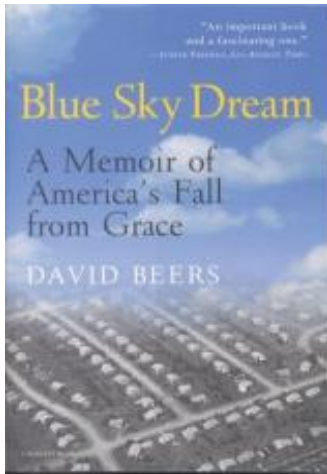


Blue Sky Dream

by David Beers



About the Book

"Sputnik was my lucky star," writes David Beers, a telegraphic way of saying that for his family, and for millions like them, the Cold War space race assured a comfortable existence in a sunny subdivision, with all the neatly trimmed lawns surrounding modern tract houses and a shiny new patriotic mythology created to sustain the new, technocratic middle class at the dawn of the 1960s. His father built space weapons in secret for Lockheed. His mother constructed Catholicism in a brand new home. His school and church and television set all assured that he belonged to a chosen people, a "blue sky tribe" showing the rest of America the way to the future.

This is a highly personal remembrance of a rather ordinary family; one that today seems not to have heralded the future, but to have lived within an artificial bubble that has burst.

This is also a *communal memoir*, a weaving in of the people (from Wernher von Braun to June Lockhart to Steve Wozniak) and events (from Sputnik to Vietnam to *Star Wars*) that bind the tribe's imagination.

One strand running throughout *Blue Sky Dream* follows the rise of aerospace as it surpasses the auto industry in employment, becomes an icon of national prestige, founders on the moral crisis of Vietnam, and bleeds millions of disillusioned workers in the layoffs of the 1990s. Another thread follows the rooting of the Church in suburbia, a Catholicism that embraced the space-age optimism of the 1960s and now asks faith of a generation that prefers a stance of jaded irony.

Blows to faith suffered by the blue sky tribe are a steadily recurring theme in this memoir: faith in the benevolent corporation; faith in government-led technology; faith in an ever-expanding middle class. Sometimes, as the author recounts, the blows have been all too real. On a hot summer night at the height of the Vietnam war, pent-up tensions overflow and the tract home backyard becomes the scene of an unexpected nasty beating. Like a zoom lens, the author shifts between the intimacy of family life and the broader social forces at work on that family, tracking his story through

to present day. Anyone with a connection to American suburbia during the Cold War will find here something of their own story, as well.

Discussion Guide

1. "A Memoir of America's Fall from Grace." Do you take the book's subtitle at face value or as an ironic statement? Can it be said that America was a nation in a state of "grace" at the dawn of the Cold War? Why or why not?
2. Contrast the visions of President Eisenhower and Wernher von Braun with respect to the government's role in science and technology. Which seems best suited to today?
3. What is meant by the phrase "command economy?" What were some of the similarities and differences between the command economies of the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War?
4. Did the Cold War make America richer or poorer? (Feel free to define "richer" and "poorer" in your own terms.)
5. What role, according to the author, did the paintings of Chesley Bonestell play in the formation of the imagination of the blue sky tribe? Can you think of other instances, throughout history and today, when art placed itself in service to grand projects of the state?
6. Given that most aerospace work was greatly subsidized by the government during the Cold War, what is owed the laid off aerospace worker today? Is his or her predicament significantly different from other victims of corporate layoffs in the 1990s?
7. What aspects of the "blue sky suburb" served to suppress or promote a feminist consciousness among women like the author's mother? She poured most of her energy, outside the home, into religious activities. Are religion and feminism necessarily antagonistic to one another?
8. The stay-at-home mother is a fading reality in America. In the case of the author's family, what were some of the positives and negatives created by having mother at home full time? Compare this family arrangement with your own.
9. Social observers at mid-century saw in American culture an increasing faith in scientific rationalism and individualism. They predicted that the United States would become an ever-more-secular nation. Have their predictions come true? Offer evidence.
10. What role did the military play in the development of the personal computer? Do you think such a commercially successful machine could have been developed as quickly (or at all) without Pentagon support? Can you think of other everyday technologies that were brought into existence by military support playing a key role in their development?
11. Systems engineering, as honed by aerospace, has proved itself capable of tackling hugely complex technological problems. What is the underlying philosophy of systems engineering? Can systems engineering be used effectively to provide solutions to social problems as well? Why or why not?
12. "Blue sky children," those who grew up in communities like the author's, are approaching middle age now. What

advantages do they enjoy in today's world? What disadvantages?

13. President Kennedy is quoted: "We choose to go to the moon...because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills." Do you think large government projects can do such a thing in American society? Why or why not?

14. Compare the author's young adulthood with his father's. How much of the difference, do you think, is due to personality, and how much is due to the changes in society?

15. The author portrays his childhood swim team as a method for preparing children for corporate life. Given your best guess at how the world of work is evolving, what would be the best way to train today's children for that world?

16. Wernher von Braun is described by the author as a morally conflicted, if brilliant, salesman. Can you think of similar public visionaries today?

Author Bio

David Beers was born in 1957 in San Diego, California, where his father was stationed as a Navy pilot. He is the son of Harold S. "Hal" Beers, Jr. and Therese Ann "Terry" Beers. His three siblings, all younger, are Marybeth, Daniel and Maggie.

Until age three, his family lived near Cincinnati, Ohio, where Hal worked as a test engineer for General Electric's jet engine plant. Hal was hired by Lockheed Missiles and Space Division as a satellite test engineer in 1960, prompting a permanent move to San Jose, California. Their neighborhood borders Cupertino and Santa Clara, and is a five minute drive from Apple headquarters.

David attended local Catholic schools from grades 2 through 12, and enrolled in the Jesuit-run Santa Clara University in 1975, graduating in 1979 with a Bachelor's degree in English. At SCU he met his future wife, Deirdre Kelly.

After graduation, through a Catholic agency, he taught in inner-city San Francisco schools for one year, then made a living for the next few years as a free lance photographer, graphic designer, public relations writer, and journalist.

In the early 1980s he was published in the *San Jose Mercury News*, *The San Francisco Examiner*, and other papers, his first-hand coverage ranging from Silicon Valley workplace trends to the plight of Guatemala's Maya refugees to the U.S. invasion of Grenada.

In 1984, he became an Associate Editor at Pacific News Service in San Francisco, where his duties included reporting, assigning and editing wire copy for newspapers. He considers PNS Executive Editor Sandy Close, a recent recipient of the MacArthur "Genius" Grant, a key mentor.

From 1987 to 1988 he was Senior Editor and then managing editor of *Image*, as the Sunday magazine of the *San Francisco Examiner* was then called.

From 1988 to 1991 he was senior editor at *Mother Jones* magazine in San Francisco. He has written free lance for various magazines since that time.

Over the years his pieces have appeared in *The Nation*, *The Progressive*, *In These Times*, *Mother Jones*, *Vogue*, *Working Woman*, *California*, *The Los Angeles Times Magazine*, *Harper's*, *The New York Times Magazine*, and many newspapers.

"The Crash of Blue Sky California," the *Harper's* essay that was the genesis of *Blue Sky Dream*, received a National Magazine Award for best essay in 1993.

"We're No Angels," his essay about Vancouver, British Columbia, as a post-modern fantasy city, was a Canadian National Magazine Award finalist in 1994.

He lives in downtown Vancouver with Deirdre, who is a professor of education at the University of British Columbia. They have a daughter, Nora, born on the summer solstice in 1995.

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