

HISTORY'S FEW ORIGINALS

BOOK REVIEW BY STEPHEN HENDRICKS

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Counterculture Through the Ages: From Abraham to Acid House

By Ken Goffman, a.k.a. R.U. Sirius
VILLARD; 428 PAGES; \$25.95

When James Joyce finished the manuscript of "Ulysses," he hired a genteel Parisian lady to type it, but its heresies so offended her she quit. He hired another gentelady with the same result, and so, too, with seven more, one of whom threatened to throw herself out a window. In the end, Joyce's friends committed the colossus to type, and it was published only by finding a French printer who could not read English.

This, to Ken Goffman, is the soul of counterculture: a force of supreme originality that will not be deterred no matter how many typists menace your windowsill. Goffman's counterculture is motivated not by politics, "although countercultures may passionately participate in such endeavors at times," but by a "deep radical individualism." His emphasis on the personal over the political will not please everyone, but it is not a bad starting point.

"Counterculture Through the Ages" sketches 14 countercultures on three continents, and hence is more a "Profiles in Counterculture" than a "People's History of Countercultures." Such selectivity is fine -- all surveys must be either selective or interminable (or, in regrettable cases, both) -- but Goffman does not say why, for example, the Socratics deserved a chapter and the early Christians not a word. If he had, he might have cast light on bigger questions, such as what qualities mark a successful counterculture.

Half the book is given to the 20th century, which, intended or not, puts Dada and Leary on par with Taoism and Locke. "Why was this good?" Goffman writes of Andy Warhol's worship of money, fame and artifice. "Because it was irreverent!" It is the logic of tabloid and teen to endow all that shocks with merit, but I suspect this explains the focus on our late century, in which much indeed was irreverent. But which impertinences will endure and which fade? Goffman does not say.

Also known by his nom de plume R.U. Sirius (or, as his publisher would have it, "the legendary cultural

pundit and cyberpunk R.U. Sirius"), Goffman is best appreciated if you are the sort of person who says "ideational content" when you mean "ideas," or "suicide oneself" for "kill oneself," or if you season your sentences with "trope" and "meme" and "paradigm," or if you do not run for cover when "impact" or "privilege" are used as verbs or "unsituatable" is used as an adjective, or "repercuss" as anything. If, however, you take Goffman at his word that "overcoming brainwashing and remaining 'awake' -- not falling back into lazy conditioned responses" is vital to the good life, you may wonder whether anyone who uses language in this way can have insight into history's iconoclasts. You may even be deeply saddened that a writer can praise Thoreau and Voltaire for scorning the cheap for the considered while himself doing the opposite.

Your reviewer is a leftist in rightist Montana, a Gen Xer possessed of wretchedly little X who does not read or watch or listen to most of what his peers do -- in short, a misfit. I sorely wanted to like this book. I also have a fondness for generalists such as Goffman who dare grapple with big ideas in our acutely specialized age. But Goffman does not grapple so much as cite. He is admirably bighearted about crediting his influences, but so many are the quotations and paraphrases that some chapters read like a well-annotated Bartlett's. If it is poor to hear the blind man describe the elephant, it is poorer still to hear the blind man describe the blind man describing the elephant.

For the generalist, the alternative to stenography is analysis. But rather than say what the Sufis, Transcendentalists and Beats meant, Goffman mainly restricts himself to what they were. This may make a serviceable textbook, but not a critique. What balance of freedom's license and repression's goad does a counterculture need to thrive? Must a counterculture that would endure "go mainstream"? Can the mainstream survive without its countercultural tributaries? Fascinating questions, perhaps, but their answers will have to await other books. •

Stephen Hendricks is writing a book about the struggle between the FBI and American Indians, forthcoming from Thunder's Mouth/Nation Books.