

Stop that racket!

The Unwanted Sound of Everything We Want: a book about noise

Garret Keizer

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Noise: happy celebration or a social issue?

One of the main problems in reviewing this book has been to decide which of the many quotable passages to choose, but two quotations close to the start of the book explain why it's worth taking noise seriously: "Noise is like Thor's mysterious opponent. It appears lightweight and even frail at first glance, but once you try to pick it up, you discover that you are trying to heft the whole world"; and then: "Noise is a weak issue also because most of those it affects are perceived, and very often dismissed, as weak. The ones who dismiss them, in addition to being powerful, are often the ones making the noise."

Such exquisite constructions give a flavour of how this book resembles a constant series of initially modest tableaux that open up to reveal astonishing new vistas. The apparently minor annoyance of neighbour noise, when considered properly, opens up into the vast panoply of ways in which noise can injure, mentally and physically, and cause violent conflicts. The trivial irritation

of the loud car stereo reveals how noise is enmeshed in power and in contempt for the weak (the quiet). The aircraft noise that perturbs the peaceful national park is a harbinger of a runaway industrialised world in which "nature" offers no escape.

By the end of the book, Keizer has taken the reader on a journey from noise as a modest issue, to noise as a source of revelation of the brutal heart of contemporary capitalism, in which the weak suffer from abusive levels of noise and there are fewer and fewer refuges from uncontrolled, noisy development. And Keizer does not simply counterpoise noise to silence. Although he pays due respect to the value of quiet, he is no asocial curmudgeon but an idealist, able to appreciate the beauty of certain kinds of sound. Noise is not defined in decibels but by its cost, the price that others pay for it. In one of the most moving sections, he recounts a visit to a Portuguese-American Our Lady of Fátima festa in Massachusetts, in which he stumbles on an informal, multi-generational gathering of raucous, joyous singing. For Keizer, this loud but honest sound of community celebration is a world away from the kind of intrusively noisy gatherings in which one person's enjoyment is another's misery – such as the massive biker rally in South Dakota that he attends, which intrudes on a mountain sacred to Native Americans. By tuning our ears to the noise of oppression, we open our hearts to the possibility of the sound of humanity. **Keith Kahn-Harris**

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