

■ nonfiction

# COMING OF ATOMIC AGE

THE YOUNG WOMEN WHO (UNWITTINGLY) BUILT THE A-BOMB

by Nicole Pezold / GSAS '04

The only thing Celia Szapka knew as her train rattled along in the August heat of 1943 was that they were headed south. Szapka, a 24-year-old secretary working for the State Department in New York City, had been picked up by limo, taken to Newark Penn Station, and led aboard a berth with several other young women all hired for “The Project.” She had not been told where the job was, whom she’d be working for, what she’d be doing, or how long it would last—only that it paid well and was in service to ending the war.

What waited at the end of this journey was Oak Ridge, a top-secret town raised almost over-

night in the mountains of eastern Tennessee as part of the Manhattan Project. Its singular purpose was to enrich as much uranium as quickly as possible for use in the War Department’s quest to develop a nuclear bomb.

It was an arduous task, and as chronicled in journalist Denise Kiernan’s book, *The Girls of Atomic City: The Untold Story of the Women Who Helped Win World War II* (Touchstone), much of this labor fell to women like Szapka. Kiernan (WSUC '91, STEINHARDT '02) presents her story, as a secretary at the town’s administrative headquarters, along with the narratives of women at all levels of this undertaking—including Dorothy Jones, a calutron cubicle operator

in one of the processing plants, and Leona Woods, a physicist who helped to create the first sustained nuclear reaction. “The most ambitious war project in military history rested squarely on the shoulders of tens of thousands of ordinary people, many of them young women,” she writes.

Kiernan resurrects this moment in history through hundreds of interviews with former workers, many now in their nineties, and extensive archival research. Since its release last spring, the book has landed on *The New York Times* best-seller list and has won the attention of critics. *The Washington Post* called it “fascinating,” noting that “Rosie, it turns out, did much more than drive rivets.” The au-

INSIDE A URANIUM-ENRICHMENT PLANT, YOUNG WOMEN WERE TRAINED TO OPERATE THESE CALUTRON MONITORS WITHOUT EVER KNOWING THEIR PURPOSE.

PHOTOS © JAMES EDWARD WESTCOTT, COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES

thor was approached by Hollywood when the book was merely in proposal form, and continues to ride a wave of lectures, interviews, and book events, from Raleigh to Milwaukee—including a party in Nashville thrown by one of her subjects, Colleen Rowan, where all the ladies dressed in 1940s military garb and passed around atomic-themed cocktails.

The Project sought out young women like Rowan and Jones, from rural Tennessee and fresh out of high school, because it was thought that they were easier to instruct and asked fewer questions. These were important traits because there was no end to the se-

crecy once recruits arrived in Oak Ridge. Each was given just the sliver of information necessary to do her job. The word *uranium* was never spoken or written. Instead, it was referred to as “tuballoy” and “product”—not that anyone but, say, the chemists even knew what uranium was or how its power might be harnessed for this newly discovered thing called fission.

Lest anyone start blabbing about work, residents were bombarded with warnings. There were billboards, editorials, missives, and the occasional, sudden disappearance of a loose-lipped colleague, and these reminders mostly worked. “Nobody wanted to be responsible for derailing the war effort,” Kiernan explains. “If they said, ‘Keep your mouth shut or you’re going to screw things up,’ then it was like, ‘Well, I’ll keep my mouth shut.’”

By 1945, Oak Ridge was home to 75,000 workers and their families. The days were long, and the work never stopped for holidays. Housing was scarce and shoddy. Single women were generally assigned to dormitories, while families scrunched into prefab houses and trailers. There were lines for everything—food, cigarettes, books. The mud was ubiquitous and calf-deep. Despite the discomforts, these years marked a formative period for many of the young workers. It was the first time they were on their own, pockets flush with cash, and a lively social scene sprouted instantly. There were dances, religious services, a movie theater, and all manner of clubs, from basketball to Girl Scouts.

You only had to be white to partake in the fun. African-Americans, who were primarily hired to build or clean the town and plants, faced all the indignities of segregation and more. When Kattie Strickland and her husband arrived from Alabama, they discovered that they were not allowed to live together (and unlike white work-

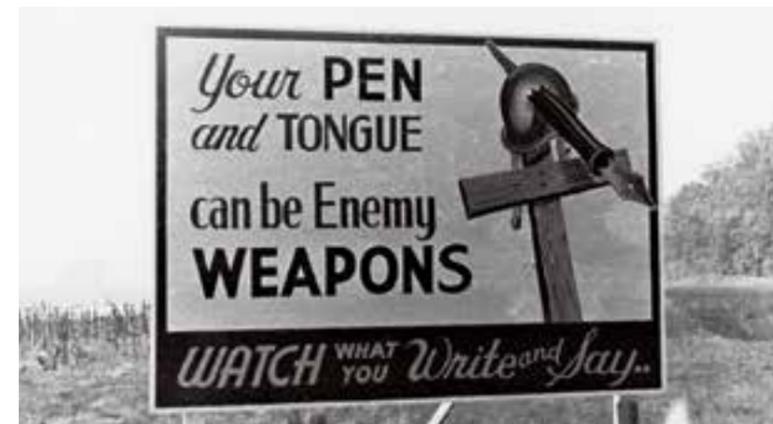
ers, they were barred from bringing their children to Oak Ridge). There was one camp for black men and another for black women, separated by a high fence, barbed wire, and guards. They had a 10 PM curfew and little privacy, with four people squeezed into a one-room hut heated by a coal stove. Cooking in the huts was forbidden. Instead, there was a special blacks-only cafeteria, renowned for serving up mystery meat and “rocks, glass, or some dangerous piece of harmful trash.” After a particularly harrowing bout of food poisoning, Strickland started to surreptitiously bake corn bread, biscuits, and other comfort foods in the huts on rumpled pans fashioned from scrap metal.

Life turned truly horrific for some African-Americans, such as Ebb Cade, a healthy 53-year-old construction worker. When both of his legs were broken in a car accident, doctors at Oak Ridge were ordered not to set them immediately and to give him injections of plutonium to study its effect. Thereafter he was known as HP-12. Staff collected urine, feces, and tissue samples, and removed 15

Though Kiernan found many letters of complaint addressed to everyone from construction bosses to President Roosevelt, many black workers stayed on. The simple truth was that African-Americans’ experience in Oak Ridge was not so different from elsewhere in the South and beyond, but the wages could not be matched.

On the morning of August 6, 1945, the United States dropped a bomb armed with uranium processed at Oak Ridge on Hiroshima, and another three days later on Nagasaki. Just like that, the world ventured into a new age, the war ended, and a veil was lifted on the true purpose of The Project. It would take some time to understand the full scale of destruction in Japan.

In Oak Ridge, there was jubilation. Everyone could return to faraway homes and know that their brothers, husbands, and sons would soon join them. But a surprising number also settled in right there, taking new jobs in the burgeoning field of atomic energy. Today, the town has only 28,000 residents but is home to the Department of Energy’s largest na-



BILLBOARDS WERE A UBIQUITOUS REMINDER TO KEEP MUM ABOUT THE WORK HAPPENING AT OAK RIDGE.

of his teeth. He died eight years later, reportedly from heart failure. In 1994, President Bill Clinton appointed a special committee to investigate this and thousands of other human radiation experiments that were conducted from 1944 to 1974.

tional laboratory and celebrates its unusual origins each June with the Secret City Festival. “[Oak Ridge] may have been constructed by the government,” Kiernan says, “but they had built that community by staying there, eating there, marrying there, having babies there.” ■

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# Writing to the Beat

DEVON POWERS RECALLS THE DAWN OF ROCK CRITICISM

by Kevin Fallon / CAS '09

These days, a person can tweet a review of Justin Bieber's new song and have his or her 140-character opinion taken (somewhat) seriously. The reflex is so common that it's hard to remember it took a revolution to get there.

Devon Powers' book *Writing the Record: The Village Voice and the Birth of Rock Criticism* (University of Massachusetts Press) chronicles the critical side of that revolution, revisiting the work of a talented, tenacious group of *Village Voice* journalists in the 1960s and '70s. These early rock critics, including Richard Goldstein and Robert Christgau, had a simple idea: to write about a cultural movement, you actually have to be a part of it. *Newsweek* declared in 1966,

"Goldstein has created his own journalistic discipline—the 'pop' beat," which allowed him to roam the world of "miniskirts, underground filmmakers, LSD cultists, and rock 'n' roll musicians." Along the way, notes Powers (STEINHARDT '08), an assistant professor of culture and communication at Drexel University, these writers helped to legitimize the study of popular culture itself.

We spoke with Powers to discuss the birth of rock criticism, pop culture in the digital age, and whether the notion that "everyone is a critic" is actually true.

**WHEN A PERSON THINKS ABOUT MUSIC CRITICS IN THE 1960S, THEY HAVE A ROMANTICIZED, ALMOST FAMOUS-INSPIRED IDEA THAT**

**THEY ALL PARTIED WITH ROCK STARS. WAS IT REALLY LIKE THAT?**

I'd say yes and no. Yes, to the extent that rock musicians were a lot more accessible then. I mean, Richard Goldstein has told me stories about meeting Janis Joplin and Diana Ross and all these people. But music writers, they were making really crappy money. It wasn't wrapped in glamour and fashion. It was an amazing job, but you were still living in a crappy apartment and wondering what you were doing with your life.

**VILLAGE VOICE FOUNDER DAN WOLF SAID THAT THE PAPER "WAS CONCEIVED TO DEMOLISH THE NOTION THAT ONE NEEDS TO BE A PROFESSIONAL TO**

**ACCOMPLISH SOMETHING IN A FIELD AS PURPORTEDLY TECHNICAL AS JOURNALISM." THAT SEEMS LIKE DÉJÀ VU WITH BLOGS AND MICRO MUSIC SITES DOING ROCK CRITICISM. IS THERE A DIFFERENCE?**

The concerns of the mid-1950s are different. It is an era when people are obsessed with the word *conformity*. It's post-nuclear bomb. The oppressiveness that people of an alternative sensibility felt in the '50s is not the same as what people felt at the rise of blogs and social networking. You might be taking down an establishment, but it's not The Establishment, capital "T," capital "E."

**THEN WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE NONPROFESSIONALS HE WAS TALKING ABOUT AND THIS NOTION THAT "EVERYONE IS A CRITIC," WHICH SORT OF DISMISSES THE NONPROFESSIONAL?**

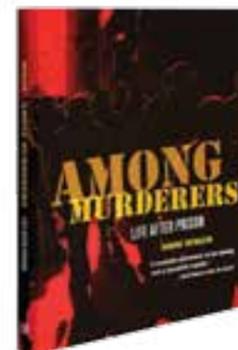
Part of the reason that mainstream journalism was not paying attention to what was going on in the Village is that they didn't know. By getting people who were local and in the thick of things, [the *Voice*] could speak more knowledgeably about what was happening. The one sort of problem that I have when people say, "everyone is a critic" is that yeah, everyone's a critic, but not everyone pays attention. I'm going to value what my friend who knows a lot about film says more than Mom—not that my mom isn't great. ■



GERDE'S FOLK CITY WAS JUST ONE OF THE VILLAGE VENUES WHERE EARLY ROCK CRITICS RUBBED ELBOWS WITH THEIR SOON-TO-BE STAR SUBJECTS.

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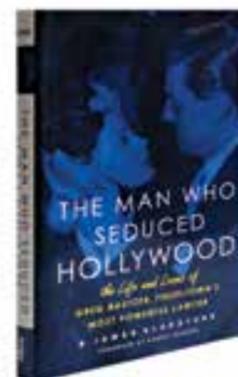
**AMONG MURDERERS: LIFE AFTER PRISON** (UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS) SABINE HEINLEIN GSAS '07



Journalist Sabine Heinlein interviewed more than 50 prisoners before she found Angel, Bruce, and Adam—all convicted of murder—who are the protagonists in this sobering, sensitive debut about reentering society after serving hard time. The author spent more than two years documenting their return to a world they barely recognized, where everyday chores such as shopping, crossing the street, riding the subway, or ordering a meal could be daunting. Heinlein's in-depth reporting offers powerful insight into the reentry system, its shortcomings, and good practices, and the book also reveals these men's struggles toward freedom and redemption. As Jillian Steinhauer put it for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Heinlein's greatest "triumph" is "the ability to turn 'murderers' [...] into people."

—Boryana Dzhabazova

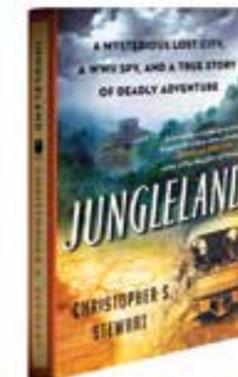
**THE MAN WHO SEDUCED HOLLYWOOD: THE LIFE AND LOVES OF GREG BAUTZER, TINSELTOWN'S MOST POWERFUL LAWYER** (CHICAGO REVIEW PRESS) B. JAMES GLADSTONE TSOA '85



Greg Bautzer, the most ambitious celebrity lawyer you've probably never heard of, waltzed his way into Hollywood and dominated its social scene, and the tabloids, for more than three decades. In 1936, the recent USC law school graduate invested \$5,000 in a posh wardrobe and, with his legal prowess and natural good looks, soon landed a leading role among the cast of Tinseltown power players. Between his celebrity clients and confidants—Howard Hughes and William Randolph Hearst among them—and his serial love affairs with the likes of Lana Turner and Ginger Rogers, Bautzer led a life as climactic as a blockbuster. Through meticulous archival research and interviews with long-lived members of Bautzer's inner circle, B. James Gladstone constructs a tantalizing portrait of Hollywood's golden era.

—Morgan Ribera

**JUNGLELAND: A MYSTERIOUS LOST CITY, A WWII SPY, AND A TRUE STORY OF DEADLY ADVENTURE** (HARPER) CHRISTOPHER S. STEWART GAL '96



One steamy day in July 2009, Christopher Stewart left the comfort of Brooklyn and embarked on a real-life Indiana Jones adventure to find the *Ciudad Blanca*, or White City. A journalist at *The Wall Street Journal*, he had become obsessed with the mystical city—believed to be hidden in the jungle of Honduras's Mosquito Coast—while reporting on the Honduran drug trade. Seventy years earlier, American explorer Theodore Morde claimed to have located it, and Stewart's narrative zigzags between this earlier account and his own journey—replete with venomous snakes and pirates—until the lines between past and present, legend and reality begin to blur. *The Daily Beast* gushed: "The premise is so fantastic that if *Jungleland* were a novel, you could be forgiven for worrying that it might be a bit pulpy or clichéd."

—B.D.

**TURNAROUND: THIRD WORLD LESSONS FOR FIRST WORLD GROWTH** (BASIC BOOKS) PETER BLAIR HENRY DEAN, LEONARD N. STERN SCHOOL OF BUSINESS, AND WILLIAM R. BERKLEY PROFESSOR OF ECONOMICS & FINANCE



In his latest work, Peter Blair Henry follows the rocky economic trajectories of developing nations—Brazil, Mexico, Barbados, Chile, and China among them—and assesses how, with policy reform and fiscal discipline, they gradually sowed paths toward prosperity. Through historical research and data analysis, Henry examines the various policies, both damaging (import substitution and nationalization in Jamaica) and beneficial (trade liberalization in China), pursued by leaders of the former Third World. He argues that First World nations now facing rising poverty and economic dysfunction have much to learn from their less developed peers. *Washington Monthly* notes that the book is a "welcome addition to global development literature" in that it can be "understood by readers who haven't passed advanced classes in statistics and algebra."

—M.R.