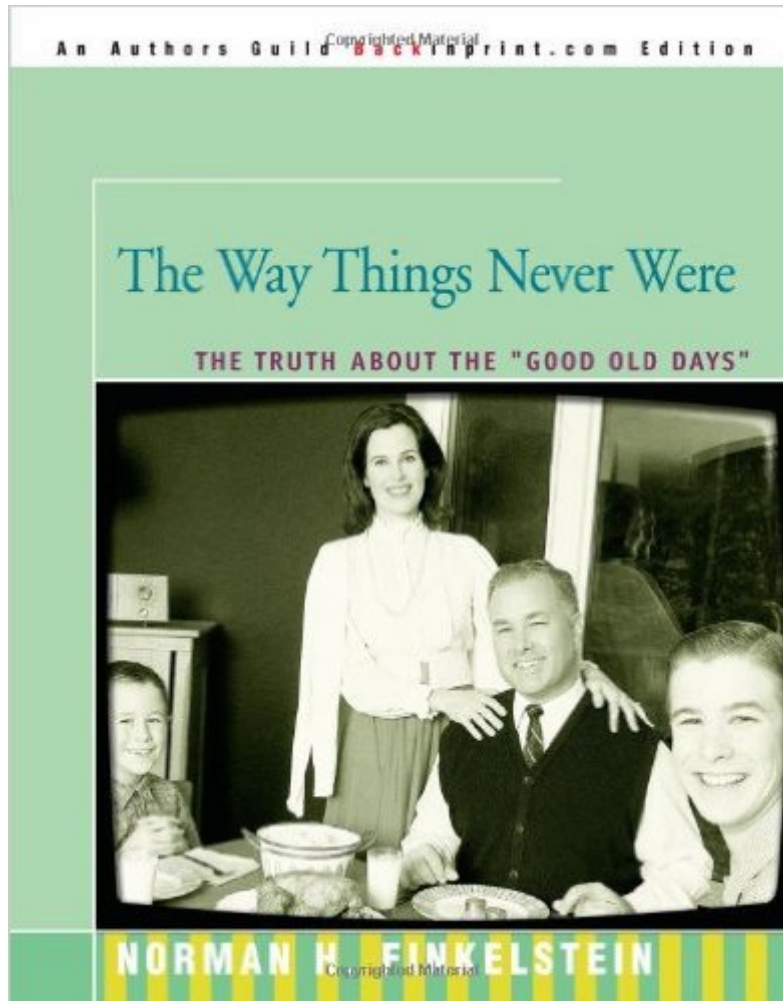


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# The Way Things Never Were: The Truth About The "Good Old Days"



## Synopsis

It seems like kids are always hearing stories about America in the "good old days." But, in fact, the 1950s and 1960s were not as carefree as they sometimes seem. Through fascinating stories, advertisements, facts and photographs, Norman H. Finkelstein invites people of all generations to decide for themselves. The New York Times Book Review said this book is "useful for inquiring young researchers looking for odd angles and, ideally might even provoke talk between young readers and parents."

## Book Information

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Age Range: 9 - 12 years

Grade Level: 4 - 07

## Customer Reviews

When I read this book, I knew it would upset some people for whom the mythical idea they had in their head of those "happier, simpler times" would be exploded. What Mr. Finkelstein forced me to realize in my reading of the book were basically two things. Firstly, the human memory tends to be mercifully selective, emphasizing the positive and glossing over the negative. Be honest. Do you not feel that most people, yourself included, tend to have idealized memories of people that have gone on to their eternal rest? The mere act of their passing made them better people in the minds of many who knew them. That works equally well with things, places and times that will never return. Many readers of this book will want to criticize Mr. Finkelstein for making them face the truth of the matter that, in the words of Mr. Joel, "The good old days weren't always good..." I am not among

those. Instead, I greatly appreciate the author for the dose of reality. Secondly, I have always been of the opinion that you cannot really "solve" problems. The act of eliminating one creates another. I believe that if you look at the wide screen that encompasses both past and present, you get a good illustration of my point. Some things about America's golden age were indeed better; some indeed weren't. I could write you a list right now as long as your arm of things from that era that I would love to see return, then turn right around and write an equally long list entitled, "But for God's sake, please let me never again see....." My bottom line....I found Mr. Finkelstein's work very informative and interesting. For those who can handle the truth, it's a good read. But if you're among those who may become traumatized by having your mental version of those "good old days" challenged, my recommendation to you is to simply stay away.

A quick, easy read comparing the good-old days with today. It traces how things have evolved technologically. We have better cars, tv's, medicines, computers, phones, etc. And we have more life style choices now. The basic premise seems to be that we are better off now because we have better things. There doesn't seem to be any thought given for a basic, simpler life back then. Another similar title, 'The Way We Never Were', is much more of a sociology textbook on the same subject, now vs. then.

This book came out during the mid-1990s when Republican Party demagogues like Rush Limbaugh used an appeal to return to the mythic, Golden Age Thinking-based Good Old Days portrayed on Leave It To Beaver to appeal to voters who were in thrall to this largely mythical time. As one of a number of books published during that era on that subject, it ranks only midway. Designed as a children's book, it became more of a "Gee Whiz, Look at All the Cool Stuff" themed book, not unlike the original General Electric House of the Future ride in the original Disneyland. It contains a small number of relatively harmless factual errors [For example, Page 36 states that "Scientists were able to prevent the escape of radioactive gasses into the atmosphere" in the case of Three Mile Island, when, in fact, the NRC's 1980 Rogovin Report on the incident stated that "During the course of the accident, approximately 2.5 million curies of radioactive noble gases and 15 curies of radioiodines were released."], but is otherwise the obvious child of its author, a professional librarian. Being rather a statistics-laden book, it falls rather short of discussing the thematic backdrop to this fascinating, scrappy era. If you can get over the withering references to comically flawed Socialist and Neo-Marxist thinking sprinkled liberally throughout, a better read is THE WAY WE NEVER WERE, by Professor Stefanie Coontz. Although as a roughly 300 page tome, it's not a children's book, it

addresses themes more squarely. It's also a sexier title, and I suspect Steff got there first with the title. But for a good lookback, it's a great source of facts and reminders of how things were, from iron lungs to burning rivers.

Finkelstein does a tremendous job at showing that things in the past were not necessarily better than now. My own grandmother talks about how much better life was growing up for her. She doesn't seem to remember that she has lived through 2 world wars, the depression and countless other tragedies. A must read for young and old alike.

The author has attempted here to put American history in its true perspective (whatever that may mean). He successfully reports SOME of the differences between then and now, but his manipulation of the facts didn't convince me that we've got it better now than before. I grew up in the 50s and indeed DO remember simpler times. While Finkelstein laments our "limited choices" back then, and "black-and-white" television (oh, POOR US!) he fails to mention that our 'limited' choices were far more than previous generations had. Granted, we have more conveniences now than previously (COLOR t.v.---one-fourth the size of a small room wall, even!!), but we have over-crowded living conditions, deplorably crowded freeways, unbelievably high insurance rates for medical care, and, of course, the threat of nuclear disaster STILL is having over our heads. So, we are living longer? GOOD! But keep in mind that living longer has it's own set of problems. A so-so book.

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