



Drinking in America: Our Secret History

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In DRINKING IN AMERICA, bestselling author Susan Cheever chronicles our national love affair with liquor, taking a long, thoughtful look at the way alcohol has changed our nation's history. This is the often-overlooked story of how alcohol has shaped American events and the American character from the seventeenth to the twentieth century.

Seen through the lens of alcoholism, American history takes on a vibrancy and a tragedy missing from many earlier accounts. From the drunkenness of the Pilgrims to Prohibition hijinks, drinking has always been a cherished American custom: a way to celebrate and a way to grieve and a way to take the edge off. At many pivotal points in our history—the illegal *Mayflower* landing at Cape Cod, the enslavement of African Americans, the McCarthy witch hunts, and the Kennedy assassination, to name only a few—alcohol has acted as a catalyst.

Some nations drink more than we do, some drink less, but no other nation has been the drunkest in the world as America was in the 1830s only to outlaw drinking entirely a hundred years later. Both a lively history and an unflinching cultural investigation, DRINKING IN AMERICA unveils the volatile ambivalence within one nation's tumultuous affair with alcohol.

Drinking in America: Our Secret History Details

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From Reader Review Drinking in America: Our Secret History for online ebook

Nick Guzan says

Interesting and concise history of America's boozy past, filled with fascinating stories and anecdotes that propel this brisk book along from the Mayflower landing to today. Who knew the U.S. was at its most drunken during the colonial era and the Revolution?

Susan Cheever explores the fascinating mindset of these oldest of American imbibers who saw alcohol as a gift from god but believed drunkenness to be submitting to the devil! "Each small town started with a saloon and ended with a schoolhouse," Cheever notes in a chapter of American expansion across the west, echoing the story of the country's own formation.

Cheever also interestingly connects her own famous literary family's alcoholism to American dynasties like the Adamses, lending a valuable personal connection to the material. In fact, it is the chapter on the Adams family that simultaneously - and with miraculous success - provides history lessons while also providing the informative context of the effects of alcoholism in a family.

I liked the tone as part-social commentary and part-history book (with an eye toward debunking myths... or at least recasting them through the boozy lens of truth.) Recommended especially for fans of the quirkier bits of U.S. history who are looking for a quick read.

Erin Cataldi says

I LOVED this book! I'm a huge fan of micro-histories, and while this subject is a little broad it all come back to the booze. Soo intriguing! Author, Susan Cheever, does a brilliant job of cataloging many of the incidents that helped make America great and then launches in to how booze played a part. Trust me, a big part. Why did the pilgrims land at Plymouth? Because they were running out of beer and didn't think they could make it to the land they were actually granted. Why did everyone really love Johnny Appleseed? Because the nasty apple trees he planted weren't good for eating but WERE good for turning into cider. How much did soldiers drink in the American Revolution and the Civil War? Triple what you thought, maybe more. How did booze play a part in President Kennedy's assassination? His security detail had partied hard the night before and were too hungover to react quickly. My view of American history is forever altered. Booze has been present every step of our country's way and it is NEVER mentioned (unless it's about the prohibition). Cheever talks about how laws have changed as is how we define drunkenness. In the eighteenth century this little diddy helped define who was drunk: "Not drunk is he who from the floor, / Can rise again and still drink more, / But drunk is he who prostrate lies, / Without the power to drink or rise." I doubt that version of sobriety would pass today. In fact during the 1820's Americans were drinking TRIPLE what we consume today!! Crazy! Cheever doesn't condone drinking but she does a great job of illustrating the negative AND positive effects booze has had on our country. A fascinating book!

Eileen E Cartwright says

Great disappointment

This book was a great disappointment. I am glad it was free and I paid nothing for it. If a book claims to be some kind of history, I expect that the author has made some kind of effort to present history accurately. From the beginning, the author stated many historical inaccuracies. And in the latter part of the book, it became evident she was presenting as historical facts things that she THOUGHT might be true just to prove her points. It was also clear that she used people she just did not like as examples of drunks. She totally lost me when she blamed the Iraq war on Pres. Bush's drinking. I thought that war was a mistake but really? He had quit drinking long before that. What ever this book is, it is not history.

Karla says

Cheever definitely has a bias and a narrow focus, based on her family and personal history, and her upfrontedness about it helps the reader keep things in perspective. There were moments where I thought, "Well, you could look at it this way....OR another way," but Cheever's slant that nearly everything momentous in American history was done through the bottom of a glass got a bit wearisome after awhile. One could also surmise that a lot of things were done in a certain way because the actors involved were constipated from a meat/bread/cheese diet and therefore not thinking calmly with a clean colon. Thinking outside the box here....

So it was definitely a subjective history, and I agree with Cheever that there is no such thing as objective history, and the ability to be 100% objective is in itself subjective. Historical events and people don't act in a vacuum and it's impossible to present it as such.

She was very convincing in her presentation, however. The Pilgrims made landing far north than planned because they were running out of beer. The harsh climate they found themselves in no doubt had an effect on the settlement character and any actions they made with rippling repercussions through American history.

Reading about authors tends to bore me, but Cheever naturally focuses on it because it's of personal interest. However, I did find it interesting that the author profession was pretty dry in the 19th century aside from Poe, and then it ramped up to liver-crushing proportions after Prohibition and through the post-WWII years. Oddly enough, Cheever doesn't really tie in the undeniable psychological damage from the Great War with the hedonistic embrace of alcohol. She seems to make America be the exception to the rest of the planet when it comes to booze, but one could argue that Weimar Germany had just as many problems with substance abuse in the same time period. But Cheever's thesis is that it's a uniquely American disease and phenomenon, and so she doesn't stray outside the borders for any meaningful compare and contrast.

I don't know if her assertions are anything you can take to the bank, but for a leisurely cultural history with some anecdotes and facts, it was agreeable enough and short enough so that it didn't overstay its welcome too much.

Bandit says

I love thematic histories. There is just something really awesome about having a cohesive thread connecting the individual stories/eras, etc. This is my second thematic history of US and the first good one, the other one connected through guns, which is arguably just as American. Or not. At least not according to this book, which makes drinking seem more American than guns, baseball and peanut butter together. Cheever, who

has an impressive pedigree as both writer and drinker, starts with the pilgrims (too drunk to land in a proper place) and continues onto the modern times, ending around Nixon's presidency. She posits at least twice in the book that histories are written with a certain bias and ones that attempt objectivity don't work as well and sure enough, this is a biased history, but a very interesting and compelling one at that. In this exhaustively researched (with monumental bibliography lost to prove it) book she demonstrates just how much the nation's history has been affected through its movers and shakers' passionate and torrid love affair with alcohol. Fascinating read, definitely thought provoking, not to mention quite educational. Cheever's personality comes across throughout the pages as intelligent, highly opinionated and definitely comfortable about plumbing her own life and that of her also alcoholic also writer father. And sure enough, she's also authored a book about cheating, sexual desire and addiction, where she uses herself as an example as well. Well, then one draws from experience, it's an essential ingredient to subjective (i.e. superior) histories. Anyway...point is books (in theory) should broaden our understanding of the world and after reading this one, you won't view US history the same way again and as such, it's a success. And a good read to boot. Thanks Netgalley.

Andrew says

There are a lot of interesting theories here, but they're mostly conjecture and extrapolated from very little real evidence. It's also sloppily written, frequently repeating the same phrases or bits of information, breaking chronology in confusing ways, and burying important information in service of Cheever's theories which are fairly clearly founded in her adherence to Alcoholics Anonymous.

I really wanted to enjoy this, but I found it very difficult and I really can't recommend it.

Susan says

Given my background as an addictions counselor and child of an alcoholic family this book resonated with me deeply.

When you think about it - how could alcohol NOT be a part of US history and have an impact on key decisions and events

over time. It is simply not possible. Alcohol is everywhere in our society and always has been and to think that our leaders at any given moment

have not been affected by it in someway is pure lunacy.

This book truly made me think more deeply again about the true nature of addiction and its impact on US society and the world.

Cathie says

This was more about alcoholics than about America's secret history about drinking in America. Of course the only chapter I appreciated was *The Writer's Vice*.

Chris says

It was certainly engaging, but the evidence to support her theories were dubious. Also, I found a number of fact errors--Ulysses S. Grant was not 5-foot-2--sprinkled throughout which further eroded my trust in her.

Armand says

This is an interesting thematic historical work, it reverberates on two themes; America is an alcoholic wonderland where great dreams and visions are conjured up by wild-eyed, drunken dreamers who could conquer the stars if they were only sober; and America is a dystopian hell of ruin, decay and moral rot, due to the terrible evils of demon alcohol. Sample passage:

George Washington, a wealthy Virginia aristocrat who loved parties and fox hunting, found out about the connection between drinking and voting for the American electorate the hard way. A rigorous military commander who drove his soldiers hard and expected much of them, he began to aspire to a government position after he did not get a command in the British military. While seeking a seat in the Virginia Assembly in 1755, he was roundly defeated.

Two years later he ran again, but this time he delivered 144 gallons of rum punch cider and wine to the polling places distributed by election volunteers who urged the voters to drink up. At 307 votes, he got a return on his investment of almost two votes per gallon. Most elections featured vats and barrels of free liquor as well as the candidate in hand to drink along with his constituency. Candidates showed off their generosity as well as their drinking capacity. Although voting while intoxicated was normal for the colonists, French traveler Ferdinand Bayard was horrified to notice, "Candidates offer drunkenness openly to anyone who is willing to give them his vote".

Not only did I want to read and complete this book, I wanted to love it. The subject matter and genre fascinate me. But this book, in its dry, polemic and acerbic stiffness, make that impossible. If your looking for a fun, leisurely romp through the history of drinking in America, boy, did you come to the wrong place! This book will knock you out cold like a fifth of well whiskey and leave you with a bad hangover.

Ami Wachter says

While some of the history is quite interesting there is more opinion than I had hoped for. By the end the author is clearly biased against drinking. I would have preferred more history and less opinion.

Lynn says

This book is just awful. The author is relentless in attributing alcohol to every part of our history. Apparently our forefathers were a bunch of inebriated sots. The way she describes the American Revolution and the influence of alcohol on it, it's a wonder that we aren't still singing "G-d Save the Queen". I gave this book 3

chapters and gave up. She has a clear agenda and it colors her POV. It would also be nice if she could put a coherent sentence together. Some of her sentences are just a jumbled mess. I think I'll get my history from real historians from now on.

Coral says

If this book were a person, I'd say they were a drunk. It's repetitive, sloppily written in places, poorly organized, and has more than a few factual errors. It starts off fun but becomes more and more annoying as it goes on.

I'll give credit to Cheevers for stating her bias openly in the beginning: she is a recovering alcoholic from a family of alcoholics. However, especially as a historian, stating your bias doesn't absolve you from the responsibility of thorough research and being as objective as possible when presenting the facts. This book felt like nothing more than a way for Cheever to use her oftentimes loose interpretation of history to preach about the evils of drink.

This had so much promise and ended up being very disappointing.

Richard McMahon says

This is a good book, entertaining and well written. But I'm sure Susan Cheever would agree that, as a historian, her first duty is to the facts. A factual error, even if minor and not related to the central premise, creates a red flag, and is apt to make the reader view the rest of the work with suspicion. Unfortunately, Ms. Cheever makes several.

Early in the book, in referring to Benedict Arnold's treason, she writes that it occurred "a few years after Ticonderoga, after the surrender at Yorktown." Actually, it happened in September 1780, more than a year before Yorktown. Later, she gives credit to Ethan Allen for transporting the cannon captured at Fort Ticonderoga to Boston in time for the Battle of Bunker Hill. It was Henry Knox, Washington's chief of artillery, who did so in December 1775. Ethan Allen had been captured by the British almost 3 months earlier, and remained a prisoner until 1778.

Two small knit picks: the author claims that George Washington "favored imported port," while most historians give that distinction to Madeira, and she reports that he spent his final years on his estates "sitting on the veranda drinking with friends while looking out over the city that had already been named after him." It's a nice thought, but Mount Vernon is 18 miles from Washington, D. C. That distance, plus a long bend in the Potomac River, make it impossible.

Bill Hough says

This book is poorly researched and full of historical errors. The first sentence says that the Pilgrims landed at Cape Cod because they were out of beer. That piece of fiction is carried on throughout the first chapter. They landed where they landed because it was the first land they encountered. They were not a bunch of drunkards. The legend that it was because the ship was out of beer was originated in a 1908 magazine

advertisement by Budweiser as part of a campaign against prohibition that included several made-up or at least distorted stories about beer in American history. You can find a discussion of this ad campaign at the Library of Congress web site, <https://www.loc.gov/rr/news/topics/br...>, and specifically at <http://www.joesixpack.net/columnArchi....>

Might be a fun read, but it is certainly not an accurate history.
