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# Staying Up Much Too Late: Edward Hopper's Nighthawks And The Dark Side Of The American Psyche



## Synopsis

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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

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) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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*

Insightful, gorgeous, well-informed commentary on art and culture.

Great book.

The reviewer who gave the book three stars was correct: the best part of the book included the references to film noir. It seemed that the author had a paucity of actual facts about the artist, Edward Hopper, and was forced to flesh out his meager material by including one random fact after another, whether they actually related to the subject at hand or not. Having spent hours in Chicago looking at the actual painting, "*Nighthawks*," this reviewer discovered reason after reason why the subject matter, and Hopper's treatment of it, has made it become an American icon. Including such artistic detail within Mr. Gordon Theisen's manuscript might have made it far more interesting to the average reader, as well as to the critical art student wanting to learn why and how Mr. Edward Hopper was able to create such a masterpiece.

Edward Hopper's paintings, well known to almost everyone in this country, are unique in that they

convey a sense of loneliness, yearning, suggestions of dark thoughts, pessimism, and hopelessness - not exactly the moods one would want to examine on a daily basis, but certainly painterly images that cause us to pause when we encounter them in museums and collections. Gordon Theisen is a fine writer and in this book **STAYING UP MUCH TOO LATE: EDWARD HOPPER'S 'NIGHTHAWKS' AND THE DARK SIDE OF THE AMERICAN PSYCHE** he manages to successfully use the famous night diner painting of the artist to address the current mental state of affairs seeping into our consciousness. He wisely covers every aspect of the artist's life and work, giving us the necessary details of his life and his idiomatic stance in American art, spreads those ideas into his output thus assuring us that the one painting of the title is not an isolated image, and then begins to apply his ideas to our cultural status - at times not comfortable, but always creatively informative. If Thiesen strays a bit too far from his title subject, drawing on his own interpretation of concepts he perceives as more than just legitimate diversions, then he can be forgiven by the reader who want more from an author than a term paper presentation. Thiesen indulges in reminiscing about our cultural icons such as diners, cigarettes, coffee, plastic, jazz, war, sex, film noir, and personality disintegration in a time of easy drugs AKA medications. Perhaps these are topics many would not elect to explore, but then they are bookmarks to the greater understanding of where our current culture stands. If indeed our artists are our shamans then Hopper as Thiesen presents him is a prophet of sorts. Not that the book is depressing as the Nighthawks painting: Thiesen has the good will to engage us in the positive aspects of all of the negatives listed above. There is humor here, but it is humor with an edge. This book, along with other contemporary 'paintings as examples of current thought' books by such authors as Biel and van Hensbergen in their evaluations of Grant Woods' American Gothic and Picasso's Guernica, once again proves that art gives us more than visual delight: art gives us valuable food for thought...and change. Grady Harp, November 06

At first glance, I expected this to be a heavy duty history of Hopper's painting, with copious documentation, contemporary views of the work, and lots of secondary source citations--something like reading a published dissertation. I was pleasantly surprised to find Theisen's book is not an ordinary work of scholarship. It's not so much academic art criticism as it is a comment on American culture and mores. Theisen uses Hopper's seminal work, "Nighthawks," as a jump-off point to discuss film noir, Pulp Fiction, Andy Warhol, pornography and Puritanism, the Beats, Russ Meyer, the Great Gatsby--you name it. At times, it feels overstuffed, and it contains unnecessary editorializing (about the Iraq War, for example) and some sloppy mistakes (as one reviewer has

noted, Theisen wrongly says Gatsby kills himself at the end of Fitzgerald's novel). But overall it is an imaginative and engrossing work that will inform those who don't know much about Hopper the man and who always found him an understudied artist. Theisen's book could have a place on a cultural studies or U.S. history shelf, and it would make interesting reading for a freshman American history survey class. An unusual, though very readable thought piece.

This book examines the dark underside of American life, the kind ominously represented in *Nighthawks*, the famous painting by Edward Hopper. Theisen quickly sets up the difference between the optimistic, sunny, daytime America and the world of night, and not even night so much as the non-mainstream undiscovered parts. I enjoyed this book particularly much because of the disparate elements the author brings together. Although to some people, talking about Pulp fiction, Weegee the photographer, and Hopper together is hard to follow, I picked up right away on his meaning and felt really interested to read a scholarly unpacking of the imagery, meaning, and themes. I compare this book to Paul Fussell's oeuvre, books which say, "Ever notice this theme is in a lot of things?" and then go on to enlighten the reader and make you smarter and more educated than you were before. Definitely buy this book.

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