



The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation

By Jim Cullen

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"The American Dream" is one of the most familiar and resonant phrases in our national lexicon, so familiar that we seldom pause to ask its origin, its history, or what it actually means. In this fascinating short history, Jim Cullen explores the meaning of the American Dream, or rather the several American Dreams that have both reflected and shaped American identity from the Pilgrims to the present. Cullen notes that the United States, unlike most other nations, defines itself not on the facts of blood, religion, language, geography, or shared history, but on a set of ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence and consolidated in the Constitution. At the core of these ideals lies the ambiguous concept of the American Dream, a concept that for better and worse has proven to be amazingly elastic and durable for hundreds of years and across racial, class, and other demographic lines. The version of the American Dream that dominates our own time--what Cullen calls "the Dream of the Coast"--is one of personal fulfillment, of fame and fortune all the more alluring if achieved without obvious effort, which finds its most insidious expression in the culture of Hollywood.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

When a small group of 17th-century English religious dissenters crossed the Atlantic Ocean in search of a place where they could worship God in their own unique fashion, they were following a dream. These early settlers, the Puritans, paved the way for subsequent American dreamers, and, Cullen (Born in the U.S.A.: Bruce Springsteen and the American Tradition) argues, "you'll never really understand what it means to be an American of any creed, color, or gender if you don't try to imagine the shape of that dream." Subsequent versions of the American Dream have pushed to the fore and, in the process, changed the shape of the nation. Cullen particularly focuses on the founding fathers and the Declaration of Independence ("the charter of the American Dream"); Abraham Lincoln, with his rise from log cabin to White House and his dream for a unified nation; and Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream of racial equality. Our contemporary version of the American Dream seems rather debased in Cullen's eyes-built on the cult of Hollywood and its outlandish dreams of overnight fame and fortune. The book desires to be suggestive rather than exhaustive (as the subtitle "short history" suggests), and there are numerous gaps between the chapters where entire half-centuries and important leaders pass without mention. Its straightforward and engaging narrative style ought to appeal to general readers of American history, and its broader exploration of freedom, equality and shared ideals offers a nice dose of depth as well. 8 b&w photos.

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From [Booklist](#)

Cullen explores American history through its ideals and notions that feed goals from which success and happiness are perceived and secured. At different times the American dream has meant different things. At the founding of the nation, Cullen asserts, the Declaration of Independence embodied the American ideal that all men are created equal. Even with the obvious contradiction of slavery, the essence of this dream allowed for the possibility of racial equality, class mobility, and home ownership--all values that at some point have centered the collective American consciousness. Cullen explores the ideas, hopes, and accomplishments of both native-born Americans and immigrants in developing consensus around the ideals. As the dream varies, Cullen tracks its shifts and the complexities that result in our cultural unity of valued ideals. From the initial ideals of the Declaration of Independence, Cullen moves to the expansion and inclusion of the dream through Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream of racial equality to, finally, home ownership as the commonly accepted notion of the American dream. *Vernon Ford*

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Review

"One man's provocative, worthwhile, and stimulating summation."--Kirkus Reviews

"This erudite popular history poses a provocative question: What is the American Dream?"--Herbert Mitgang, The Chicago Tribune

"The American dream, as Jim Cullen shows in this useful, intelligent book, is more than a set of platitudes, and says something important about our national character."--The Boston Globe

"Cullen combs the riches of American history to analyze the American dream idea.... From these rich slices of American history, Cullen weaves a historical quilt illustrating key components of the idea.... This work combines the author's personal reflections with a cogent interpretation of American social and intellectual

history."--Library Journal

"Its straightforward and engaging narrative style ought to appeal to general readers of American history, and its broader explorations of freedom, equality and shared ideals offers a nice dose of depth as well."--
Publishers Weekly

"Cullen is a master of the difficult art of distilling complex ideas without oversimplifying them. His grasp of American history is impressive, and his narrative is lucid, lively, and engaging. He has done an admirable job of summarizing, dramatizing, and giving a sense of personal urgency to successive versions of the American dream. I find the mixture of personal reflection and historical narrative quite effective and inviting. This is a refreshing, spirited book."--Andrew Delbanco, Columbia University

"Jim Cullen's The American Dream is a tour de force through the whole of American history, from the Puritans to home ownership and California. Cullen daringly takes the notion of the American Dream as a touchstone for a huge swathe of American cultural history, and tracks its complexities, its shifts and conflicts--and unities. Gracefully written, elegantly unified, respectful toward disparate ideas, never indulgent of scholastic gobbledegook, the book has all the strength of its simplifications. A marvelous achievement." --Todd Gitlin, Columbia University

Users Review

From reader reviews:

India Oakley:

In this 21st centuries, people become competitive in every way. By being competitive today, people have do something to make all of them survives, being in the middle of the particular crowded place and notice simply by surrounding. One thing that oftentimes many people have underestimated the idea for a while is reading. Sure, by reading a reserve your ability to survive increase then having chance to endure than other is high. To suit your needs who want to start reading any book, we give you this kind of The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation book as beginner and daily reading publication. Why, because this book is greater than just a book.

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which one is appropriate to believe or which one the actual resource are convinced. If you find the unstable resource then you obtain it as your main information you will have huge disadvantage for you. All those possibilities will not happen in you if you take The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation as your daily resource information.

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