

Invasion of the Mind Snatchers: Television's Conquest of America in the Fifties

Eric Burns

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The man who invented it hated it and wouldn't have one in his house; alarmists predicted it would ruin our eyes, corrupt our morals, and probably rot our teeth. The great educator and philosopher Robert Hutchins, tongue firmly in cheek, said that, if left unchecked, it would "produce a population indistinguishable from the lower forms of plant life."

It, as Eric Burns reveals in this delightful mid-century historical romp, was television. And America embraced it and loved it as it had never loved anything before. In less than five years (1949–1953) television changed everything—our entertainment habits, our social habits, even what we ate (remember Swanson's TV Dinners?) and where we ate (TV trays). Television sets were flying out of stores at a rate of 20,000 a day. It changed America as profoundly as the automobile, only it did so much faster. It created some stars overnight (Fess Parker as Davy Crockett) and destroyed others just as swiftly (Sen. Joseph McCarthy in the Army-McCarthy hearings). We just couldn't get enough of it.

If the name Eric Burns sounds familiar, it should. He is an award-winning broadcast journalist who for more than two decades reported for NBC news. Now he takes his chatty views on our cultural landscape from the television screen to books with the same reporter's nose for the story behind the story. If you remember Buffalo Bob or *Our Miss Brooks*, *Invasion of the Mind Snatchers* will captivate you.

As Burn points out, despite the title, television didn't actually invade our homes as much as it was invited in, given a prime seat in the living room, and treated like a trusted old friend. We believed in television, perhaps too much, and scrambled to buy its products (even fake ones, as comedians Bob and Ray would discover in a hilarious segment of the book). That trust was crushed in the quiz show scandals of the late fifties. America would continue watching television, but would stop believing in it.

Eric Burns has written a good book that just misses being a great one. Curiously, the book is devoid of any first-person accounts from the people who were there, many of whom are still alive and presumably well-known to Burns. His editors at NBC would have never let him get away with that. It's still a fun and well-researched read, however, that will make readers yearn for coon-skin caps, Hopalong Cassidy lunch boxes, and Rick Nelson.

JACK SHAKELY (September / October 2010)

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