“This could be your university. The students and National Guardsmen could be you, or young people of your neighborhood, or, if you are old enough, your sons and daughters. The city of Kent could be your community. That is why you need to know what happened to you, so that you can prevent it from happening again.”

—JAMES A. MICHEMER

Kent State: WHAT HAPPENED AND WHY
by James A. Michener
"ABSORING, SOMETIMES FRIGHTENING, SOMETIMES SICKENING IN ITS EXPOSITION OF THE GROWING TREND TOWARD VIOLENCE"

A REPORT by Clifton Fadiman

THERE HAVE BEEN and perhaps will be other books on the Kent State tragedy. All will prove useful in throwing light on one of the darkest and most shameful episodes in our entire history. But it is hard to see how any of them can rival Mr. Michener's work in three respects: fullness, fairness, perspective. Of these the last is the most important, for the perspective opens out to include all of our native land: "This could be your university. . . . The city of Kent could be your community. That is why you need to know what happened to you, so that you can prevent it from happening again."

As to fullness, Kent State is the product of hundreds of interviews, of months of on-the-spot observation and research, and of the efforts of a large number of young men and women students and journalistic colleagues who backed up the herculean professional labors of Mr. Michener. The core of this very long book is an almost minute-by-minute close narrative of the fateful four days. But if this were all, there would be less reason to recommend the book to our members. Mr. Michener knows that the "facts" of the episode itself can be understood only if we know a good deal more than the facts. And so we are given full information about, and thoughtful analysis of, Kent State itself as an institution; of its president and faculty, of the National Guard that did the killing; of the biographies and characters of dozens of students, and especially those who were killed; of student life itself, not merely in Kent State but throughout the country; of the life-style of the more dissident types, a treatment that includes a full description of a typical "commune"; of the history of student rebellion in general, of "the semi-underground forces which are determined to destroy our universities and the society which supports them"; of the part—or rather non-part—the blacks played in the affair; of the non-college population of Kent; and dozens of other matters that must be understood if we are really to comprehend what happened.

Mr. Michener goes beyond reporting. He examines the generation gap and the qualities and defects of the university system, recommending ways of solving some of the problems confronting us.

As to fairness: here each reader must make up his own mind. To this reviewer Mr. Michener's conclusions seem sane and just. His method of reaching them makes sense. He carefully and with absolute detachment describes, as far as he has been able to unearth the facts, exactly what happened on each of the four days that made up the "rebellion." After finishing each day, he draws his conclusions, presenting them in simple, unequivocal language.

The language is simple, yes; but the conclusions themselves are numerous and do not point, as scared and vengeful citizens of Kent seem to think, to the students as a collection of subversive villains. The Friday riots, concludes Mr. Michener, were directed by real revolutionaries. These riots were not well managed by the police—who made fourteen arrests with no leaders among them. On Saturday the ROTC building was burned. There was a 2000-person riot. The summoning of the National Guard was justified. But again no ringleaders were arrested, and the local police were derelict. The university administration was pusillanimous. There were professionals behind the riots, but they stayed well away from it. On Sunday came the watershed crisis, a confrontation of the Guard and the students. The Guard seemed at no time to be in serious danger. The administration was "suptue." The indicant statement of the twenty-three "concerned" professors did not condone to the riot. On Monday, May 4, came the killings. There was no real riot although there was "a riotous condition." Individual acts of "tumultuous conduct" should have been halted—and weren't. The Guard was not in mortal danger at any time. There were no "snipers." Some kind of incident was probably made inevitable by the almost invisible hard-core revolutionary leadership. But—"no student performed any act on May 4 for which he deserved to be shot." This sentence is the basic conclusion drawn by Mr. Michener from his painstaking researches.

Mr. Michener does not absolve the Guard, even though a local Grand Jury did. But, although most of the students at Kent had reasons for dissatisfaction, there were other people, most of them professional destroyers, who manipulated the students. And so, says Mr. Michener, "the American university is . . . in substantial peril, because it nurtures in its bosom persons dedicated to its destruction."

Each reader must judge this book for himself. He may agree or disagree with the author's thinking, but he cannot help being enlightened by both the plain narrative and Mr. Michener's own carefully phrased reflections. This reviewer found Kent State absorbing, sometimes frightening, sometimes sickening in its exposition of the growing trend toward violence, a trend to be found not only within a part of the student body but among the non-college citizenry and the official defenders of law and order.

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"I WAS EAGER TO LISTEN TO ANYONE... WHO HAD STRONG IDEAS"

JAMES A. MICHENER, a man whose interests have taken him all over the world and whose books reflect these worldwide interests (Iberia, Hawaii, Tales of the South Pacific), speaks of the writing of his latest work.

"I can recall no period of my life more fruitful and compelling than the time I spent at Kent doing research for this book....

"I arrived by car in early August, slipped into a motel, spent a week walking around the city and reading back copies of the Record-Courier and The Daily Kent Stater, the university paper. I spent my nights in the bars on North Water Street, sitting in a corner and listening. It was eight days before anyone knew who I was....

"How did I work? I let it be known that I was eager to listen to anyone in Kent who had strong ideas about what had happened during the first four days of May. I sat in the window of a motel where any student could get my attention by tapping on it. I took a jog each day through the back streets near the campus and stopped off whenever a fraternity or sorority group flagged me down to heckle me with questions.... And I passed many precious hours with faculty members who wanted to talk about their institution and its grave confrontations.

"When a practiced writer does this, quietly and with enough time so that he is not hurried, he finds an amazing sequence of visitors coming to his door. Some of the most extraordinary came after midnight, hoping that the police would not spot them. Some called and arranged meetings at strange places. Others refused to give their names. And one lovely girl of 20, with a remarkable story to tell, swore us to secrecy with the best reason I ever heard for anonymity: 'It would break my mother's heart if she learned I had been in jail.' ”
"There was a single shot—some people heard it as two almost simultaneous shots—then a period of silence lasting about two seconds, then a prolonged but thin fusillade...then another silence, and two final shots. The shooting had covered thirteen seconds."

IN THOSE THIRTEEN SECONDS thirteen students had been hit by bullets fired from the guns of the Ohio National Guard. Four of the thirteen were dead, or dying. And in the days and months that followed, Americans would hear many contradictory versions of the Kent State tragedy.

Last August James A. Michener arrived in Kent, determined to find out what had really happened at Kent State during those first four days of May, 1970. And, perhaps most important of all, to discover why this violence had occurred. Mr. Michener spent three months in Kent talking to hundreds of people—all of whom were participants in or observers of the events of that long, tumultuous May weekend. And from their accounts he has shaped a masterful narrative which lets you feel the tension building hour by hour until it explodes into frightening violence.

With Mr. Michener you'll walk the streets of Kent, talking to townspeople—lawyers, housewives, businessmen, firemen, police. You'll visit the university and hear students of every political persuasion and life-style tell what happened on campus before and after the National Guard was called in. You'll see the "Haunted House," a haven for some of the school's most radicalized troublemakers.

And you'll meet people you'll not soon forget. A young Guardsman, flower in the muzzle of his rifle, flashing a peace sign. A close friend of one of the slain students, when asked whether he thought his friend might have become a radical if he had lived, saying with real anguish, "How in hell can anyone predict how this wonderful kid would have developed? I am sure of only one thing. When we lost him we lost a damned good right-fielder." A geology professor, pleading with the students to break off their confrontation of the Guardsmen after the shootings: "I don't care whether you've never listened to anyone before in your lives. I am begging you right now. If you don't disperse right now, they're going to move in, and it can only be a slaughter. Would you please listen to me?"