Gates of Eden explores 60s with literature

Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties by Morris Dickstein published by Basic Books; 300 pages; $11.95.

By Gordon Haff

Morris Dickstein believes that literature is one of the chief symbols of the sixties - and about which, it is written. Largely based on this assumption, he delves into the writing of the sixties and comes up with the literature he thinks encapsulates the era: Vonnegut, Mailer, Ginsberg, Wolfe, Bellows - and on a different level - Dylan, the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones.

This is seemingly presumptuous on the part of the author. On the whole, Dickstein ignores the events which occurred: the protests, occupations, and finally the takeover at Columbia through the eyes of a young instructor there: himself. This final section is a refreshing change from the heavy, complex literary analysis in many of the earlier chapters. More than that, it carries more emotional impact, being a personal account.

Dickstein himself is obviously a product of the sixties. He regards the time as a romantic era. "Clearly the romantic mind - is the mind of the sixties with its fascination with movement, flow, and energy, its experimental appetite, its contradictions. It was an era, probably more than any other, in which an enormous abyss opened up between society's stated norms and its actual behavior. Dickstein defines the "Beat" culture against such changes as the one in Time in 1940 which called it "a sack of oddballs who celebrate booze, dope, sex, and despair." He says, "only the 'tranquilized' Fifties (as Lowell calls them) with its utopian visions, still glimmer in the distance like Kafka's castle, unapproachable yet unshaken." Even though in many ways structure and system now dominate personality (Dickstein feels that Zen and the manufacture of Motorcycle Maintenance encompasses the post-sixties outlook), it is a decade which will be remembered because it still exists in many who lived through it, an "utopian hopes may be disappointed but rarely forgotten."

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