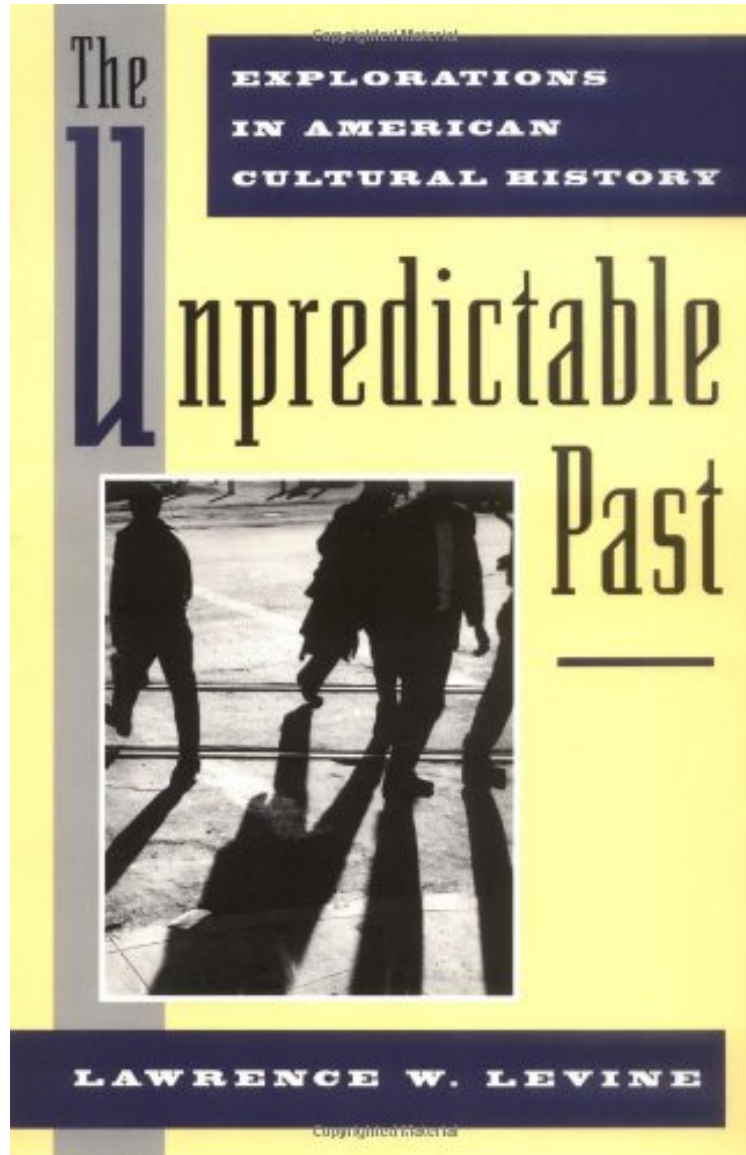


The Unpredictable Past: Explorations in American Cultural History

Lawrence W. Levine

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Lawrence W. Levine : The Unpredictable Past: Explorations in American Cultural History before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Unpredictable Past: Explorations in American Cultural History:

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"The future is certain," according to an old Soviet joke, "it is only the past that is unpredictable." But it is not solely in totalitarian societies that the past is contested terrain. Disagreements about the meaning and significance of past events and people have been part of the landscape in our own society from its inception. To the historian, therefore, the unpredictability of the past is no laughing matter. Indeed, so protracted have historical disputes become in recent years that there has been a growing conviction among many that the venerable craft of history is in a state of crisis. In this brilliant new collection of essays, Lawrence W. Levine, one of our premier writers of history and President-Elect of the Organization of American Historians, offers an incisive response to the controversy which rages in the academy today. This debate among historians does not concern, as one might think, conflicting interpretations of the past, but rather concentrates upon which past events, peoples, and cultures are significant enough to deserve our attention. Taking issue with those who desire "synthesis" above all else, Levine's book constitutes a passionate call for inclusion, a history that extends the traditional focus on the centers of political, economic, and social power to embrace the panoply of ethnic, racial, regional, occupational, class, and gender groups that have been ignored or distorted in the past, and subject areas--like folk and popular culture--that have been by-passed or denigrated as trivial. The fourteen essays included here seek not to erect new fences and shut more doors but to expand our knowledge, supplement our approaches, and broaden our historical vision. The Unpredictable Past offers eloquent discussions of American history and historiography at large, African-American culture, and, perhaps most fascinating, the times of the Great Depression during which film, radio, photography, and even the comic strip emerged as significant manifestations of a changing American popular culture. There are also trenchant examinations of folk songs and folktales, Marcus Garvey's role as a black leader in the 1920s, jazz and American culture, Hollywood's unique view of national government in Washington (especially as seen in the films of Frank Capra), even Shakespeare's role as the most popular playwright in nineteenth-century America. The immediacy of each essay is enhanced by the brief introductions that place each one not only in the context of Levine's career, but in that of American history as a whole. Through the course of the book, Levine demonstrates how history, from generation to generation, is viewed through the prism of an ever-changing present and rather than distorting our vision, offers us new ways of seeing things, fresh insights not only into the past, but into the present and the future as well. The Unpredictable Past is a remarkably wide-ranging lens for viewing the richly textured history of America.

From Library Journal Levine, the president of the Organization of American Historians, delivers an exceptional volume of essays in comprehensive history that incorporate ethnic, racial, regional, division, and gender groups omitted or scorned in the past and thought to be too insignificant for focus or discussion. Some of the issues he tackles are patterns of African American culture (from slavery to the politics of Marcus Garvey), understanding popular culture (jazz, film images), and periods of the Great Depression. The book illustrates how history is constantly transforming itself and proposes new insights not only into the past but for the present and future as well. Highly recommended to scholars in general and specialists in the field of history.- Gayle S. Leach-Bethea, MHC Correctional Facility Lib., Jessup, Md. Copyright 1993 Reed Business Information, Inc. "An exceptional volume of essays in comprehensive history that incorporate ethnic, racial, regional, division, and gender groups omitted or scorned in the past and thought to be too insignificant for focus or discussion....Highly recommended."--Library Journal "Everyone interested in the evolution of modern thought and culture should be thrilled to have these innovative and provocative essays in such accessible form. Levine has long been a shrewd essayist and an engaging polemicist. His passionate commitment to the study of popular culture is both salutary and sensible. The particular application of that commitment to African-American culture during the Great Depression is most commendable. This volume deserves a hearty welcome."--Michael Kammen, Cornell University "The Unpredictable Past is a brilliant reminder of why Lawrence W. Levine has long been required reading for everyone interested in American culture and its history."--Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Harvard University "Lawrence Levine scrutinizes American culture that is popular--in Depression era movie theaters, nineteenth-century black neighborhoods, and, even the audience of a historians' professional meeting as the generations were changing. Always penetrating, unfailingly good-humored, this book, like its author, brings the gift of affection to the study of ordinary Americans."--Nell Irvin Painter, Princeton University "In these delightful and illuminating essays, Larry Levine demonstrates his astonishing virtuosity as a cultural historian. Ranging from the slave songs of the 1830s to the Hollywood films of the 1930s, from animal trickster tales to Shakespeare's plays, from jazz to photography, Levine brings us rich and neglected dimensions of American culture. The past may indeed be unpredictable, but we can predict that Levine's commentaries on the past will be filled with wit, compassion, and originality."--Roy Rosenzweig, The State University in Northern Virginia "By entering the debate in contemporary historiography between consensus history and current social and cultural history, Levine dignifies the discipline. This volume clarifies the contributions of the new social history without overstating its importance. He challenges future generations of historians to consider all evidence from all groups in an assessment of the whole. This is an inspired work that stimulates thoughtful approaches to history."--K. Lynn Stoner, Arizona State University "Well done; Levine is a fine writer appreciative of the nuances of American culture."--June Sochen, Northern Illinois University "Should be read by everyone who teaches a course in multicultural education, Africana studies, ethnic studies, or American

cultural studies. The pervasive lack of information and misinformation regarding the cultural background and the acculturation of Africans in the U.S. and their impact on the larger society are illuminated in a lucid, scholarly style. This work is an unequivocal contribution toward understanding American culture and why things are the way they are today."--Warren C. Swindell, Indiana State University"Wonderful essays! Rich, full of useful insights for teaching."--Mart Stewart, Western Washington University"Wonderful essays, well worth having collected in one volume."--Philip Scraton, Rutgers University"Excellent essays with timely subject matter."--Robert L. Cole, Ripon College"Superb. Larry Levine has once again demonstrated why he is America's leading cultural historian. He has taken past events and shown us how to reexamine them. He is especially good when examining the African-American past."--Clarence Taylor, Lemoyne College"Students of American cultural history will be glad of the chance this book provides to see Levine's important work steadily and whole."--American Historical "Excellent series of essays....[W]ill recommend it for our library."--Sylvia McGrath, Stephen F. Austin State University"This is a most welcome collection of essays by historian Lawrence Levine. Levine is at his best in his examination of the nuances of various cultural forms. Not only does Levine offer new and exciting ways to look at cultural history, he also helps to revitalize the field in general."--Nina Silber, Boston University

About the Author
Lawrence W. Levine is Margaret Byrne Professor of History at the University of California, Berkeley, and a recipient of the MacArthur Prize Fellowship. He is the author of numerous books, the most recent of which include *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (1988) and *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford, 1977), which won the Chicago Folklore Prize.