*Breaking the fever of hate is everyone’s job*

I read. A lot. Newspapers, of course. Magazines. Books, lots of books. Fiction and nonfiction. Print or digital. Whatever is handy.

Now and then I’ve written about a particularly interesting reading experience and so I will again today. At the end, I’ll attach a brief recommended reading list. The intent is to suggest, for those who believe we’re in an unprecedented time of divisiveness and hate, that maybe we’ve been here before and managed, with great effort, to find a better way.

Today’s featured book: A Fever in the Heartland, by Timothy Egan. Subtitle: The Ku Klux Klan’s Plot to Take Over America, and the Woman Who Stopped Them.

As kids in school, most of us learned the Civil War was fought to free slaves in southern states. After northern victory, the Klan briefly rose in a spasm of racial violence. Federal troops hounded the Klan out of existence. The march of progress, slowly at times, moved ahead.

Not exactly. The north won. Slavery was abolished. But with Lincoln’s assassination his scoundrel vice president, Andrew Johnson, succeeded him and looked the other way as former confederates rebuilt racial barriers by any means necessary. The Ku Klux Klan rose as night riders, terrorizing the Black population. The violence continued and rights were crushed until Ulysses Grant became president and sent in troops. But when Grant left the White House Rutherford B. Hayes succeeded him, in a contested election, which involved cutting a deal to remove troops – essentially ending reconstruction and ushering in the rule of Jim Crow laws that locked in second class status based on race.

Egan’s book deals with the revival of the Klan in the 1920s. Following World War I an era of change occurred. Prohibition played a role. Suddenly millions of people were breaking the law with bootleg booze at speakeasies. Women were wearing bobbed hairstyles, short skirts and dancing. Blacks were moving north to seek opportunities in industry. Heightened immigration brought in new populations. Many of them worshiped differently – Catholics, Jews.

And the Klan rose again, touting a message that White Protestant morals were under attack. The old hate of Blacks was front and center, but the new Klan left plenty of room to hate the Irish, the Italians, Asians, Jews, Catholics and others.

I was fascinated to read Fever in the Heartland because it’s largely based in southern and central Indiana, which became Ground Zero for the new Klan. Much of the action takes place in or around Indianapolis, including places like Terre Haute. I grew up 90 miles from Indy and 30 miles from Terre Haute. As a kid I heard stories of how the Klan took root throughout the region in the 1920s, how thousands of young men in the largely rural population joined. It also was said that just as quickly as the joining took place, it ended for reasons left unclear.

Fever in the Heartland answers a lot of those questions. Indiana became corrupted with the Klan controlling local and state government. But when Klan leaders were shown to be what they were – grifters, moral degenerates, liars and cheats – the fever broke and followers retired their robes. I won’t spoil the rest of the story, of a woman wronged by Indiana’s Klan boss speaking truth from the grave.

The point: Hate is always there. Its mortal enemy is truth. And, often belatedly, the goodness in decent people’s hearts. Americans have beat hate before. They can beat it again.

As promised, a brief reading list on similar topics:

* Killers of the Flower Moon, by David Grann. When oil was discovered on what was believed to be useless land occupied by the Osage, members of the tribe stood to become fabulously wealthy. Instead, they were targeted for exploitation while authorities looked the other way. Murder was the most efficient tool. The case marked the emergence of the fledgling FBI, to bring at least some justice for the victims.
* 1491, by Charles Mann. The date in the title suggests the content to follow, because it’s one year before the arrival of Christopher Columbus to “discover” the Americas. Mann’s purpose is to report on a land that was not empty, but rather populated by millions of people now referred to as Native Americans. The result of “discovery,” as one might surmise, did not turn out well for those who were already here.
* Blood and Thunder, the Epic Story of Kit Carson and the Conquest of the American West, by Hampton Sides. The story fairly presents the widely differing versions of history surrounding western expansion. The incredible persistence and heroism of people like Carson, the most famous and accomplished mountain man and guide through the wilderness. The sad and violent displacement of native people who were in the way. The taking of Mexican territory that was the culmination of a vision of America’s manifest destiny to become a continental nation.
* The Man Who Saved the Union, Ulysses Grant in War and Peace, by H.W. Brands. Warts and all, a presentation of Grant’s career as the determined general who bled the south into submission and later brought the same will to the effort to win the peace.

History is a guide, if we’re willing to see it. And hate is not new, but rather an ever-present challenge to overcome.

To learn more, read.

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