



Staying Up Much Too Late: Edward Hopper's Nighthawks and the Dark Side of the American Psyche

By Gordon Theisen

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A fascinating study of Edward Hopper's iconic *Nighthawks* painting and its deep significance for understanding American culture.

Staying up Much Too Late discusses the painting *Nighthawks* and the painter Edward Hopper and their central importance to twentieth-century American culture. Topics include individualism, New York City, Arthur "Weegee" Fellig, diners, pornography, capitalism, advertising, cigarettes, American philosophy, World War II, *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Blade Runner*, *Pulp Fiction*, Russ Meyer, R. Crumb, David Lynch, and film noir

What links these together is the painting's pessimistic take on American culture, which it also seems to epitomize. Despite its desolate feel, *Nighthawks* has become a familiar icon, reproduced on posters and postcards, in movies and on television shows. But *Nighthawks* is more than just a masterful painting. It is a portal into that rarely acknowledged but pervasive dark side of the American psyche.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Hopper's *Nighthawks* is one of the most iconic images in 20th-century art, but Theisen's analysis of the "desolate, alien, denatured, perverse, [and] desperate" masterpiece is too facile to support all the cultural weight he wants to place upon it. The interpretations veer between the obvious (he characterizes the urban setting as representing an absence of nature) and the bizarre (he imagines the painting's four figures engaging in group sex). Some sections add flashes of insight—like a discussion of Hopper's familiarity with commercial illustration that segues into the influence of Warhol's Pop—but in trying to make Hopper resonate with everything from cool jazz to Robert Crumb's underground comics, Theisen overreaches and occasionally stumbles. Discussing film noir, for example, he dwells on the "movie screen–like proportions" of *Nighthawks*, although Hopper completed the painting a decade before the introduction of wide-screen projection. At times, the fledgling critic can't seem to make up his mind: is the uniform menu of the diner supposed to be depersonalizing, as he suggests in one chapter, or subversively democratic? As Theisen meanders through his checklist of cultural pessimism, some readers may conclude that *Nighthawks* is better off letting its powerful imagery speak for itself. 8-page color insert. (July)

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Review

Advance Praise for STAYING UP MUCH TOO LATE:

"A personal meditation on Hopper's most famous painting, *Staying Up Much Too Late* should introduce Gordon Theisen as exactly what he is: one of the true originals in American letters. In *Staying Up Much Too Late* Gordon Theisen dismantles the American Dream like a savvy child patiently unscrewing an Erector set Shangri-la. He begins by skewering American optimism, ends with a hymn of praise to un-American pessimism, and in between demonstrates convincingly that Edward Hopper's great painting *Nighthawks* is imbued with the underhistory of America. We live in the loneliest country on Earth, Theisen tells us, and his darkly vivid language, like Hopper's brushwork, renders it with deadpan accuracy. What a lovely book."

--John Vernon, author of *A Book of Reasons*

About the Author

GORDON THEISEN was born in Queens, New York. He has worked as a landscaper, dishwasher, barback, cashier, library clerk, construction worker, telemarketer, taxi driver, teacher, proofreader, and freelance writer. He holds a Ph.D. in English literature from the State University of New York at Binghamton. He lives in Carrboro, North Carolina, with his wife, two-year-old son, and his wife's cat.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Christina Epp:

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