

editorial opinion

A golden age

New Frontier recalled

I stood in the bookstore gazing at the usual assortment of books and magazines.

This was my weekly trip to the literary shrine. Unfortunately, I've been one of those cursed by a fate for books of almost any description, so I find myself, more often than not, drawn to one of these voluminous edifices.

One of the big treats about hanging around these places is watching the people who frequent them.

This day was like most others. Book freaks on one side of the room, magazine fanatics on the other, squinting at titles and thumbing through the new and old.

My eyes were drawn towards a young lady as she stood next to me, thumbing through some volumes of political figures. She was 17 or 18 years old.

Admiringly, she gazed at an assortment of books. Curious to see what politically intrigued this 70s generation, I, as unobtrusively as possible, looked over her shoulder.

I had to smile when I saw what she was reading.

She had passed over the books on Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower. That wasn't surprising. These political figures must seem like something out of ancient history.

The books on Jerry Rubin, Tom Hayden and Ed Bradley Chavez gathered dust more than because of her disinterest.

How quickly I thought of political figures lose their charisma. It reminded me of what Ralph Waldo Emerson once said: "Every hero becomes a list item at last."

Standing there, I recalled my own fascination with political leadership. I was this girl's age. Thirteen years ago, when I was 17 years old, the world was quite a different place.

This country was in its golden age. Assassinations, something which we believed could happen only in less civilized countries, seemed an integral part of the United States.

Little did I know in that sweet November 11 years ago that America's life after World War II was about to be destroyed by a crazed gunman hanging out the window of the Dallas Book Depository.

War was something that happened only in the history books and something which our fathers talked about in their private moods. Korea and Guadalcanal and Natchez were memories of a barbaric past, we thought.

Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam were nearly unheard of in the United States.

America had taken on the challenge of facing the moon. Even then, such an endeavor was said by many to be beyond the grasp of man. But the American people cast aside the concept of the impossible.

Legions of young adults signed up for the Peace Corps and became ambassadors for what we believed to be a fair and just system of government.

Thousands took up the banner of civil rights in a demonstration of brotherhood and sacrifice which hasn't been equalled before or since.

We faced the Soviets head-on over the Cuban missile crisis and they "blinked" as Secretary of State Dean Rusk said.



But above all, we had a young president who offered hope to an excited and vibrant nation. A new generation of Americans, he called us. And we loved it.

"Let the word go forth from this time and place to friend and foe alike that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans."

He dubbed us all pioneers of the new frontier and offered "a set of challenges, not promises... more sacrifice rather than more security."

It was a heady time to be baptized into a new, but all too short, political era. Many Americans did accept the challenge, did grasp the "torch of freedom," however naively, and set out to change the world into a better place. But that hardy flame suddenly was extinguished along with the spirit of millions of Americans because of that fateful Nov. 22 when John Kennedy was murdered.

And now only the eternal flame burns quietly over the dead president's grave.

Many of us who saw the dream born and die often have wondered if that spirit would be revived. We've wondered if that feeling of optimism would ever ignite America again, particularly after the devastating decade of riots, protest, war and government corruption which followed.

Hence, was my curiosity fueled by the young girl's political interest in the bookstore.

As she put the book back on the rack, I noticed it was a volume on another young president, with tousled hair, who spoke with an intriguing dialect and who was elected by a narrow margin.

"Maybe, just maybe," I thought, "a new generation of Americans will be inspired by this new president."

If this is so, I hope and pray that the dream won't be destroyed by a nightmare of tragedy and disillusionment.

I wanted to walk over to that young lady and tell her it was all right to hope, it was good to dream—but I didn't.

Instead, I gave a passing glance at the book rack with my eyes momentarily riveted on those books inspired by that era that seems so long ago, but really was just yesterday.

As I walked out of the store, a title kept pressing on my mind.

Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye.

May the gods of fortune treat us more kindly in the coming generation.

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Taking wooden nickels...

Edwin Newman, NBC commentator, says an enorm amount of activity in the U.S. is devoted to changing its face.

He says he's out to dispense American English and attack modern clichés. I had a similar idea many years ago, but it was about kicking the cliché habit. A major difference is that Newman published two books on universal and atrocious English and made a mint.

My humble contribution was written many years ago for a creative writing class. It was triggered when I found myself staggering under the weight of a gargantuan cliché monkey on my back. I was well on my way to an MB degree—Master of Banalities.

I wrote my epic to purge my system of stereotypes. For the sake of interest, I dubbed my protagonists Mr. Jones and Mr. Smith from Hickoryville, Anywhere, U.S.A. In my story, they were reunited on a commuter train on the way to work.

MR. JONES: (delivering Mr. Smith a resounding whack on his shoulder) "Haven't seen you in a dog's age, old man. How's the world treating you?"

Mr. Smith (after recovering his wits) "Can't explain for an old man. Can't keep a good man down, you know."

Mr. Jones: "You're looking fit as a

little. Same old Smith, haven't changed a bit.

Mr. Smith (obsequiously) "You just say that, 'cause it's true. You don't look so bad, yourself."

Mr. Jones: "How's the little woman and those three kiddies?"

Mr. Smith: "In the pink. Those kids are sure chips off the old block."

Mr. Jones: "But they're growing like weeds."

Mr. Smith: "Yep, they have a way of growing up right under your nose. Time sure flies."

MR. JONES: "You can say that twice."

Mr. Smith (obsequiously) "Yep, they have a way of growing up right under your nose. Time sure flies. Yep, they have a way of growing up right under your nose. Time sure flies."

Mr. Jones: "Nice weather we're having. Looks like rain."

Mr. Smith: "Yeah, nice weather for ducks."

Mr. Jones: "Think spring will ever get here?"

Mr. Smith: "Nah, just two seasons, winter and July. Everybody's about the weather, but nobody does anything about it."

Mr. Jones: "How's tricks down at the salt mines?"

Mr. Smith: "Keeping my nose to the grindstone. Tough to make a buck these days. We're just making ends meet."

Mr. Jones (contemptuously) "Oh, well, you can't take it with you. What's the difference as long as you're healthy. Health is one thing money can't buy."

MR. SMITH: "It's a great life if you don't weaken."

Mr. Jones: "Let's change the subject, talk about something pleasant. Hey, that's a nice head of skin you've got there."

Mr. Smith (offended) "I've got news for you. My forehead's just getting higher. That's a sign of brains."

Mr. Jones (seeking safer ground) "What do you think of our chances for winning the pennant this year?"

Mr. Smith: "They've got a chance like a snowball in hell. Those bums can't hit the side of a barn."

Mr. Jones: "Yeah, I could blow my top everytime I think of them. Those fat heads act deader than doornails on the diamond."

Mr. Smith: "Hate to break this off, but I've gotta get cracking. See you around boy."

Mr. Jones: "Yeah, don't be such a stranger. Give a guy a buzz once in a while. Drop in and we'll shoot the breeze. So long, don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Whew, was I glad I got that off my chest. That was a load off my mind. It'll be a cold day in July before I use another cliché or take any wooden nickels."