

Mary Alice Yeskey

Welcome to the Johns Hopkins University Press podcast, I'm Mary Alice Yeskey with the Hopkins Press Journals Division. Joining us today is Dr. Bruce Schulman. Dr. Schulman is the William E. Huntington Professor of History at Boston University and has authored three books, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt* from Oxford University Press, *Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism* from St. Martin's Press, and *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Politics, and Society* from Free Press. Dr. Schulman also directs the Institute for American Political History at Boston University and is a contributor to *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Los Angeles Times*. Dr. Schulman's essay "Islands in Time, Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Decade" appears in the latest issue of the journal *Reviews in American History*. The essay is a comprehensive look at the decade book as a literary genre and traces its history and cultural influence over the last century.

Thank you so much for joining us today, Dr. Schulman. The first question I like to ask all our guests is, just to get a little background, can you tell us what your academic origin story is?

Bruce Schulmann

Yeah, I mean, I hate to admit it, but I suppose my story is at once utterly conventional and maybe a little bit unexpected. I mean the utterly conventional part is I think like maybe so many American historians in my generation I owe my origins to a particularly unusual and inspirational high school history teacher. So back in those days, as I'm sure you know, high school history instruction was a really bad, drab, soulless, gutless, heartless, almost live humanless, recitation of sort of boring facts and dates and names and no real context to it. And so, I had this wonderful teacher, Mr. Backfish, who not only, you know, made us confront a wide variety of source materials, so primary documents, but also music, and he in fact did a Sunday radio show so he was very much into music, arts, news, journalism, movies when we got into the twentieth century and so on. So, confronting, bringing history alive that way, with that kind of direct engagement with the wide variety of source materials was part of it, but also I think Mr. Backfish dramatized the presence of the past, its real impact on our daily lives, not only on the big things of politics and social and economic trends, but also how, let's say, Andrew Jackson and the spoils system could explain my hometown's weird Halloween rituals, or the presence, really the bribes, my mother paid to the trash collectors so that they wouldn't accidentally on purpose spill trash, you know, on our lawn. That kind of graft that happened in that town. So, I got the idea that history was not only a discipline for studying and understanding the past but could be a form of present-day social criticism, that it was a way,

and I came to think the best way, to sort of reckon with and participate in debates about where American society and politics were and where they should be going. And so, I mean, I think maybe conventional that it was a high school teacher, unconventional in the kind of teacher it was.

To maybe be a little bit more specific, and so to try to explain how I came to do the kind of history I do and especially my interest in the interactions between and interrelationships of politics and popular culture, I think that that sort of dates back to my earliest days in graduate school. When I entered graduate school in the early 1980s, American historical scholarship had had this long tradition of political history, rather straight-forward studies of elections, public policy, political parties, and so on, and this then relatively new body of social history, what was called the “new social history”, which was interested not only in the lived experience of previously marginalized actors but also just understanding the everyday life of ordinary Americans, and those two literatures, those two sets of scholarship didn’t really speak to each other. In fact, they were in many ways antagonistic to each other and being relatively young at the time, having learned about both of these things and not participated in the arguments between them, I became interested in trying to get into that gap, to try to understand how politics and policy affected people’s everyday lives and then how the everyday experiences of ordinary Americans shaped politics and policymaking. And so that was really what my first book was about, and in the writing of that book I came to understand that especially in the twentieth century, the cultural realm had become such an important factor that if you wanted to understand how ordinary people created their own identities, how they thought of their relationships to each other and to the larger world, that you really had to dig into forms of popular cultural expression. So, all the rest of the work I’ve done since then has been trying to get into that relationship or that set of interactions.

Mary Alice Yeskey

That’s a wonderful answer, and I love hearing about your high school history teacher he sounds amazing. (laughs) That sounds wonderful. Your essay in *Reviews in American History* is part of the journals “State of the Field” series. Can you tell us how this essay came to be included in the journal, and more specifically in the state of the series section?

Bruce Schulman

The current leadership, the current editor of *Reviews in American History*, Ari Kelman, is, I think, doing something really exciting with that journal. For many years, it had always been something useful to scholars in the field, but it had mostly been relatively short book reviews of current publications, and it still does a lot of that, which is an important service. But I think Ari and his collaborators have tried to go beyond that and to really, you know, enlist historians to think more broadly about the kind of work they do and, you know, the ways that history is produced and consumed and how and why history matters not only to scholars but also to larger audiences. And the state of the field feature is part of that, in which the editors ask different

historians to sort of reckon with how things are going and why things are changing in certain areas of inquiry, and about two or three years ago now, I don't remember the exact date, they asked me to write what I would consider a rather conventional state of the field piece on the field of which I've done most of my scholarly research, which is recent US political and cultural history, and I wrote a state of the field essay on US history since 1968, and trying to make sense of the direction of American historical scholarship that's come out in the last quarter-century, but focused on trying to make sense of the emergence of the contemporary United States and how it took shape since the end of the 1960s. And so, you know, I did that piece, and then they liked that piece and there were some fairly good reactions to it, and we kind of went back and forth about, they asked me if I, you know, had other ideas for things I would like to write, and I pitched this idea of trying to understand the decade. The decade not just as a unit of chronological time but as a kind of marker of cultural time, how people sort of understand cultural development, and with that understanding of the decade, and the way late-twentieth, early-twenty-first century Americans tend to reckon cultural time in decades, the development of an entire genre of writing: the decade book, of which there are dozens if not hundreds of such books. And I myself have produced a decade book which is probably why I thought about this genre, and the book that it seemed to me created the genre of the decade book, and as its legacy left us many of the still-defining features of the genre: Frederick Lewis Allen's *Only Yesterday*, his book about the nineteen-twenties which came out in 1931. Well, it was marking a ninetieth anniversary, so that seemed like another reason to do this piece now.

Mary Alice Yeskey

In the section "Conversations with Ourselves", you note that Frederick Lewis Allen and many other decade historians document periods that they lived through, blurring the boundary between history and memoir. Can you tell us a little bit more about how you came to write your own decade book, *The Seventies*, and specifically what led you to choose that period and how did your lived experience during that period inform your research?

Bruce Schulmann

Well, this probably will come as no surprise that I came of age during the nineteen-seventies. I went to high school and college during that decade, and certainly, it was formative of my own identity and my own intellectual development. I think I came to write the book that it was almost a perfect storm that kind of blew together both professional and personal interests, and even obsessions. It really came out of my conviction as a historian and more specifically my experiences as a teacher, teaching classes on the history of the United States since World War 2, trying to make sense of the development of the modern United States. And when I began teaching those classes, one of the things I noticed was that the scholarly literature, not only the textbook, but the, you know, kinds of scholarly literature you would use, mostly petered out around 1968. That there would be, you could buy a post-1945 US history textbook that was 500 pages long and it had 420 pages to get you to 1968, and then like three chapters all just about presidential administrations since then, even though that was almost half of the chronological

period. So, to teach that period, you had to really begin to reckon with primary sources, with memoirs, with all kinds of other material. But I think that for me the problem was this: that I needed to make sense for myself and for my students of the contemporary United States. This place, with its distrust not only of government, but of all forms of established authority: the Hollywood studios, the medical profession, the legal profession, and so on, with its distrust of all forms of established authority, with its free-wheeling, defiant, in-your-face cultural style, with its very complex wrestling with problems of racial and ethnic identity, with the fact of women in the classroom, on the athletic field, in the workplace, and even now in the speakership of the House of Representatives and the Vice Presidency, that if you wanted to make sense of that, it seems to me that the nineteen-seventies were really the pivot point, that they were the place you needed to go to understand how all of this had started to develop, if you wanted to unravel some of the contradictions that we're living with today.

So, there was that, you know, quite urgent professional need, but on the other hand, or not on the other hand, in addition to that, there was also a kind of personal reckoning with my own coming of age, trying to make sense of my own intellectual formation. But also, I think, I don't know if we want to call it a rivalry, but a certain conviction that the people who had come of age in the nineteen-sixties that always talked about how great and how pivotal and how decisive the 1960s were, a sense of tiredness, weariness with that, and rebellion against that. So, in some ways, I was trying to speak for my own generation or for the people who had come of age in the 1970s and kind of pushed back against that 1960s centric understanding of modern US history. And so, the personal and the political blended together, but I think what was interesting about that was, even though in some ways you could read my book on the seventies as autobiographical, even though I am not in it at all except briefly in the preface, and I very intentionally kept myself out of it, you can in some ways read it as kind of an autobiography, of a kind. But on the other hand, there were some things that I didn't include in the book, just because they seemed too close to me, in some ways.

Mary Alice Yeskey

That's interesting and thank you for that. One of those clinging to "the sixties is the best" is my dad, so I've heard that growing up as well. (laughs) Thank you for that laugh, that made me smile. Do you think that we as a society sort of cling to the notion of a decade because it allows us a sense of a fresh start, despite the fact that nothing changes in between, for example, December 1979 and January 1980, it's pretty much the same era? Do you think the dawn of a new decade carries with it a hope that we might want or need kind of like a bigger version of New Year's Eve?

Bruce Schulman

I mean, I think that is certainly part of the appeal of it, in that, you know, to the extent that, you know, those years that end with zero seem like particularly resonant markers and when digits roll around to zero again that sense of a new beginning perhaps is enhanced. But I think I would

emphasize something else. To me, I think the appeal, the lingering appeal of the idea of the decade, which as you've suggested, is in some ways ridiculous, things don't neatly change or fall into these ten-year intervals that begin and end with the zeros and nines, history doesn't work that way, so neatly, I think that part of the reason that we cling to the idea is because central to the idea of the decade is an assumption, sometimes conscious sometimes unconscious, of shared experience, and that in a nation and in a world where fragmentation seems the order of the day and people have such different perspectives and experiences and are interested in such different things that you and I might not have heard of the kinds of things that we are thinking about, reading, watching, listening to, etcetera, that the idea of a decade having a particular spirit or zeitgeist or set of cultural affiliations and norms and experiences, that that is very appealing and I think that has something to do with its lingering impact.

I wonder, and I speculate on this at the very end of the article in *Reviews in American History*, if the decade is not disappearing now, beginning to lose resonance in the twenty-first century. Certainly, there have been fewer decade books about the last decade of the twentieth century and the first two decades of the twenty-first than there were about, let's say, the sixties, seventies, and eighties. Now you could say that that has to do with the nearness in time, that we wouldn't expect there to be decade books or reckonings with the two thousand-tens yet, we're only in two thousand twenty-one. But there have been almost no decade books about the 1990s, or the first decade of the twenty-first century, and there are probably a lot of reasons for that but I wonder if that we no longer live in the era of network television, of the big Hollywood studios, of the big record labels, of the big publishing companies, of a handful of nationally circulated magazines that had readerships in the tens of millions, and so that without that common set of cultural markers that we can think, you know, in the age of network TV everybody was watching pretty much the same stuff, and even if they weren't watching it they were sort of, if you refer to it most Americans, a majority, would have been familiar with Mary Tyler Moore, or Mash, or Dick Van Dyke, or whatever it might be. And so that, with the loss of that set of common cultural reference, that maybe the decade just makes less sense. We'll see if the decade book has a revival or not.

Mary Alice Yeskey

That's interesting, and that actually, you've sort of inadvertently made me feel better about my own age a bit, and I'll tell you why: I frequently will look up, you know, part of my job is to do social media, and so I will often times look up, you know, what happened today in history, as just a way to tie in content. So, if today is this author's birthday I say, great, I can figure out a journal article about that. And so, I'll frequently scroll down and see, you know, famous people born today, and I'll tell you, anybody you know, born after nineteen eighty, I don't know who they are. And frequently it'll just say, you know, "TikTok Star" or "YouTube Star", and I'm like, man, I'm getting old, cause I don't know who these famous people are whose birthday it is today. (laughs) But then I don't, I think to your point though, I don't think that's necessarily just oh, I'm a woman of a certain age, it's more just like, there isn't the shared experience, there

isn't four networks that we can pick from, you know, there's just so much that we don't have a collective understanding of who the most famous people are who were born on this day, that just kind of doesn't exist anymore so, thank you for making me feel a little bit less out of touch, perhaps it's the times and not just my lack of understanding. (laughs)

I particularly loved the portion of your piece that explained Frederick Allen's curating and translating of culture into accessible content, and you referred to him as "what we might today, in different contexts, call him an influencer". Do you think that there could be a place in the future for decade retrospectives that focus just on digital media? I mean, to your point we're not on a three-network TV screen anymore, do you think something like, you know, TikTok and the two thousand-twenties could be a decade piece of content or literature that someone's producing in the future, or are things just moving sort of too fast for that kind of retrospective now?

[Bruce Schulman](#)

I think that's a really good question. If you were to try to put yourself in the place of someone trying to make sense of the twenty twenties, you know, twenty years after that, someone who, you know, is in their teens or early twenties now and who as a middle-aged person is writing a decade retrospective on that, you would have to think that social media would form, and digital media, generally, would form the lion's share of the source material for that person. I mean, there'll be all kinds of questions of access to that kind of digital material which I couldn't begin to anticipate how that will be resolved in twenty or thirty years. But, in a funny way Frederick Lewis Allen, even though he's working nearly a century ago, offers an interesting model. If you look at the Frederick Lewis Allen archive in the Library of Congress, in the files that he collected, as he was writing only yesterday, there are these, I guess we would call them scrap books: just pages and pages and pages of advertisements from newspapers and magazines that he cut out. Advertisements for shoes and hats and what not, was his way of trying to, you know, scroll through the new media of the time and to try to identify important trends and development. So yeah, you could imagine that, you know, the Frederick Lewis Allen of the future will be doing something similar, but literally scrolling through a wide variety of digital media.

[Mary Alice Yeskey](#)

Screenshotting memes instead, excellent. (laughs) In your piece you reference many different decade books. Are there any that you want to kind of call out as your personal favorite?

[Bruce Schulman](#)

That's a hard question cause I really like a lot of them, and I personally know the authors of many of them.

[Mary Alice Yeskey](#)

Ah, well, I don't want to cause any riffs. (laughs)

Bruce Schulman

To all of you, with any of you authors here that you should know that I think highly of many of your books. That said, I think I would point out two of them: one a fairly recent book and one one of the older books that you might not normally think of as a decade book, but I do.

So, the first, a recent book, is Jefferson Cowie's book about the nineteen seventies called *Staying Alive*. That, I think, is a particularly creative, particularly elegantly written book and it does what I see as one of the distinguishing features of the decade book: the interpenetration of politics, lived experience, and popular culture just so, not only beautifully, but suggestively. So, his reading of country music and the way it participates in, reflects but also shapes the transformation of the blue-collar working class in the 1970s or his reading of a series of movies that feature working-class main characters and how they at once capture but also help to reshape the understanding of the working class at that crucial juncture, I think that book is not only well-executed but really just imaginative and compelling.

One of my favorites and I suppose one of the inspirations for my book, though, is an earlier book, it came out in the early 1970s, and that's John Morton Blum's *V Was for Victory*, which, you know, is nominally not a decade book but a history of the United States during World War 2. Or really, a history of the United States Homefront during World War 2, rather than the military history or the international diplomatic history, and certainly it is that. But I think that the book really falls into the tradition of the decade book because it identifies a specific chronological period as an island in time, as a coherent cultural and political moment, and it analyzes that moment by trying to figure out the interaction between politics and popular culture, everything from cuisine to popular literature to memoir, and also, I think, more than anything else, what really attracts me to this book is how much you can tell that Blum is wrestling with his own experience as a young American coming of age right during this period, someone who, when Franklin D. Roosevelt dies in the spring of 1945, can't understand who could be president now, because had literally never experienced a world in which anyone but Franklin D. Roosevelt was president of the United States. And so that attempt to reckon with his own experience of and disappointments in what came out of the World War 2 Homefront, I think of *V Was for Victory* as *Decade* book, I think it kind of fulfills what I see as the major features of that genre, and its long been one of my favorites.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Excellent, thank you. I'm going to add those to my very long summer reading list which is getting near impossible at this point, but I will keep that delusion alive. (laughs) So, my last question is what are you currently researching? What's next? Do you have any papers or book projects you'd like to tell us about?

Bruce Schulman

Yes, I'm at work on, and I have to admit, hustling because I'm well behind schedule, on a volume series called the *Oxford History of the United States*. So, if you're not familiar with the series, this was a series that was launched a long time ago, it was actually launched in the early 1980s, and it had a kind of checkered history. It was originally intended to kind of present that generation's take on US history in twelve chronological volumes and a couple of topical volumes, and I think that the creators of the series, you know, assumed that within fifteen or twenty years it would be complete. But we're now fifty years later and it's not yet complete. As I said, it has a checkered history. So, on the one hand, it has a fanatical following among readers, it has produced three Pulitzer Prize winners and a Bancroft Prize winner, that's the good news. But there have also been several volumes that authors worked on their books for twenty or thirty years and didn't finish them, or in a couple of cases they weren't accepted as part of the series, and now even two cases in which the authors passed away before they completed their books. So, I am not the first person to be writing the volume covering the period 1896 to 1929, and I'm writing that volume for this series, and, you know, trying to make sense of this period that marks, I think, the emergence of the modern United States, and really, the transformation of, and the consolidation of, American nationhood. So, this is the period in which, Americans for the first time are consuming the same brand name goods across the country, in which we are creating national audiences for cultural products like first, recorded music and film, and eventually network radio, when we're creating new instruments of national governance, and a new set of relationships to the broader world, including the taking of formal empire and entering onto the world's stage as a great power in the first world war, and we literally changed the face and the faces of the nation through mass migration and immigration from abroad. So, that's my main work, is trying at long last to finish this volume.

[Mary Alice Yeskey](#)

(laughs) Wonderful. Well, good luck with that. Thank you so much for taking time out of that harrowing task to talk to us today about your essay which again was such a delightful read, it really, it just sort of stuck with me for days I kept thinking about it and thinking about, you know, my personal lived experience in my coming of age in the eighties and I just, I don't know I just really enjoyed it and I'm excited for a broader audience to read it after listening to this podcast. We'll put the link to your paper in the write-up and I hope that you get a little bit of relaxation this summer. Thank you so much for taking the time with us.

[Bruce Schulman](#)

Well, thank you. I really enjoyed talking with you.