about John F.

³ Brendan Gill, *Here at The New Yorker* (New York: Random House, 1975), p. 168.

Kennedy and the PT-109 rescue, which was later reprinted in *Reader's Digest*.

Hersey's first book, *Men on Bataan* (1942) was a patriotic look at General Douglas MacArthur and his troops in the Pacific at the beginning of the second World War. His second book, *Into the Valley* (1943), described the fighting at Guadalcanal from the perspective of the soldiers. At Guadalcanal, Hersey had become a participant rather than just a reporter. The unit he was accompanying came under heavy fire and suffered many casualties; Hersey was pressed into service as a stretcher bearer and was later commended by the Navy for his assistance in aiding the wounded.

Hersey was subsequently transferred to the Mediterranean Theater, where he reported on the Allies' invasion and occupation of Sicily. He won the Pulitzer Prize for his first novel, *A Bell for Adano* (1944), a fictionalized account of the occupation government in a small Italian town. (*The New York Times* listed his Pulitzer on the same front page of its May 8, 1945 edition that announced the end of the war in Europe.)

In 1944-45, Hersey was posted in Moscow by *Time*, but after the war in the Pacific ended he received a joint assignment to cover China and Japan, with expenses shared by *Time* and *The New Yorker*.

The Production of "Hiroshima"

In the winter of 1945-46, William Shawn, managing editor of *The New Yorker*, discussed with Hersey a story idea that would illustrate the human dimension of the effects of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima. Shawn was "astonished that in all the millions of words being written about the bomb—how and why the decision was made, how the bomb came to be built, whether it should have been dropped at all—what had actually happened in Hiroshima

itself...was being ignored.” In March 1946, Shawn sent a cable to Hersey (who was in Shanghai at the time) encouraging the idea: “The more time that passes, the more convinced we are that piece has wonderful possibilities. No one has even touched it.” The story was to be published in August 1946, on the one-year anniversary of the dropping of the bomb.⁴

Engaged in many other ongoing projects, Hersey didn’t begin working on the story until May. He spent three weeks in Japan, first doing some interviews and research in Tokyo, and then traveling to Hiroshima to find and interview bomb survivors. Hersey decided not to focus on the explosion or the wrecked city, but to investigate the effects on people, later saying “I felt I would like to write about what happened not to buildings but to human beings.”⁵

Hersey flew back to the U.S. in late June and spent several weeks writing the article. Although he had interviewed many people in Hiroshima, he decided to focus exclusively on the six “because they had been good interview subjects, and not for any more dramatic reasons such as their closeness to ground zero ... or because they made up any convenient cross-section of Hiroshima.”⁶

“Hiroshima” was written in a dry, calm manner that struck some readers as emotionless but permitted the survivors’ stories to speak for themselves. Forty years after he wrote the article, Hersey said in a letter to historian Paul Boyer, “The flat style was deliberate, and I still think I was right to adopt it. A high literary manner, or a show of passion, would have brought *me* into the story as a mediator; I wanted to avoid such mediation, so the reader’s experience would be as direct as possible.”⁷

⁴ Thomas Kunkel, *Genius in Disguise: Harold Ross of The New Yorker* (New York: Random House, 1995), p.370.

⁵ *Antaeus Report*, Fall 1984, pp. 2-4. Quoted by Robert J. Lifton and Greg Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America: 50 Years of Denial* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s, 1995), pp. 86-87.

⁶ David Sanders, *John Hersey* (New Haven, Conn.: Twayne, 1967), p. 41.

⁷ Boyer, p. 208

In August, Hersey presented Shawn with the completed 150-page manuscript. Hersey had arranged it as a four-part article to be run in four consecutive issues, with separate introductions for the second, third, and fourth parts. Shawn felt the introductions interrupted the flow of the story and would lessen the effect, so he asked Harold Ross, the founder and editor of *The New Yorker*, if the piece could be published in a single issue. This would require nearly all of the editorial space in the entire issue.

Ross deliberated for a week. He worried about disappointing readers with the loss of their familiar features, and he was not interested in doing something so extreme merely for the shock value. On the other hand, omitting all of the editorial content for the issue did solve the awkward situation posed by running cartoons and other non-weighty matter in proximity with the piece. Ross wrote to E. B. White, one of the few people to find out about the planned article in advance: “Hersey has written thirty thousand words on the bombing of Hiroshima (which I can now pronounce in a new and fancy way), one hell of a story, and we are wondering what to do about it...[Shawn] wants to wake people up and says we are the people with a chance to do it, and probably the only people that will do it, if it is done.”⁸

For over a week, Ross, Shawn, and Hersey worked long days editing the article. Both Ross and Shawn were known as meticulous editors, and every sentence of the piece was carefully deliberated. Ross was said to have made more than 200 editorial queries on the original manuscript. Hersey told people afterwards that Ross had even questioned his description of a bicycle seen near ground zero as ‘lopsided’. Ross had asked, “Can something that is two-dimensional be ‘lopsided’?”⁹ The word ‘crumpled’ was finally used instead.

⁸ Kunkel, p. 371

⁹ Kunkel, p. 372

Complete secrecy was observed, so that no one on *The New Yorker* editorial staff knew what was happening. The various writers for the assorted weekly features were baffled when the proofs didn't come back for their submitted articles, and no explanations were offered. The advertising department, in keeping with the magazine's usual policy, was not informed in advance of the special issue.

As *Newsweek* noted a couple weeks after the article was printed, *The New Yorker* showed "a debonair disdain for reader appetites cultivated over 21 years"¹⁰ by leaving out the usual articles and cartoons. The lighthearted cover artwork of the August 31 issue gave no clue about the contents; it depicted a summer picnic in a park. "Hiroshima" started where normally the "Talk of the Town" column began, following the theater listings in the beginning of the magazine. A small editor's note at the bottom of the page read:

TO OUR READERS *The New Yorker* this week devotes its entire editorial space to an article on the almost complete obliteration of a city by one atomic bomb, and what happened to the people of that city. It does so in the conviction that few of us have yet comprehended the all but incredible destructive power of this weapon, and that everyone might well take time to consider the terrible implications of its use.—The Editors.¹¹

Reaction to Publication

Following publication, Ross told writer Irwin Shaw "I don't think I've ever got as much satisfaction out of anything else in my life."¹²

In an era when the press wasn't so deeply engaged in reporting on each

¹⁰ "Talk of the Town" (section of "The Press" column), *Newsweek*, 9 Sept. 1946, p. 70.

¹¹ "Hiroshima", *The New Yorker*, 31 Aug. 1946.

¹² Kunkel, p. 374

other, the publication of “Hiroshima” caused a big commotion. *The New York Times* published a short article on August 29, 1946 with the lead paragraph “Breaking a precedent of twenty-one years standing, *The New Yorker* this week devotes virtually all the editorial space in its sixty-eight pages to an article by John Hersey on Hiroshima titled ‘A Noiseless Flash’ ”.¹³ The day after, on August 30, the *Times* had more to say about the article in an editorial titled “Time From Laughter:”

Our weekly contemporary, *The New Yorker*, normally carries pungent comment, good reporting, able criticism and much other material that is not intended to provoke laughter. Still, in text and pictures, the laughter is usually there. This week it is not, for the entire magazine has been given over to John Hersey’s account of what happened to six principal characters and about 245,000 others in the Japanese city of Hiroshima on Aug. 6, 1945, and thereafter. What happened to about 100,000 is clear. They died. What happened to the lucky six is an example of what human beings can endure and not die. Every American who has permitted himself to make jokes about atom bombs, or who has come to regard them as just one sensational phenomenon that can now be accepted as part of civilization, like the airplane and the gasoline engine, or who has allowed himself to speculate as to what we might do with them if we were forced into another war, ought to read Mr. Hersey. When this magazine article appears in book form the critics will say that it is in its fashion a classic. But it is rather more than that.

The editorial went on to make clear that the *Times* did not regret that the

¹³ “Atom Bomb Edition Out / *The New Yorker* Devotes Current Issue to Blast at Hiroshima” *The New York Times*, 29 Aug. 1946, p. 25, col. 2. (Actually, the *Times* got it wrong; “A Noiseless Flash” is the title of the first of the four sections, the title of the article was simply “Hiroshima.”)

bomb had been dropped. But it ends with the statement “The death and destruction not merely of people and cities but of the human conscience is clearly involved.”¹⁴

Respected opinion journals reviewed the article with the same seriousness they showed for important books. Bruce Bliven, writing for *The New Republic's* September 9 issue started off his review saying “By now, you have doubtless heard that last week *The New Yorker* devoted its entire space to one subject for the first time in the history of that periodical. The subject is the atomic bombing of Hiroshima; the author is John Hersey; and we understand the magazine sold out on most newsstands within a few hours of its appearance. If so, the public showed discernment. Hersey’s piece is certainly one of the great classics of the war...”¹⁵

Other, less known periodicals also praised the article. A thoughtful Protestant weekly reviewed the article in its book review section and said “Once in a lifetime you read a magazine article that makes you want to bounce up out of your easy chair and go running around to your neighbors, thrusting the magazine under their noses and saying: ‘Read this! Read it now!’ ”¹⁶ A Roman Catholic journal published shortly after “Hiroshima” commented that “the story of Hiroshima moved *The New Yorker* to abandon its worldly sophistication in its issue of Aug. 31. Every inch of text-space in that number is given over to an account of the atom-bombing of Hiroshima. Despite the miles of print, the endless reels of photographs that have tried to impress us with the cataclysms of Bikini, it is this *New Yorker* report which most shudderingly brings home to the reader the utter horror of the atom bomb.”¹⁷

¹⁴ “Time From Laughter,” Editorial, *The New York Times*, 30 Aug. 1946 p.16, col 2.

¹⁵ Bruce Bliven, “Hiroshima,” *The New Republic*, 9 Sept. 1946, pp. 300-301.

¹⁶ Russell S. Hutchinson, “Hiroshima,” *Christian Century*, 25 Sept. 1946, p. 1151.

¹⁷ “*New Yorker* and the Soul,” *America*, 14 Sept. 1946, p. 569.

Most of the critical reaction was positive, but not all of it. Mary McCarthy indicted the story for failing to put the bombing of Hiroshima in context. To her, the article, based on interviews with survivors, was “an insipid falsification of the truth of atomic warfare. To have done the atom bomb justice, Mr. Hersey would have had to interview the dead.” McCarthy, evidently feeling that *The New Yorker* was not an appropriate forum for confronting the harsh reality of nuclear warfare, argued that “since *The New Yorker* has not, so far as we know, had a rupture with the government ... it can only assimilate the atomic bomb to itself, to Westchester County, to smoked turkey, and the Hotel Carlyle.”¹⁸

Many accounts noted the fact that the August 31 issue of *The New Yorker* sold out on newsstands. Copies were scalped for fifteen and twenty dollars, an impressive markup for a magazine with a cover price of 15 cents. Reprint orders immediately flooded in. *Newsweek* reported that Albert Einstein had ordered a thousand copies of the magazine, but they couldn't be supplied. Reprint rights were granted to other periodicals provided that the article would not be abridged. Proceeds (\$15 per 10,000 circulation) were to be forwarded to the Red Cross.

Reaction from readers was said to be overwhelmingly but not entirely positive. A reader was said to have told *New Yorker* artist Helen Hokinson “I've read that entire ‘Hiroshima’ article from front to back and I didn't see one funny thing in it!”¹⁹ One subscriber wrote to *The New Yorker* saying “I read Hersey's report. It was marvelous. Now let us drop a handful on Moscow.”²⁰

Most readers probably were receptive to the point of the article, however. A Manhattan Project scientist wrote to a friend,

¹⁸ Mary McCarthy, “The Hiroshima ‘New Yorker’,” *Politics*, Oct. 1946, p.367. Quoted by Boyer, p. 206.

¹⁹ Gigi Mahon, *The Last Days of The New Yorker* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1988), p. 46.

²⁰ Joseph Luft and W. M. Wheeler, “Reaction to John Hersey's ‘Hiroshima’,” *Journal of Social Psychology*, 28, Aug. 1948: 138. Quoted by Boyer, p. 334.

I wept as I read John Hersey's *New Yorker* account of what has happened during the past year to six who were lucky enough to survive Hiroshima. I am filled with shame to recall the whoopee spirit ... when we came back from lunch to find others who had returned with the first extras announcing the bombing of Hiroshima. That evening we had a hastily arranged champagne dinner, some forty of us; ... [we felt] relief at the relaxation of security, pride in our part in ending the war, and even pride in the effectiveness of the weapon. And at the same moment, the bomb's victims were living through undescrivable horror (or rather, describable only in the simple, straightforward reportorial style used by Hersey). We didn't realize. I wonder if we do yet.²¹

An official response?

"Hiroshima" may have prompted a response in the different form of another very influential article, published in *Harper's* in February 1947, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb." This article, by former Secretary of War Henry Stimson, was the first clear and detailed justification for the atomic bombing, complete with details about the decision-making process used, published by someone who had been in a top-level cabinet position at the time.

On September 9, 1946 (a few days after the publication of "Hiroshima") Navy Admiral William F. Halsey, Third Fleet commander, was quoted in the press as saying that the Japanese had been on the verge of surrender before the atom bombs were dropped in the summer of 1945 and that the "atomic bomb was an unnecessary experiment..."²² Halsey's statements, and *The New*

²¹ A. Squires to J. Balderston, *AORES IX*, 7 Sept. 1946, p. 2. Quoted by Alice Kimball Smith, *A Peril and a Hope: The Scientists' Movement in America: 1945-47* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), pp. 80-81.

²² Gar Alperovitz, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1995). p. 445.

Yorker's "Hiroshima," prompted Norman Cousins to write an editorial in the September 14 issue of the *Saturday Review of Literature* harshly criticizing the decision to drop the bombs and calling on Americans to contemplate the morality of nuclear armaments.

James B. Conant, president of Harvard University (formerly a poison gas chemist during the first world war and a primary supervisor of the Manhattan Project during the second) was greatly disturbed by "Hiroshima" and the *Saturday Review* editorial. According to Robert J. Lifton and Greg Mitchell, he felt that "both Cousins and Hersey emphasized the horrors of Hiroshima rather than putting the use of the bomb in context."²³

Newspaper reporter Merrill Goozner has written, "To counter the emotional impact of Hersey's work, Harvard president Conant urged Stimson to write an article asserting what would become orthodoxy about why the bomb was used. [The article] asserted the bombs' sole purpose was to save American lives."²⁴ The Stimson article was contributed to (without attribution) by McGeorge Bundy, General Leslie Groves, and others, and represented what may have been the defining establishment justification for the use of nuclear weapons against Japan: as many as a million American soldiers' lives saved. The fact that many historians doubt these figures as well as the rationale presented in the *Harper's* piece doesn't make "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb" less of a powerful influence in American political culture.

Post-Publication

"Hiroshima" was quickly brought to a vastly larger and broader audience via radio. The ABC radio network preempted its regular programming and

²³ Lifton and Mitchell, p. 92

²⁴ Merrill Goozner, "Decision to Use Atom Bomb Most Controversial in U.S. History." Article on *San Jose Mercury News* web site (<http://www.sjmercury.com/hirosh8.htm>), 6 Aug. 1995.

broadcast the full text over four half-hour long programs starting on Monday, September 9, 1946 at 9:30 pm Eastern time. The story was read by actors, but not dramatized, and the names of the actors were not announced in advance. *The New York Times*'s radio column explained, "In order to focus maximum listener attention on Mr. Hersey's words, the names of the players will not be announced until the conclusion of the series."²⁵ The *Nation*'s radio reviewer, Lou Frankel, said that "this reading of the John Hersey piece in *The New Yorker* must be heard."²⁶ The broadcast won the George Foster Peabody Award for the Outstanding Educational Program of 1946. Some radio stations repeated the broadcast, and the text of "Hiroshima" was also broadcast by the BBC in England and by the national networks in Canada and Australia.

The Book-of-the-Month Club mailed a special edition of "Hiroshima" to every member for free, as a "Pro Bono" selection. Harry Scherman, the club's director, said "we find it hard to conceive of anything being written that could be of more importance at this moment to the human race."²⁷ The Book-of-the-Month Club's *Selection Report* newsletter several years later carried an article by Norman Cousins about John Hersey. Cousins had traveled to Japan and had spoken with Dr. Fujii, one of the six people in the article. Cousins quotes Fujii as saying, "Everything in his book was just as he said it was. It was remarkable to see how accurate and careful he was with the facts. When he came to visit me, I didn't know that he was a journalist...so I gave him brief answers.... It was very interesting to see that he remembered every word of our three-hour conversation."²⁸

In October 1946, a few weeks after "Hiroshima" was published in *The*

²⁵ "One Thing and Another" (radio column), *The New York Times*, 8 Sept. 1946, section 2, p. 7, col. 2.

²⁶ Lou Frankel, "In One Ear," *Nation*, 12 Oct. 1946, p. 410.

²⁷ Sanders, p. 49

²⁸ Al Silverman, ed., *The Book of The Month--Sixty Years of Books in American Life* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1986), pp. 121-122.

New Yorker, it was rushed into book form by Alfred A. Knopf, the same company that had published *A Bell For Adana*. Within the next year, “Hiroshima” had been translated and published nearly worldwide. *Hiroshima* has sold over three million copies and has remained in print for fifty years.

The one notable exception to the book’s early global distribution was Japan, where the book’s publication was discouraged (if not actually banned) by the American occupation government. In April, 1948 *The New York Times* covered the growing controversy in an article titled “Censorship In Japan Denied by M’Arthur.” The article said that the Authors League of America (a writer’s group based in New York and headed by Oscar Hammerstein 2d) had sought clarification of MacArthur’s censorship policy. “Handling of requests for permission to publish in Japanese five books [*Hiroshima* and four works by Edgar Snow] by the two authors have been tantamount to an official ban, it was charged.” MacArthur, in a cable to the Authors League, denied any banning of the books in question.²⁹ But in June 1948, when *The New York Times* reported on the first post-war sale of U.S. and British book rights to Japanese publishers, the controversy was still alive. Ninety-one books were acquired, including a book by former ambassador Joseph C. Grew titled *Ten Years in Japan*, George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, and Carl Sandburg’s *Lincoln Grows Up*. The *Times* noted the continuing charges of censorship being made against General MacArthur’s office, and that “conspicuously absent from the list are some that Japanese publishers have long been trying without success to have released. Among these are John Hersey’s *Hiroshima...*”³⁰ *Hiroshima* was finally published in Japan in 1949.

²⁹ “Censorship in Japan Denied by M’Arthur,” *The New York Times*, 8 April 1948, p. 23, col. 4.

³⁰ “91 American and British Books Bought for Publication in Japan,” *The New York Times*, 15 June 1948, p.24, col. 3.

Afterwards

Hersey had been a favorite of *Time* magazine publisher Henry R. Luce's during the war, "a protégé, in fact, who it was thought might one day run *Time*."³¹ But by the time "Hiroshima" was published in *The New Yorker*, Hersey was no longer a contributor for *Time* magazine. There had been growing tension between Hersey and Luce before the end of the war; Theodore White recounts that at one point Hersey told Luce directly that "there was as much truthful reporting in *Pravda* as in *Time* magazine."³² Given Luce's strenuous anti-communism these words would not have been taken kindly or lightly. Whittaker Chambers, who had been a *Time* foreign desk editor at the time, publicly accused Hersey (along with other *Time* reporters including Theodore White) in his memoir *Witness* (1952) of slanting stories in a leftward direction. Certainly Chambers had previously made these accusations known directly to Luce. Finally, it was said that Luce was furious that "Hiroshima" had been submitted to and published by *The New Yorker*, not *Time* or *Life*. Of course, neither *Time* nor *Life* would have published it; if for no other reason than its length. But it was said that Luce was so enraged "by what he regarded as Hersey's treachery that he removed his protégé's photograph from Time Inc.'s gallery of honor"³³ and rejected a seventeen-page *Life* article that had been in the works "because it would have been accompanied by an article that Hersey was to write."³⁴

Hersey went on to publish several short fiction pieces and articles about other topics in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic Monthly* and in '47—*The Magazine of the Year* (a monthly journal published by a writer's cooperative that he

³¹ Kunkel, p 369

³² Theodore H. White, *In Search of History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 247.

³³ Kunkel, p. 374

³⁴ Thomas Griffith, *Harry and Teddy* (New York: Random House, 1995), p. 155.

belonged to). His next large-scale writing project, called the *The Wall*, was a heavily researched historical novel about the Nazi destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto and was published in the spring of 1950. The novel was critically acclaimed and is considered to be the first American novel about the Holocaust.

Around this time, Hersey also joined and actively participated in several writer's organizations, including the Authors League of America and P.E.N. Later in the fifties he also showed a passion for the improvement of the educational system, joining various local and national educational committees, including the National Citizens' Commission for the Public Schools. His political interests included campaigning for Adlai Stevenson during the 1952 and 1956 presidential races, and serving as one of Stevenson's speechwriters in the latter campaign. Hersey also became involved with higher education and was named Master of Pierson College at Yale University where he became first a lecturer and then a professor. Yale was his alma mater, he had graduated in 1936 along with classmate Brendan Gill who also was a long-time contributor to *The New Yorker*.

Hersey also continued writing. After *The Wall* came *The Marmot Drive*, *A Single Pebble*, *The War Lover*, *The Child Buyer*, *White Lotus*, and others. In 1985 Hersey returned to Hiroshima to write a follow-up article. He had remained in contact with several of the survivors whose stories he had told. The second article, "Hiroshima: The Aftermath" was published in *The New Yorker* on July 15, 1985, and it was subsequently added to a newly revised edition of the book, published by Knopf later that year.

Hersey died on March 24, 1993 at his Key West home. An obituary published in *The New Yorker* said that "Hiroshima" might have been "the most

famous magazine article ever published” and went on to state “If ever there was a subject calculated to make a writer overwrought and a piece overwritten it was the bombing of Hiroshima; yet Hersey’s reporting was so meticulous, his sentences and paragraphs were so clear, calm, and restrained, that the horror of the story he had to tell came through all the more chillingly.”³⁵

Effect of “Hiroshima”

One way to understand the impact of “Hiroshima” is to compare it to another work first published in *The New Yorker*: the environmental classic *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson. Portions of *Silent Spring* were published serially in *The New Yorker* a decade and a half after “Hiroshima” and it also was quickly published in book form. Extensively researched yet written in a simple and clear style, *Silent Spring* told of the damage caused to the environment by the widespread use of modern pesticides and herbicides. In order to fully explain the causes of the crisis, *Silent Spring* explained concepts of ecology (such as the food chain) that were new to the public.

“Hiroshima” was written in a reporter’s style. A reviewer of the day noted that that “there is no preaching in this book. Not a single sentence ‘views with alarm.’”³⁶ On the other hand, *Silent Spring* was certainly an explicit warning, full of (well-reasoned) advocacy and also what some might have considered sermonizing. Where Hersey was noted for his dry style, Carson’s book was clearly impassioned.

The effects were different too. “Hiroshima” was not presented as a call to action; it was instead offered as a clear-eyed report about the reality of the atom bomb as seen through the eyes of the survivors. Pacifists and militarists

³⁵ “John Hersey” (obituary), *The New Yorker*, 5 April 1993, p. 111.

³⁶ Ruth Benedict, “The Past and the Future” (book review) *Nation*, 7 Dec. 1946, p. 656.

alike could read the book and better appreciate the point of view of those left alive after a nuclear catastrophe (although some, Conant and Stimson for example, felt this point of view obscured a greater truth). Certainly, people opposed to war (and nuclear war specifically) might be more inclined to praise the book and find it to be a motivating factor; but Hersey's credentials as a patriotic war reporter and his background as a friend to Chinese culture (and therefore, not particularly sympathetic to the Japanese) meant that there were limited avenues open for criticism by nuclear apologists.

However, Carson's *Silent Spring* was nothing else if not a 'call to action.' It described an environmental disaster in the making, it pointed a finger at wrongdoers, and it explained what sort of remedies would be required. Unlike "Hiroshima," large and powerful interest groups were greatly threatened by *Silent Spring*; the chemical and agricultural industries fought a bitter public relations and public policy war against Carson and her message.

The modern environmental crusade was probably initiated by *Silent Spring*. Citizen action and government policy can be traced directly to the book and to the storm of controversy that surrounded it. The anti-nuclear weapons movement certainly placed "Hiroshima" near the top of its recommended reading list, but this movement was not sparked by any particular book and it had strong connections with other existing movements (pacifism, anti-imperialism, and eventually to environmentalism).

Paul Boyer, in his book *By the Bomb's Early Light* says that "Hiroshima" wasn't in the same category as works like *Silent Spring* Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. Instead, he compares it to the Civil War classic, Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*:

Like *Hiroshima*, Stephen Crane's novel was praised for its realism, its freedom from cant, and its delineation of the experiences and feelings of individuals overwhelmed by death and destruction. But, again like *Hiroshima*, it induces an almost elegiac mood. The reader is not stirred to action, but left with the feeling that he has gained a deeper understanding of war's human meaning...In the intense but strictly circumscribed engagement with the *Hiroshima* reality offered by John Hersey, it was as though Americans were saying: "We have now faced what we did. We have been told. We have experienced its full human horror. But we must get on with our lives. We can now put all that behind us."³⁷

Of course, superb and imaginative reporting doesn't necessarily result in concrete action and social change. Sometimes it leads to awareness and contemplation only. Certainly the millions of people who have read "*Hiroshima*" during the last five decades have found a chilling and unforgettable description of life after nuclear annihilation. It is hard to believe that these readers ever felt the same way again about the possible use of nuclear weapons, and in some respect their understanding of the reality of nuclear war must have continued to have at least some impact on their social and political activities.

³⁷ Boyer, p. 210

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