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Beyond the Melting Pot and Back

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Beyond the Melting Pot and Back

David Leviatin (bio)

Simon Schama. *The American Future: A History*. London: Bodley Head, 2008. i + 392 pp. Images, bibliography, and index. 20.00. (In U.S.: New York: Ecco, 2009, 29.95.)

Three weeks after Barack Hussein Obama was elected President of the

United States, my wife and I (New York immigrants living in London) were in St. Paul's Cathedral for the fiftieth anniversary of the annual American Thanksgiving Day Service. Sitting next to us was an English couple from Cohasset, Massachusetts. Born and raised in Yorkshire, they left England for the United States in 1968. Seeing my future in reverse, I asked them how they thought England and the United States compared. The man, with no hesitation, described English society as exclusive and American as inclusive. Soft-spoken and modest, he recalled that after only six months in the United States, and without the benefit of any introduction or connection, he was (much to his surprise—then and still now) doing business with members of the Rockefeller family. "An impossibility in England," he noted. "Absolutely no chance."

Not to be outdone, his wife, gently leaning over her husband, whispered that on coming to America, after having endured years of demoralizing class discrimination from the Southern (read: London) "white glove set," she had been "reborn."

Opportunity and rebirth; chance and change.... This was powerful stuff to consider, sitting beneath Wren's magnificent dome, against the backdrop of Obama's phenomenal rise.

The election of the son of an African immigrant, a half-black Hawaiian with an Arabic name, is nothing short of miraculous. It represents the culmination of American idealism. Ironically, the realization of one version of the American Dream has come as another disintegrates. Could there be a better time to revisit and reassess the image of America? And who better to lead the journey than historian, immigrant, presenter, Simon Schama? "A master storyteller" with a keen eye for detail, Schama has produced a remarkable and timely book. Clever and full of energy, *The American Future: A History* is the companion volume to Schama's four-part BBC 2 television series. According to the blurb on the book's dust jacket, *The American Future* is "a history of [End Page 296] American exceptionalism—the 'American difference' that means so much to its people but which has led it into calamities as well as triumphs."

Schama's book is much more than a "history of American exceptionalism." Written primarily for an English audience, Schama seeks to uncover and explain the nature of America's national character. Offering a self-reflective discourse on the current state of the Union, Schama escorts his readers/viewers on a fast-paced tour of America's past and present. Set against the extraordinary unfolding of the presidential election of 2008, at a time when American power, influence, and capital are in decline, Schama notes: "right now, aeroplane America has lost altitude ... can the lumbering beast of American power, so big and clumsy ... manage the latest act of self-transformation?" Schama is quick to answer: "I've lived in the United States half my life and take it from me, it can" (pp. 358–59).

The Columbia University professor's survey of America is a relatively new type of popular history, the product of an information-saturated, image-driven world dominated by television and marketing, celebrity and spin, punditry and opinion. Schama's as-seen-on-television "take it from me" essay is a sign of the times. This sort of history, in which an ever-present narrator joins the stage with his subject and seeks the widest possible audience, will appeal to some and not to others. Regardless, witnessing Schama juggle reportage, cultural studies, autobiography, history, and television-presenting is both fascinating and frustrating; a moment of penetrating insight is often followed by a questionable display of showmanship. For example: we learn that the site chosen for Arlington Cemetery, the "boneyard" for the Civil War dead, was the sprawling Virginia estate of Confederate General Robert E. Lee. Later on, in Atlanta, at an Easter Sunday service in Ebenezer Baptist Church, we are introduced to Mark Anthony Green, a...

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2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
+1 (410) 516-6989
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