



Fallout: The Hiroshima Cover-up and the Reporter Who Revealed It to the World by Lesley M.M. Blume.

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Review by Jonathan Marwil, The University of Michigan (jmarwil@umich.edu).

John Hersey is said to have been a modest man. According to his son Baird, “He never went on tour.... He didn’t go on TV or radio, didn’t give lectures” (176). When the Secretary of the Navy in 1942 sent him a letter of commendation for helping to evacuate wounded marines during the fighting on Guadalcanal, Hersey was uncomfortable: “I should have sent it back.... My alacrity in helping get the wounded out was my way taking the quickest possible way out of that hellhole” (16). At least that was what Hersey thought his reaction was when recalling the incident in 1989, four years before his death. That is one of many Hersey memories of long-ago situations that (bestselling journalist) Lesley Blume accepts without comment in her new book *Fallout*. That credulity is one of several problems in a volume that works a little too hard to please its readers.

Another is her insistence that *Hiroshima* “long acted as a pillar of deterrence.” Its “ability to engulf readers emotionally” shaped our “memory of what happened at Hiroshima” and kept “subsequent generations of leaders from incinerating the planet” (11), as Hersey himself put it in a 1986 interview. To deny such claims any value would be unfair, but to give them such critical significance is a stretch. Hersey was rightfully proud of his graphic reporting. And, given the various anti-nuclear campaigns of the postwar era, he may be forgiven for imagining his Hiroshima story was central to their thinking. Blume, however, had the responsibility to assess the validity of Hersey’s judgment of *Hiroshima*’s influence, which would have required a serious reading of the literature of deterrence. One also wonders if she would ascribe such importance to films, for example, Peter Watkins’ *The War Game* (1966), with its vivid portrayal of an atomic attack on England. Or the many American movies that, while lacking the horrific details in Hersey’s account, terrified millions of viewers—likely far more than read *Hiroshima* in book form, let alone in the original *New Yorker* article. And have not the disasters at Chernobyl (1986) and Fukushima (2011) renewed the dread of uninhabitable radioactive landscapes? Today, a thousand-square-mile “Exclusion Zone” surrounds Chernobyl.

To her credit, Blume has done a great deal of research: her endnotes occupy a third of the book’s pages. Lacking, however, is the kind of critical approach to sources that is normally second nature to historians. The reason is signaled in the book’s subtitle, which neither Hersey nor Harold Ross, the *New Yorker*’s founder-editor, nor managing editor William Shawn would ever have sanctioned. It smacks of an exposé and the promise of titillating insights. It also encourages readers to expect a smooth, easy passage through the text. They will not be disappointed.

Fallout suffers from over-segmenting. Its seven chapters, 158 pages in all, are divided into bite-size sections, each with its own title. Chapter 4, “Six Survivors,” has seven sections in its twenty-five pages; chapter five, “Some Events at Hiroshima,” has nine in twenty-seven pages. Even the introduction (fourteen pages) and epilogue (nine pages) have breaks indicated by ellipses. Blume is a skilled writer, so why treat readers as if they are slow, or at any rate impatient. Was this her

decision or her publisher's? Does it reflect a recognition that today's readers, accustomed to viewing (phone, tablet, and computer) screens, expect texts to be delivered in an easy-to-read format?

A further complication is that the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and its horrific consequences happened long ago and have never been part of the story Americans tell themselves about the "Good War." After all, how much attention did American media pay to Hiroshima on the seventy-fifth anniversary of the bombing last August? More telling is what happened in 1995, when the Smithsonian Institution was planning an exhibition on the last six months of the war. Instead it was redesigned to focus solely on the Enola Gay (the B-29 that dropped the bomb), because so many veterans and members of Congress objected to the attention given to the dead of Hiroshima and the suffering of the survivors. Fifty years after the war, there was still scant empathy for the Japanese.

For those unfamiliar with Hersey's *Hiroshima* and how it came to be written, Blume provides a good account. Historians are already well aware of the US government's ham-fisted but brief effort to conceal the effects of radiation. But *Fallout* is must reading for anyone curious about the publishing process. They will learn just how important editors are in the shaping and selling of books. By the end of her story, Lesley Blume has persuaded at least one reader that Harold Ross and William Shawn are as much the heroes of *Fallout* as Hersey himself. In keeping with a few other slightly off-key analogies, she asks readers to think of their efforts to keep the project secret as "their own version of the Manhattan Project" (110).