Impact of the ’60s in twists and turns

Reviewed by Glenn C. Altschuler

True Believers
A Novel
By Kurt Andersen
Random House. 438 pp. $27

The aphorism by Karl Marx that most appeals to Karen Hollander, the protagonist of True Believers, asserts that epochal events happen twice, first as tragedy and the second time as farce. It occurs to her, however, that in the 1960s, when she and her comrades were young, "playing secret agents with licenses to kill and then playing antiwar radicals, exactly the reverse happened."

A divorcée and a diabetic, with a granddaughter on whom she dotes, a brilliant attorney and dean of a prestigious law school, Hollander has recently refused to be considered for an appointment to the U.S. Supreme Court. She has kept a big secret about her activities in 1968, but as the novel opens, Hollander has decided to answer some unanswered questions (with the help of a "cowboy intelligence operative, a professional secret-keeper and occasional overseer of government killing"), let the chips fall where they may, and tell all in a memoir.

Along the way, she will reflect on living in a James Bond world - and becoming who (and what) we pretend to be.

True Believers is the third novel written by Kurt Andersen, the former editor in chief of New York magazine, the current host of Studio 360, a public radio program, and the cofounder of Spy magazine. Like its predecessors, this book is full of twists and turns, popular culture references, spook-talk, black ops, deception, and duplicity. And True Believers is ambitious, seeking to take the measure of the 1960s - and their impact on our own times.

Hollander's (self-described) "crypto-conservative" assessment of ’60s radicals, including herself, allows Andersen to endorse the (somewhat simplistic) conventional wisdom about "true believers." Hollander still believes that racism in the United States was "savage and deep seated" and deplores imperialism and unnecessary wars. But she has learned, along with the rest of us, that a considerable fraction of the civilians killed during the Vietnam War were murdered by North Vietnamese and Viet Cong soldiers and that some of the "spontaneous" urban race riots were actually "ignited by plausible fictions" about police brutality.

In light of that knowledge, she concludes - allowing a few to stand for all - that the radicals of her generation, deluded by "single-minded visionary passion," enlisted in cults based on "our narcissistic love of our beautiful young American selves and hatred of the horrible American pod people callously killing millions." As Hollander locates her "nihilistic" cohort "somewhere between the lunatic Islamists and the lunatic American right-wingers" on the spectrum of "self-righteous madness," Andersen leaves readers wondering what role, if any, he thinks idealism, conviction, and visionary passion ought to play in our politics and public affairs.
More provocative is Andersen's argument that a "pandemic perceptual glitch" in contemporary American culture subordinates "authentic" history to memories that have been "shrink-wrapped in generic pop nostalgia." He seems to agree, moreover, that Hollander's "tragic flaw" was an "overactive imagination" and to sympathize with her resolve to stop assuming fictional guises: "no more Howl beatnik, no more Bond girl, no more New Left mother country guerrilla."

And yet, True Believers invites us to ask whether such an escape is possible - or always positive. After all, what's wrong with Hollander feeling like Wile E. Coyote in a Road Runner cartoon, "suspended in mid-air just past the edge of the cliff, waiting to fall"?

For better and worse, of course, each of us adopts more than one "persona" in our lives. Perhaps True Believers can begin to teach us that we are free to choose that persona (be it fictional or not), and that our choice reveals a lot about who we are and aspire to be.

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