



BOOKS | BOOKSHELF 'Fallout' Review: Hiroshima and After

John Hersey's profile of six survivors of the A-bomb blast, published 74 years ago, has lost none of its horrific power.

By Edward Kosner Aug. 30, 2020 5:10 pm ET

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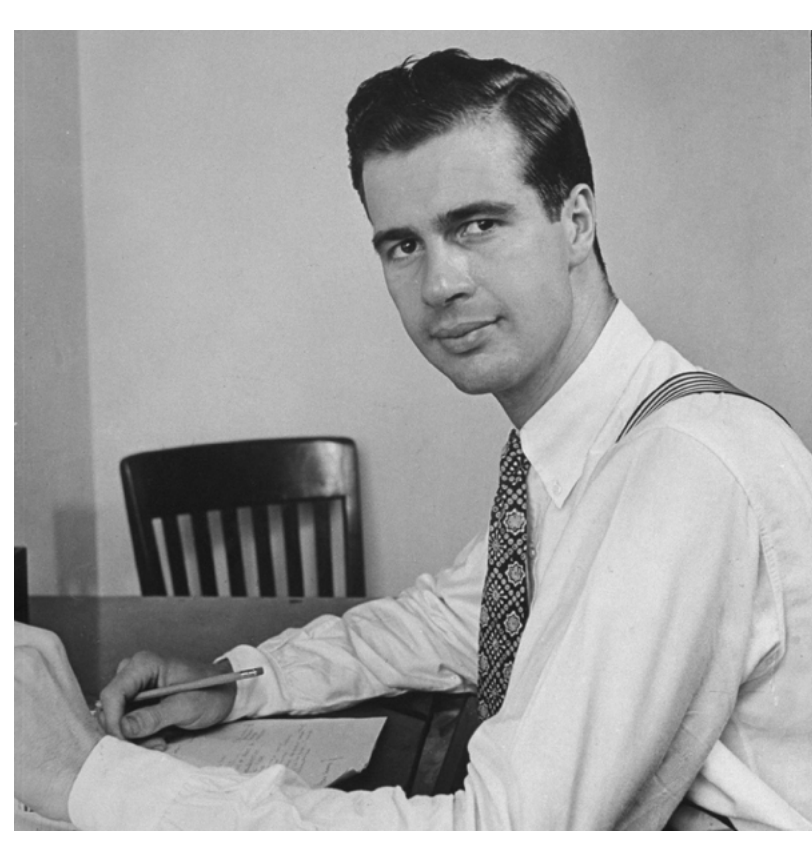
"At exactly fifteen minutes past eight in the morning, on August 6, 1945, Japanese time, at the moment when the atomic bomb flashed above Hiroshima, Miss Toshiko Sasaki, a clerk in the personnel department of the East Asia Tin Works, had just sat down at her place in the plant office and was turning her head to speak to the girl at the next desk."

That's the deadpan first sentence of the most celebrated magazine article of our time, John Hersey's 31,000-word "Hiroshima," published as the only piece in the extraordinary Aug. 31, 1946, issue of the New Yorker. The first detailed account of what happened to the victims of that first atomic explosion, "Hiroshima" was a world-wide sensation as a piece of reporting, later sold millions of copies in a slender hardback edition, and has lost none of its horrific power when reread now, 75 years since the first use of the weapon that changed the world.

The bombing of the thriving Japanese city, followed by the devastation of Nagasaki three days later, led to Japan's surrender some 31/2 years after the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. Emperor Hirohito's capitulation touched off ecstatic V-J Day celebrations in Times Square and around the Allied world, but the unleashing of the atom bombs also prompted vexing questions that linger: Did America commit a war crime—an atrocity comparable in its way to the Nazi Holocaust and the Japanese "rape of Nanking"? Why did America suppress the truth about the radioactivity generated by the bombs that doomed countless survivors to death later?

Lesley M.M. Blume, whose previous work told the behind-the-book story of Ernest Hemingway's "The Sun Also Rises," raises these issues and others in "Fallout," her brisk account of how Hersey got his story. Hersey's lean prose and meticulous detail won "Hiroshima" a place in the pantheon of literary journalism. But Ms. Blume is far more interested in Hersey as a "whistleblower" who exposed "one of the deadliest and most consequential government cover-ups of modern times," especially about the radiation's toll on the Japanese. She calls Hiroshima "a massacre of biblical proportions" and castigates officials who "suppressed, contained, and spun" reports from ground zero to hide "their handiwork." She quotes President Harry Truman, an artillery officer in World War I, calling the bomb "nothing else but an artillery weapon."

Hersey (1913-1993), tall and handsome, was a wunderkind war correspondent for Time magazine. By age 31, he had published two books about combat in the Pacific as well as "A Bell for Adano," winner of the 1945 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. But he had a falling-out with Time's autocratic ruler, Henry Luce, and quit. He then went to work for the New Yorker, which was edited by Harold Ross, his prickly co-creator, and his odd-couple deputy, a quiet little man named William Shawn.



John Hersey. PHOTO: ALFRED EISENSTAEDT/PIX INC./THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION VIA GETTY IMAGES

Ms. Blume turns the writing of "Hiroshima" into the cliff-hanging saga of an intrepid young newsman outplaying his own government to get the facts. By 1946 a handful of American-based journalists had eluded the Allied occupiers to document the physical devastation of Hiroshima, but none had dared report on Hersey's chosen topic: the human cost of the blast. When Hersey wasn't worrying about getting unsupervised access to survivors, he fretted about U.S. military censors. He also worried about how to structure his story so that readers would "suffer some of the pain, some of the disaster." En route to Japan, Hersey read Thornton Wilder's novel "The Bridge of San Luis Rey"—which linked the stories of five people who died when a rope bridge collapsed over a canyon in Peru—and had an epiphany.

After authorities granted him 14 days in Hiroshima to interview hibakusha—Japanese for "atomic bomb-affected people"—Hersey sought out six linked protagonists for his story. Early on, he found a German Jesuit priest who was 1,400 yards from ground zero when the "noiseless flash" went off; he somehow managed to get to nearby Asano Park, where he comforted many survivors, some with the flesh melting off their bodies. The priest led Hersey to a Japanese Protestant minister, the Charon of Hiroshima, who had ferried victims across the river to the park by poling a boat he found on the shore.

Hersey also interviewed two doctors, one the sole surviving physician at the 600-bed Red Cross hospital besieged by 10,000 walking wounded after the blast, the other a Japanese humanitarian who had donated medical supplies to the Jesuit mission, which the priest and others used to bandage their wounds. One of the two women Hersey chose, the widow of a

drafted killed in action, had desperately dug her three children out alive from the wreckage of their home. The other, the young woman Hersey wrote of in the first sentence of his story, was buried under a mountain of books in her office.

Upon Hersey's return to New York, Ross, Shawn and the author locked themselves in Ross's shabby office for secret marathon editing sessions. The finished piece was cleared by Gen. Leslie Groves, the military's atom czar—and one of Ms. Blume's prime cover-up culprits. Still, Ross fretted that advertisers would be enraged by being included in the "Hiroshima" issue and that squeamish readers would cancel their subscriptions. Like any anxious editor, Shawn sent an underling to Grand Central Terminal on publication day to see how the magazine was selling. He needn't have worried.

For all the virtues of her narrative, Ms. Blume is guilty of the historian's sin of "presentism"—judging the actions of the past by the standards of today. Some may consider any use of nuclear weapons immoral, but ending the war without invading Japan was a compelling option for Truman and his military, whose first responsibility was the preservation of American lives. Imagine the furor that would have erupted if—after hundreds of thousands of Allied and Japanese troops (and countless Japanese civilians) had been killed and maimed in an invasion—it were revealed that the U.S. had a secret weapon that could have ended World War II in a week but refused to use it.

What's more, Japan was notorious for the savagery of its troops during the war. The Nazi Holocaust was genocide, not a military tactic. Suppressing word of the enduring radiation hazard from nuclear weapons can be decried. Still, actions taken in wartime or its immediate aftermath ought not to be judged only by peacetime standards.

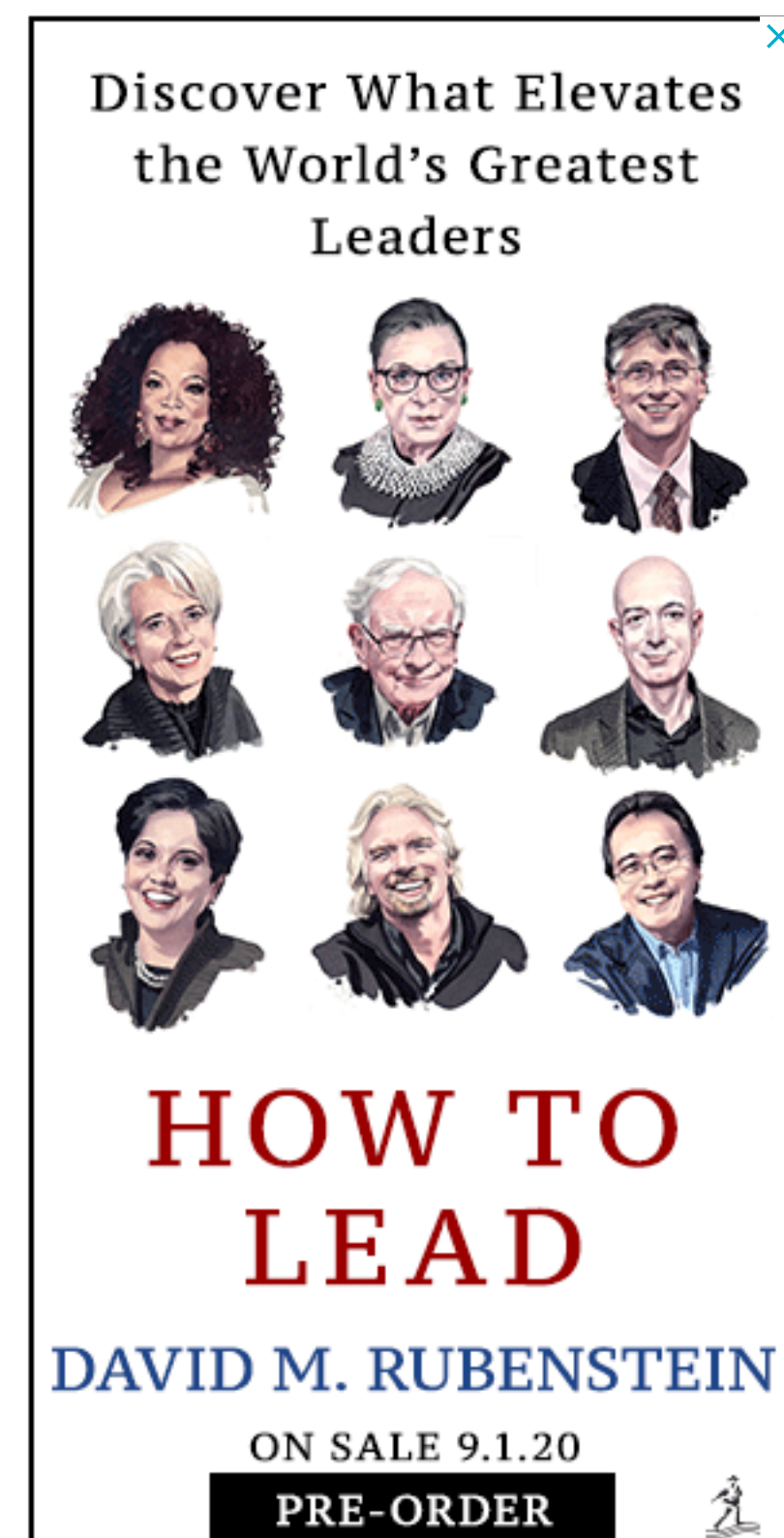
Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York magazine, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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