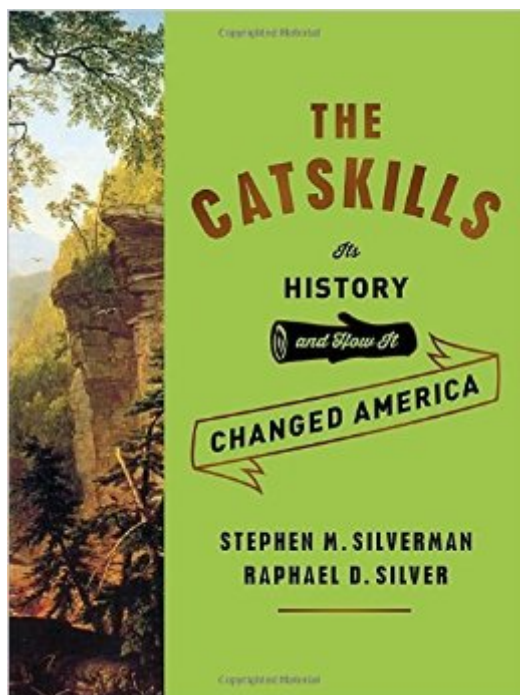


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The Catskills: Its History And How It Changed America



Synopsis

The Catskills (â œCat Creekâ • in Dutch), Americaâ™s original frontier, northwest of New York City, with its seven hundred thousand acres of forest land preserve and its five countiesâ™ Delaware, Greene, Sullivan, Ulster, Schoharie; Americaâ™s first great vacationland; the subject of the nineteenth-century Hudson River School paintings that captured the almost godlike majesty of the mountains and landscapes, the skies, waterfalls, pastures, cliffs . . . refuge and home to poets and gangsters, tycoons and politicians, preachers and outlaws, musicians and spiritualists, outcasts and rebels . . . Stephen Silverman and Raphael Silver tell of the turning points that made the Catskills so vital to the development of America: Henry Hudsonâ™s first spotting the distant blue mountains in 1609; the New York State constitutional convention, resulting in New Yorkâ™s own Declaration of Independence from Great Britain and its own constitution, causing the ire of the invading British army . . . the Catskills as a popular attraction in the 1800s, with the construction of the Catskill Mountain House and its rugged imitators that offered WASP guests â œone-hundred percent restrictedâ • accommodations (â œHebrews will knock vainly for admissionâ •), a policy that remained until the Catskills became the curative for tubercular patients, sending real-estate prices plummeting and the WASP enclave on to richer pastures . . . Here are the gangsters (Jack â œLegsâ • Diamond and Dutch Schultz, among them) who sought refuge in the Catskill Mountains, and the resorts that after World War II catered to upwardly mobile Jewish families, giving rise to hundreds of hotels inspired by Grossingerâ™s, the original â œDisneyland with knishesâ •â™ the Concord, Brownâ™s Hotel, Kutsherâ™s Hotel, and othersâ™ in what became known as the Borscht Belt and Sour Cream Alps, with their headliners from movies and radio (Phil Silvers, Eddie Cantor, Milton Berle, et al.), and others who learned their trade there, among them Moss Hart (who got his start organizing summer theatricals), Sid Caesar, Lenny Bruce, Mel Brooks, Woody Allen, and Joan Rivers. Here is a nineteenth-century America turning away from England for its literary and artistic inspiration, finding it instead in Washington Irvingâ™s â œRip Van Winkleâ • and his childhood recollections (set in the Catskills) . . . in James Fenimore Cooperâ™s adventure-romances, which provided a pastoral history, describing the shift from a colonial to a nationalist mentality . . . and in the canvases of Thomas Cole, Asher B. Durand, Frederick Church, and others that caught the grandeur of the wilderness and that gave texture, color, and form to Irvingâ™s and Cooperâ™s imaginings. Here are the entrepreneurs and financiers who saw the Catskills as a way to strike it rich, plundering the resources that had been likened to â œcreation,â • the Catskillsâ™ tanneries that supplied the boots and saddles for Union troops in the Civil War . . . and the bluestone quarries whose excavated rock became the curbs and streets of the fast-growing

Eastern Seaboard.Â Here are the Catskills brought fully to life in all of their intensity, beauty, vastness, and lunacy.

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Customer Reviews

I really liked this one. As far as I can remember, it's the very first that covers ALL the Catskills (and a little of the surrounding countryside, as applicable as well). The typical history of the Catskills is really centered on one of two geographies to which "Catskills" applies: the Eastern Catskills, mostly in Ulster and Greene County, and the Western Catskills (aka the Borscht Circuit), comprising mostly Sullivan County. These authors actually succeed in integrating the whole ball of wax. There were real plusses for me in this approach. Having grown up in the Western Catskills, but having spent a very formative year of my life in Woodstock (in the Eastern Catskills), I have to admit that I perceived them as being two entirely separate places -- close to each other, but entirely different. My sense at the time when the Woodstock Festival migrated from the Woodstock area (Eastern Catskills) to Bethel (distinctly Western Catskills) was that they might just as well have continued on and migrated to Scranton or something. After reading this book, I got some perspective that I never got from having lived in both. Very perceptive of the authors: one senses that they did NOT live in either, thus were able to see what those of us closer to the ground could not. The book was also very useful to me in filling me in on more of the history of the Eastern Catskills. I have to say that I knew most of the names they wrote about, and had been in all of the places, but in terms of actually integrating the various artistic, social, and political movements affecting the Eastern Catskills, the book was far more helpful than it might have been. That said, there have to be sacrifices made to get

this much history into a single volume.

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