



Lesley A. A. Blume. Photo by Kendall Conrad

Nuclear Shadows: Hersey's "Hiroshima" Revisited

Fallout: The Hiroshima Cover-up and the Reporter Who Revealed It to the World
by Lesley M. M. Blume. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020. Paperback, 288 pp.
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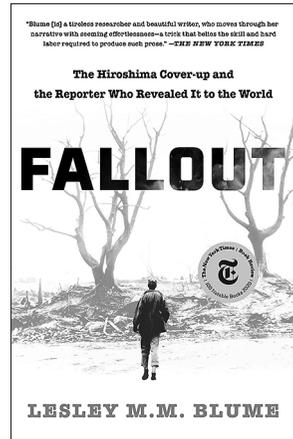
Reviewed by Susan E. Swanberg, University of Arizona, United States

The seventy-fifth anniversary in 2020 of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki reminded us yet again of the global and humanitarian impact of the catastrophic nuclear attacks that ended World War II. In her book, *Fallout: The Hiroshima Cover-up and the Reporter Who Revealed It to the World*, Lesley M. M. Blume—journalist, historian, and best-selling author—examined what she called “the backstory of how John Hersey got the full story about atomic aftermath when no other journalist could . . .” (5).

Fallout, published less than sixteen months after Jeremy Treglown’s *Mr. Straight Arrow: The Career of John Hersey, Author of Hiroshima*, is more circumscribed in scope than *Mr. Straight Arrow*, which was reviewed in this journal in December 2019. Where *Mr. Straight Arrow* focused on Hersey’s entire career as a writer, spanning his life from childhood to his last winters in Key West, Florida, *Fallout* focuses on the circumstances surrounding the reporting, writing, and the *New Yorker’s* August 31, 1946, publication of “Hiroshima,” which was republished as the book, *Hiroshima*, in November 1946.

That two major books covering aspects of John Hersey’s career would be published within a span of sixteen months is extraordinary. Even more extraordinary is the fact that Blume urges her readers to accept the premise that, while interviewing sources for “Hiroshima” almost one year after the bombing, the “Hiroshima” author was a “Trojan horse” (48–51) bravely evading the watchful eyes of Douglas MacArthur—the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP)—and General Leslie Groves, director of the Manhattan Project’s development of the atomic bomb (11, 26), as Hersey uncovered, then returned home, with suppressed truths about the suffering wrought by the atomic bomb.

. . . until Hersey’s story appeared in the *New Yorker*, the U.S. government had astonishingly managed to hide the magnitude of what happened in Hiroshima immediately after the bombing, and successfully covered up the bomb’s long-term deadly radiological effects. U.S. officials in Washington, D.C., and occupation officials in Japan suppressed, contained, and spun reports from the ground in Hiroshima and



Nagasaki . . . until the story all but disappeared from the headlines and the public's consciousness. (2)

As SCAP, MacArthur no doubt minimized, spun, and censored news about the deadly impact of the atomic bomb. It is also true that a few journalists were complicit in this process. Whether censorship was still as stringently imposed when Hersey arrived in Hiroshima in the late spring of 1946 is questionable, however.

It should be noted that several journalists arrived in Hiroshima well before Hersey and reported on the bomb's destructive force as well as the scourge of radiation sickness. These early reports were news reports, however—not the long-form narrative nonfiction Hersey and the *New Yorker* had in mind. Nevertheless, the existence of these news reports suggests that word about the bomb and its aftermath was getting out. Blume mentions several of these journalists in *Fallout*, but their work merits further discussion.

Australian Wilfred Burchett, whose writings were compiled by George Burchett and Nick Shimmin in *Rebel Journalism: The Writings of Wilfred Burchett*, was a *Daily Express* (London) staff reporter who wrote about the “Atomic Plague” killing people who had survived the blast, seemingly uninjured (26–27). Leslie Satoru Nakashima, who worked for the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, arrived in Hiroshima even earlier than Burchett. Nakashima's first Hiroshima story, which also reported the death and destruction left in the wake of the bombing, was filed with the United Press International wire service on August 27, 1945 (25–26). William H. Lawrence of the *New York Times* (not William Leonard Lawrence—the Manhattan Project's erstwhile “historian”) wrote in a September 5, 1945, story, headlined “Visit to Hiroshima Proves It World's Most-Damaged City” that many apparently uninjured people “lost 86 per cent [*sic*] of their white blood corpuscles, developed temperatures of 104 degrees Fahrenheit,” and finally succumbed after suffering bouts of vomiting, hair loss, and decreased appetite.

What Hersey did that distinguished his reporting from those who preceded him included the following: he authored a 31,000-word piece of narrative nonfiction; he engaged in immersive, in-depth reporting; he empathetically elicited detailed interviews from a number of individual survivors; he carefully reported the details of six survivors' post-war “status lives”; and he used dialogue effectively—all hallmarks of what is now called literary journalism.

Reporting from Hiroshima after the war ended was not an easy task for journalists. However, Hersey had many advantages. He had the backing of *Time* and the *New Yorker*, magazines that shared the cost of his travel to Asia. He had a positive relationship with the military establishment by virtue of his prior writings concerning Guadalcanal and Bataan—including a favorable portrayal of General Douglas MacArthur in *Men on Bataan* (56–59). Hersey also had connections that other reporters did not have or could not cultivate. Note, for example, Hersey's access to a version of a Jesuit priest's Hiroshima report that had once been in the possession of the military authorities (217n64b).

Because of Hersey's privileged access to Hiroshima as a *Time* and *New Yorker* journalist and his special status vis-à-vis the military, it is highly unlikely he had to

engage in subterfuge of any import to get his story. Once back in the states with his notes, Hersey wrote “Hiroshima” and then retired in secrecy with his *New Yorker* editors to polish the piece. According to Blume’s “backstory,” General Leslie Groves was provided an advance copy of “Hiroshima,” which he read and approved—after requesting a few changes. The nature of those changes might be lost to posterity, but it is clear the story ran with Groves’s seal of approval. Anybody who has read accounts of Groves’s tight hold on the Manhattan Project and his obsessive resolve regarding the speedy development of an atomic weapon will find it hard to believe that Hersey and his *New Yorker* editors could have deceived the irascible general (117–21).

A careful reading of *Fallout* reveals a few other instances of hyperbole. For example, Blume writes in the book’s introduction that “John Hersey later claimed that he had not intended to write an exposé” (1). Blume cites as her source for this assertion Michael J. Yavenditti’s 1974 *Pacific Historical Review* article, “John Hersey and the American Conscience: The Reception of ‘Hiroshima.’” It is not clear from Yavenditti’s article, however, whether Hersey made such a claim or whether Yavenditti was merely expressing his own opinion (Yavenditti, 42). Blume also occasionally uses phrases such as “Hersey felt . . .” and “Hersey worried . . .” to illustrate Hersey’s supposed internal dialog (9, 14, 72).

Hersey had, in fact, displayed courage as a war correspondent, and it likely took courage to venture onto the ravaged ground that had been Hiroshima, but these facts are only one part of the “Hiroshima” backstory. Hersey was a man of exceptional privilege who was granted numerous advantages throughout his life. Despite an ostensibly humble, early upbringing in China as the son of missionary parents, Hersey later attended Hotchkiss, a private prep school in Connecticut, where he was voted the most popular student in his class, and Yale University. While at Yale Hersey was inducted into Skull and Bones—an elite club that served as a cultural and social touchstone for the likes of *Time* cofounder Henry Luce and Secretary of War and Manhattan Project overseer Henry L. Stimson.

The narrative Blume tells in *Fallout* revolves around an image of Hersey as a valiant whistleblower, a covert David purging the military establishment Goliath of its atomic secrets and revealing them to the world. Hersey as hero is an attractive myth. It was, however, Hersey’s empathy towards his subjects that shone forth in “Hiroshima,” not the supposed stealth with which he allegedly evaded the authorities in post-war Hiroshima.

There are lessons to be learned from history’s tragedies, as Blume notes in the closing pages of her book. Will we as a people be amenable to those lessons, queries Blume, or will another catastrophe be required for us to appreciate the dangers inherent in nuclear conflict, mass dehumanization, and tyranny (182–83)?

Blume also notes that Sinclair Lewis’s novel, *It Can’t Happen Here* (published two years before Hersey became Lewis’s temporary assistant), “warned Americans that what they were seeing happen in Europe—the rise of toxic populism and of vicious government propaganda machines, the assault on truth and facts, the ascent of despotic leaders—could indeed happen in the United States . . .” (182). These words have even deeper meaning since the events of January 6, 2021.

Blume notes at the end of her book that the current assault on the free press in the United States is a “high-stakes” challenge that can be overcome only by actively defending the fourth estate (183). We have seen firsthand how the degradation of truth, facts, and evidence erode democracy. Hopefully, Blume’s intimation that each generation must experience its own catastrophe to learn the importance of the lessons of Hiroshima will not come to pass.

Blume’s detailed acknowledgments illuminate the comprehensive nature of her research and the persistence with which she must have pursued the many unpublished manuscripts, notes, and other materials to which she gained access. Despite the hyperbole that, at times, gets in the way of the story, *Fallout* is a worthwhile read and a major addition to Hersey scholarship.