

The Year That Changed  
Everything: 1959,  
Or did it?

By

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## **Section 1: the thesis**

Fred Kaplan proposes the idea, in *1959 The Year that Change Everything*, that all of the advances and changes of the last four decades of the twentieth century, and in to the twenty-first, were a result of the year 1959. Kaplan makes a compelling case for his thesis, yet a selective one. He expounds on numerous different topics, including the space race, literature, Jazz, politics, science and technology, art and architecture, and birth control. While, 1959 may have had numerous pivotal moments, in the history of the United States and the World, did it change everything?

## **Section 2: the evidence**

Kaplan focuses great attention to Norman Mailer, maybe too much so. The work which Mailer published was the ground breaking *Advertisement for Myself*. Kaplan writes of Mailers purpose of the book as “an act of therapy, a self-administered form of psychoanalysis that had come into fashion,” and that the book is “...a wild mishmash, rife with loopy ramblings and drug-addled revelations, some profound, many bizarre...” (p.18). Kaplan cites Mailer’s essays such as *The White Negro* and other that were written for *Village Voice*, and other novels including *The Deer Park* (which received disappointing reviews) providing the background and inspiration for *Advertisement for Myself*. However, not everyone viewed the book with such high regards. Ernest Hemingway, Mailer's idol, denounced the book as a “compendium of bits and pieces and refuse a writer should forget about and never let see the light of day”. Mailer

receives an entire chapter in 1959, and is used again and again in other sections of the book as anecdotal evidence when discussing other authors, and artists of the period.

He includes a discussion on Allen Ginsberg's work that led to his triumphant return to literature celebrity, the poem *Howl*. Ginsberg gave credit for the inspiration for *Howl* to Jack Kerouac. At which point Kaplan diverts to write about Kerouac, and how he was virtually unknown, and only had one published novel *The Town and the City*, and the fact that he was best known for a phrase "the *beat* generation." Kaplan states that "as a result, *Howl* made Kerouac famous". It was a result of this fame that allowed for the publication of *On the Road* – his most famous work – which was turned down by his publisher, just six weeks earlier. Because, of their friendship and the circumstances relating the publications of their writings, the two, according to Kaplan (and others), are inextricably linked.

Through these books and others like *Naked Lunch* by Burroughs – a drug induced hodge-podge, similar to Ginsberg's book, but more extreme and graphic, writers of the era were able to break down the barriers of censorship and what was considered obscene. He, also, includes the importance of an obscenity case involving the US Postal Service, Grove Press, and an exceptionally well-known novel – *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. This is a pivotal event in literature, without it many of the great novels of the 1960s may never have been published.

Kaplan provides a great deal of analysis on the rapidly changing Jazz scene in the late 1950s, and the development of **Motown**. There is no disputing the fact the George Russell, with his friend Miles Davis, completely redefined the structure of Jazz

(for that matter any freeform improvisational style of music, for example the Grateful Dead). It was Russell's theories and research, into using scales rather than chords as the basis of improvisation, that would allowed Miles Davis to record – arguably the greatest jazz album in history – *Kind of Blue*. Kaplan seems to be knowledgeable of Jazz, but for those unfamiliar with Jazz and its structures it could become a bit confusing, in parts. Both Jazz and Motown opened up black culture to a wider audience, and brought African-American musical styles to mainstream, middle class, white America.

Kaplan points to three crucial happenings in the political realm, all of three were visits by foreign dignitaries, Anasta Mikoyan, Fidel Castro, and Nikita Khrushchev. All of whom are communists. This was not known of Castro at the time of his visit. Kaplan points out that Mikoyan, the highest ranking communist to visit to that date, set the precedent of how a visit of the United States should be done. He saw the sights met with average Americans, Wall Street executives, and Hollywood Stars, and the occasional politician. Castro followed a similar "path" when he visited, but was greeted with even warmer hearts, because he was not yet a communist and he roused that sense of patriotism, because we were revolutionaries once. It was Khrushchev's visit that was opened the door to change. According to Kaplan it was his visit that presented the idea that US and Russia could negotiate and debate issues, and that neither side wanted Armageddon. Khrushchev felt good after his visit to the U.S.A. saying, "Long live Soviet-American friendship!"

Kaplan provides even more evidence that 1959 was the year of change, these were scientific break throughs that would have profound social and economic

implications: “the pill” (birth control), and the solid state integrated circuit (the microchip) – both of which were developed before 1959. The microchip and “the pill” came to the market in '59. The chip did away with the need to have entire rooms dedicated solely for gargantuan computers, and the development of microminiaturization, and resulted in lower and lower cost electronics. Birth control would lead to another type of revolution, the sexual revolution. The fear was that women would become more promiscuous, rightfully so. For the first time in history a women could engage in sexual activity with minimal fear of becoming pregnant. Kaplan writes that other methods of contraception were being used, but the “devises robbed sex of its passion and spontaneity.”

### **Section 3: the flaws**

While Kaplan makes some compelling arguments there are some glaring weaknesses in his book. He seems to deemphasize certain events that led up to the events of 1959. These preceding occurrences could be, and are, recognized as watershed moments in our history.

Lunik 1, Kaplan cites as the start of the space race. He does mention that Sputnik occurred in 1957 and was the first man-made object to orbit the earth. He downplays the ideas that the USA had several teams working on different rocket and delivery systems. He, also, mentions the statement that really ignited the race, Eisenhower’s comment that during the IGY (International Geophysical Year) the United States would put a satellite in orbit. This statement spurred the Soviet Union to

improvethe development of their own satellite program. In 1959 the space race heated up, but it certainly did not start then.

Another glaring oversight is Kaplan credits the government, Medgar Evers, and Malcolm X with starting the civil rights movement. The civil rights movement was not started because of the scathing report, about race relations in America, released by the U.S. Civil Rights Commission. The movement had its roots long before, with people like Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Dubois, and others who spoke out. It was a gradual progression from those early “pioneers” to the modern movement, and it took courage along the way. The modern civil rights movement began with the courage of one lady – Rosa Parks – and the people and heroes, such as;Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., World War II veterans, and others that were tired of the mistreatment; and marched, protested, photographed and documented, brought litigation against, the injustices that they saw on a daily basis. These earlier people’s actions began the lawsuits that resulted in the desegregation of busses and schools, and who enabled congress to propose and pass the bill that would create the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, in **1957**.

Kaplan chose Kahn’s lectures over the events of 1957, when the Soviet Union successfully tested its first intercontinental ballistic missile, which was the same basic system that put Sputnik in orbit, and the presidential commission that urged the adoption of a strategy to fight and win a nuclear war. It was this urging that led to the establishment of the **Rand Corporation** where Kahn worked and developed his Ideas, used in his lectures.

The reality is any good researcher can pick a year and look at the events of that year and argue that that year was a turning point. In almost any year, going back to at least the founding of the United States, there are events that helped make us who we are. Just like the United States has influence in the world, but the world, also, has influence in America. Very few things outside of sudden natural catastrophes happen out of the blue. Events frequently occur because of the ones that preceded them, and thus have an impact on things after their occurrence, and on into the future.

#### **Section 4: things to be gained**

1959 may not have been the year that changed everything. Yet, many of the things that occurred in that year and the decade of the 1950s did have an impact, on peoples thought processes, their behaviors, how they view the world, and most importantly how they see themselves within the context of world. The book brings to light the fifties, not as a dry boring time, but as a vibrant and dynamic decade of profound changes in societal norms. The book brings those changes to the foreground by examining music, politics, science, literature, art and architecture, and maybe most importantly social justice. One can only hope that examinations of other decades turn out to be as liberating and spirited as this examination of the nineteen-fifties turned out to be. The book is similar to Frederick Lewis Allen's *Only Yesterday*, with one exception Kaplan has the advantage of hindsight and historical information.

## **Section 5: what to use**

While the book was extremely interesting, only a third to a half would be useful in a high school classroom. The parts that are not readily useable in class are good background information when there is a student who is inquisitive by nature. However, the chapters on Castro, and Khrushchev would make for great thought provoking discussion on Cold War policies and relations. Along with Cold War relations the chapter on Herman Kahn's how to survive a nuclear attack could be used as discussion point and what it would be like if someone was giving speeches today on how to survive a biological attack. *Sparking the Powder Keg*, which is the civil rights chapter, would help bring to light the repression of African-Americans in the middle of the twentieth century. To integrate the sciences into the history class the sections involving the microchip and the space race could help spark an interest in the science minded students, or could be used as part of a changing technology theme.