

## BOOK REVIEW

# 1968:

*The Year that Rocked the World*

MARK KURLANSKY

New York: Random House, 2005, 441 pgs.

REVIEWED BY **Raul Reis**

Whichever way you look at it, 1968 was a very unusual year. In America, Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy were assassinated; Lyndon Johnson escalated the Vietnam War and announced that he would not seek reelection; race riots erupted across the country throughout a very hot summer season. Hippies and Yuppies joined forces with very politicized student leaders in unprecedented demonstrations, occupations, and sit-ins that started as anti-war rallies and quickly morphed into anti-establishment events.

In Europe, the reformist dreams of the Prague Spring inspired students throughout the Eastern Bloc to protest and demonstrate against authoritarian governments. In France, Germany, Italy, and even conservative Spain, student protests closed down universities and forced governments to sit down and negotiate with the “new generation.” Anti-authoritarian and anti-establishment protests soon spread to other shores, and governments in countries as different as Japan, Mexico, and Brazil had to deal with a surge in street demonstrations and strikes.

How could so many events and trends have converged to produce such explosive outcomes in such a short time frame? According to Mark Kurlansky, author of “1968: The Year that Rocked the World,” that year’s most dramatic events were the culmination of a decades-long process that started as soon as World War II ended. The post-war baby boom produced a generation that grew up with both economic prosperity and the Cold War. The same 1950s’ prosperity that gave this new generation the opportunity to be educated and aware also sowed the seeds of anti-consumerism and rebellion.

Kurlansky’s book is as gripping and readable as the best news stories and as well researched and encompassing as the best sociological treatises. The author employed all his journalistic skills—he used to

write for *The New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune*, among other publications—to research and write a cultural, sociological, and political history of that turbulent year.

Kurlansky interviewed some of the protagonists of those events, such as Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Abbie Hoffman, and Tom Hayden, among many others, and their first person accounts lend credibility and immediacy to the events narrated in the book. Time and distance also allowed the protagonists of those extraordinary events to look at them critically and offer some earnest and surprising interpretations.

The book is also interesting for journalism professionals, educators, and students for an additional reason: recognizing that the events of 1968 were extremely *mediatic*—in the sense that they were both influenced and heavily covered by the mass media—Kurlansky spends a great deal of time dissecting the way in which newspapers, magazines and, most importantly, television, covered the events. As a matter of fact, the attentive reader will detect an almost *parallel* book running through it, in which the recent history and development of the mass media become as important as the facts narrated and covered by them. Many of the sources interviewed by Kurlansky, such as Walter Cronkite and Dan Rather, were themselves journalists, placed in the eye of the storm in their capacity as “professional witnesses” to those events.

“1968” is far from being a traditional, run-of-the-mill, sociological and political non-fiction book. In books such as “Salt: A World History,” “Cod: The Biography of the Fish that Changed the World,” and “A Chosen Few: The Resurrection of European Jewry,” Kurlansky had already shown that he had a very unique voice, choosing sometimes to focus on odd or quirky events and characters that perfectly illustrate a larger point. An example of that is his choice to write a “biography” of a fish, cod, which ended up serving as a springboard from which he jumped into a much broader historical, commercial, and political narrative.

The author uses the same artifice very successfully here. Yes, he talks at length about the ins and outs of Eastern European politics and gives us a clear understanding of the Prague Spring and its significance to Cold War politics; yes, he constantly goes back to the “larger” picture, and provides the necessary political background that allows us to understand the Black Panthers and the race riots. However, he also focuses on “smaller” or secondary facts and characters, such as Joanna Szczesna, a student leader in Poland, to illustrate a typical Eastern European student’s political trajectory from earnest belief in Communism to anti-authoritarian rebellion. He also has some recurring, favorite, “main” characters, such as

poet Allen Ginsberg, who keep resurfacing at key moments throughout the book (and the year) to offer us through their actions and words, some emblematic images to help us understand the events discussed.

Another unusual (and refreshing) characteristic of the book is that Kurlansky makes no secrets about his own political beliefs. Although an obvious sympathizer of the 1968 student protests and what they meant, he does not let his own politics get in the way of his journalism. He might adopt an ironic or even sarcastic tone when discussing conservative French President Charles de Gaulle's views—apparently, de Gaulle earnestly thought university students were protesting because they were afraid of flunking the notoriously tough year-end exams—and then immediately switch to a very journalistic blow-by-blow (in this case quite literally) account of the French students' confrontations with the police in the streets of Paris.

Good journalists are in the business of telling great stories well. Besides having all the facts, interviewing all the right sources, rummaging through the dust heap of history and mining the right nuggets of information, we have to be able to weave it all together in a way that is compelling, accurate, all-encompassing, clear, and readable. While I was reading Kurlansky's "1968," I often thought about adopting it for one of my writing and reporting classes as an example of great journalism done well. It is often said that only good readers can be good writers. What better way to teach journalism students how to do their job well than to have them read a great journalist's recent work?

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