



## Bad

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In 1983 Fussell turned to satire in his book *CLASS: A GUIDE THROUGH THE AMERICAN STATUS SYSTEM*, which ridiculed the pretensions of American culture and society. His latest book, *BAD: OR, THE DUMBING OF AMERICA* (1991) is written in a similar vein. Like *CLASS* it is often amusingly on target, though sometimes it seems more ill tempered than *CLASS*, as Fussell distinguishes between what is merely “bad” and truly “BAD” in American culture: anything that is “phony, clumsy, witless, untalented, vacant, or boring that many Americans can be persuaded is genuine, graceful, bright, or fascinating.”

Fussell despises “the publicity enterprise propelling modern life” and begins his book with a chapter on “BAD Advertising.” The thirty short essays that follow define everything from “BAD Newspapers” (*USA TODAY* gets special attention here), “BAD Colleges and Universities” (“the goal was to widen access to ‘educational opportunity’”), “BAD Cities” (woe to Las Vegas, notable for its Liberace Museum), “BAD Books” (e.g. *PEYTON PLACE*), and even “BAD People.”

Fussell concludes with cheerful chapters that speculate over “The Future of BAD” and lament “The Dumbing of America.” Fussell notes, regretfully, that “only 42 percent of the seventeen-year-old students in American high schools can understand a newspaper editorial.” The book is remarkable for its rhetoric of outrage. Fussell concedes that “not everything in America is bad or BAD” (he thinks the First Amendment is “very good,” for example), but he has doubts “about a country which spends billions of dollars on ‘exploring’ outer space when millions of the poor and hungry sleep, like the natives of Calcutta, on its city streets,” a country that would elect as its president an ignorant, “superannuated movie star.” Some will dismiss Fussell as a snob, others as a mean-spirited crank, but thinking people will see the image of truth in many of Fussell’s accusations. The book overstates its case, but it has a case to make.

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