

Reference Books

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Editor

American Icons. Ed. by Dennis R. Hall and Susan Grove Hall. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2006. 3 vols. alkaline \$225 (ISBN 0-275-98421-4).

American culture scholars and pop culture junkies rejoice! *American Icons* is a collection suitable for studying or just browsing, and it has something for everyone. Editors Dennis R. Hall (a professor) and Susan Grove Hall (an independent scholar and author) put together a collection of slightly more than one hundred entries that explore some of the people (Madonna, Marilyn Monroe, Tiger Woods), places (Coney Island, Niagara Falls), and things (Barbie, the tattoo, Underground Railroad, Viagra) that have influenced American culture and how other countries view America. These icons may elicit good, bad, or indifferent responses, but they are all familiar. Even if you're not a fan of Oprah Winfrey and her various pursuits, you know who she is, and you can learn more about her in this work.

The editors asked contributors to write essays that would "reveal an icon's origins and changes, its influences, and the meaning of its enduring appeal—and repulsive reactions" (xviii). The results are both enlightening and entertaining. Each entry contains a detailed and engaging essay, black-and-white photos or illustrations, and a list of cited and recommended works. The set concludes with a selective bibliography and a detailed index.

Considering the massive number of possible entries, *American Icons* is quite selective, and people are sure to debate why certain things were deemed icons when others were not. Libraries may already own the *St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture* (2000) and be tempted to pass on *American Icons*, but doing so would be remiss. The former casts a wider net and has more than 2,700 entries, but the latter delves into much more detail.

Some of the subjects chosen for the cover artwork are curious (Jack Nicholson instead of Elvis Presley?) or confusing (Is the white picket fence supposed to symbolize suburbia?)—let's hope people are smart enough to not judge this book by its cover.

This collection is highly recommended and appropriate for high school and college students as well as the general public.—Samantha J. Gust, *Reference Librarian, Niagara University Library, New York*

Building the World: An Encyclopedia of the Great Engineering Projects in History. By Frank P. Davidson and Kathleen L. Brooke. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2006. 2 vols. alkaline \$199.95 (ISBN 0-313-33354-8).

Building the World has a unique approach to describing forty-one major projects undertaken by mankind throughout history. In treating the building projects, from Solomon's Temple in Israel to the Big Dig in Boston, the authors emphasize macroengineering, their field of expertise. They define macroengineering in the preface as a term denoting large and complex technical projects that not only require huge human, economic, and materials resources but also have a major impact on the environment and society.

Each entry follows a set pattern: a brief set of facts ("Did You Know . . .?"), history, cultural context, building, importance in history, and references for further reading, which include books and articles, Internet resources, and even cultural works such as music, films, and television productions. Of the latter, some seemed a bit far-fetched in illustrating the widespread cultural effects of the project. For example Yo Yo Ma's recording *Silk Road Journeys: When Strangers Meet* (Sony Classical, 2002) was listed following discussion of the Grand Canal in China because the Silk Road is likened to the Grand Canal as a route of cultural as well as economic exchange. In fairness, these resources were intended for further exploration and not for in-depth research.

Building the World illustrates many considerations of macroengineering, such as the decision process and the circumstances leading to project execution. Each entry concludes with authorizing documents such as congressional records, treaties, contracts, or other historic accounts. A cast of fifty-three persons listed in the acknowledgments provided documentary research and translations of texts. These primary materials enable the reader to step right into history. The documents can be dry reading, but they nevertheless illustrate the complexity of such projects and how they were initiated and managed.

The second volume of *Building the World* features a bibliography compiling the references from each entry. It is not clear whether these sources were used to derive the information for each entry, or whether they are simply for enrichment. The second volume also features a detailed index for finding specific persons, places, entities, and structures.

Most books on large-scale projects describe a single project, address young readers, treat only the building process, or analyze a single aspect such as management or environmental impact. *The Seventy Wonders of the Ancient World: The Great Monuments and How They Were Built* (Thames and Hudson, 1999) does treat a vast array of projects, albeit from the ancient world only. Entries average slightly more than four pages each, whereas *Building the World* averages more than twenty-one pages per entry, a longer treatment by far. Much of the length can be attributed to the authorizing documents that set this work apart.

Building the World was meant to provide a "greater understanding of the role such structures have played not just in the transformation of the physical world, but in the growth and development of societies and cultures" (xi). The editors have met this goal, and have done so for audiences ranging