



Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero

Marita Sturken

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In *Tourists of History*, the cultural critic Marita Sturken argues that over the past two decades, Americans have responded to national trauma through consumerism, kitsch sentiment, and tourist practices in ways that reveal a tenacious investment in the idea of America's innocence. Sturken investigates the consumerism that followed from the September 11th attacks; the contentious, ongoing debates about memorials and celebrity-architect designed buildings at Ground Zero; and two outcomes of the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City: the Oklahoma City National Memorial and the execution of Timothy McVeigh. Sturken contends that a consumer culture of comfort objects such as World Trade Center snow globes, FDNY teddy bears, and Oklahoma City Memorial t-shirts and branded water, as well as reenactments of traumatic events in memorial and architectural designs, enables a national tendency to see U.S. culture as distant from both history and world politics. A kitsch comfort culture contributes to a "tourist" relationship to history: Americans can feel good about visiting and buying souvenirs at sites of national mourning without having to engage with the economic, social, and political causes of the violent events. While arguing for the importance of remembering tragic losses of life, Sturken is urging attention to a dangerous confluence—of memory, tourism, consumerism, paranoia, security, and kitsch—that promulgates fear to sell safety, offers prepackaged emotion at the expense of critical thought, contains alternative politics, and facilitates public acquiescence in the federal government's repressive measures at home and its aggressive political and military policies abroad.

Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero Details

Date : Published November 1st 2007 by Duke University Press Books (first published 2007)

ISBN : 9780822341222

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Format : Paperback 344 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, History, Museology, Museums, Academic, School, Grad School, Read For School, Travel



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From Reader Review Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero for online ebook

Dena Norman says

I admit I skimmed this. Too "textbook" for my liking but incredibly interesting all the same. From a cultural standpoint I can't see the correlations between OKC and Ground Zero. Perhaps I would have had stronger opinions had I actually delved into this book as a serious study. I'm interested in this culture of memory as I currently work in a military history museum, but I couldn't devote my attention to her writing style. That the first several pages were devoted to dissecting the meaning of kitschy snow globes blew my mind, and not in a good way. This is an exhausting read.

Sunkist and Mango says

Author Marita Sturken is a professor and scholar of cultural studies, visual and popular culture.

This book offers insight into how Americans react to tragedy, as well as, how our society has grown accustomed to exploiting tragedy. The destruction of twin towers on 9/11/01 is the prime focus of this book.

This was an invaluable resource in my graduate research on the artistic design and development of the 9/11 Memorial.

Marta says

Heavily theoretical, but fascinating.

Ashley says

For me to review this book, I need to separate the writing from the ideas. The ideas were 4 stars-- Sturken is a great thinker when it comes to notions of cultural memory, mourning, and representations of loss. I adored her other book, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering*, and this one is very-much in the same vein.

However, the writing and organization in this one was just too much for me. Two stars at best... Hence, the three star rating. It was incredibly disjointed, circled back on itself, and took on way too much without the appropriate level of detail. There were points where I felt like Sturken was talking herself into the argument as she was writing it. There were places where I felt she pushed the argument too far and places where she didn't make obvious connections to other sections of the book. Organizing it by theme rather than site might have helped with some of this disjointedness. Also, the fact that Timothy McVeigh gets a whole chapter

while the trial of the 9/11 hijackers is left *unmentioned* is such an obvious oversight! Her arguments about how memory impacts justice would have been helped by including at least a mention of that controversy.

I think that a good editor should have been given one more pass at it before sending it off to print.

Mike says

If I read this again, I might appreciate it a little more, but when I read it right after *Tangled Memories*, I just didn't find that much interest in it.

Simon says

This is a fascinating account of an important, yet neglected area of American life in academic studies. More works like this need to be written.

Michael says

Sturken is spectacular on the OK City Memorial, but I think the historical commemoration of 9/11 is evolving too fluidly to write about with the same level of insight.

Ryan Louis says

I guess it shouldn't be surprising how impacted I still am--how I can easily bristle at the mention of--the major violent events of my lifetime. For me, the bombings at Oklahoma City, the shootings at Columbine and the events of September 11, 2001 are burned-in as single/ular moments. Before reading this book, I hadn't really considered the snapshot-like mentality I have in remembering these events. Forever locked in a remembering of the moment, I am prone to remove the events from their context.

The book recalls the way we reenact memory. Often the book ties these reenactments to our relationship to consumables--kitsch, as it were: teddy bears, magnets, mugs, snow globes, et al. Though there is nothing inherently "wrong" with the attachments we form or the cultural/emotional processing we engage in while acquiring or interacting with these objects, Sturken ties the consumption of them to the creation of a narrative of innocence.

The promise of kitsch is good feelings. The object becomes a storehouse for memory--externalizing pieces of pain or trauma that, eventually, can fade into the banality of the everyday. They help us to see ourselves as victims, in a way; the interruption of trauma by a mug, for example, can be filled with coffee and imbibed as something warm and comforting. Done enough and en masse, we create a culture of comfort that elides broader contexts. Thus, when we remember, we remember the event, the moment, the spectacle.

Kitsch is full of contradiction in this new understanding: it heightens and flattens emotion; it provides catharsis while remaking the familiar as something mundane.

As I continue to explore my own relationship with memory (mine, my nation's, my family's, my world's--mine? Ours?) and negotiate the intermingling narratives of "truths," I am struck by Sturken's work. What I produce, reenact or reject is part of a larger process: one that is at times passive and at others highly active. What I choose to remember and forget and how I choose to remember and forget foreground a whole set of issues that make problems where things were once smooth; and make journeys out of sediments.

Tristan Johnson says

This book is basically the launching point of my Master's cognate. It investigates the odd decisions that happen when the task of memorializing something comes up. In the United States, this involves 4 major things, consumerism, revenge, kitsch, and innocence.

Consumerism: These sites of disaster become tourist destinations. The desire then becomes to turn these sites into a place that can generate profit.

Revenge: In situations like Oklahoma City, the execution of Timothy McVeigh became sites where Americans gathered in droves to cheer the state's murder of a human being. There is definitely a narrative at both Oklahoma City and Ground Zero of revenge over justice.

Kitsch: One strong thing that unofficially becomes part of these sites is a sentimentality, and the desire to add Kitschy things to the site. This can be pictures of angels, cheesy objects for sale, or anything really. Kitsch typically comes at the intersection of tragedy and consumerism.

Innocence: The last point is important. The sentimentality, and Kitsch provide a purpose. This is to remove the sites from historical contests. We aren't supposed to think about these events as part of the destruction of the farmland economy in the rust belt, or American imperialism in the MENA region. These sites need to construct a narrative that the US repeats over and over again of an innocent country that has unexplainable horrible things happen to them, forcing their action.

Overall, as a historian who researches September 11th, this is one of the best books I've ever read. I will keep it close by for years to come and recommend it to anyone I can.

Gina says

I really enjoyed this book. It was well written and very though provoking. Plus it discussed something that I never thought of before. I recommend it to anyone that wants to read a book about how people remember and memorialize Oklahoma City and Ground Zero

Tasha says

Very well-written and interesting. I think she took a lot of the arguments a little too far, but definitely worth reading for how we--i.e., Americans--interact with our dead and suffering.

