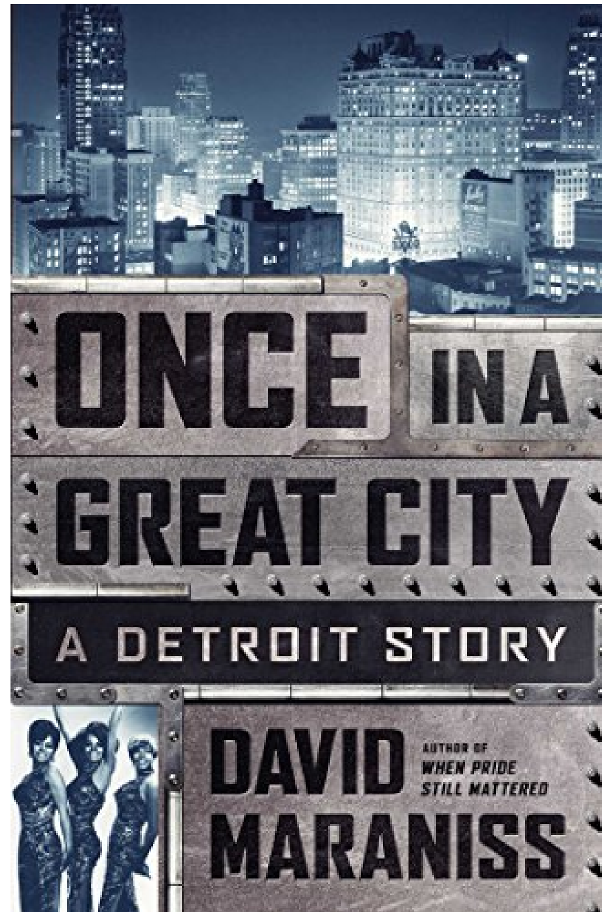
ONCE IN A GREAT CITY: A DETROIT STORY BY DAVID MARANISS



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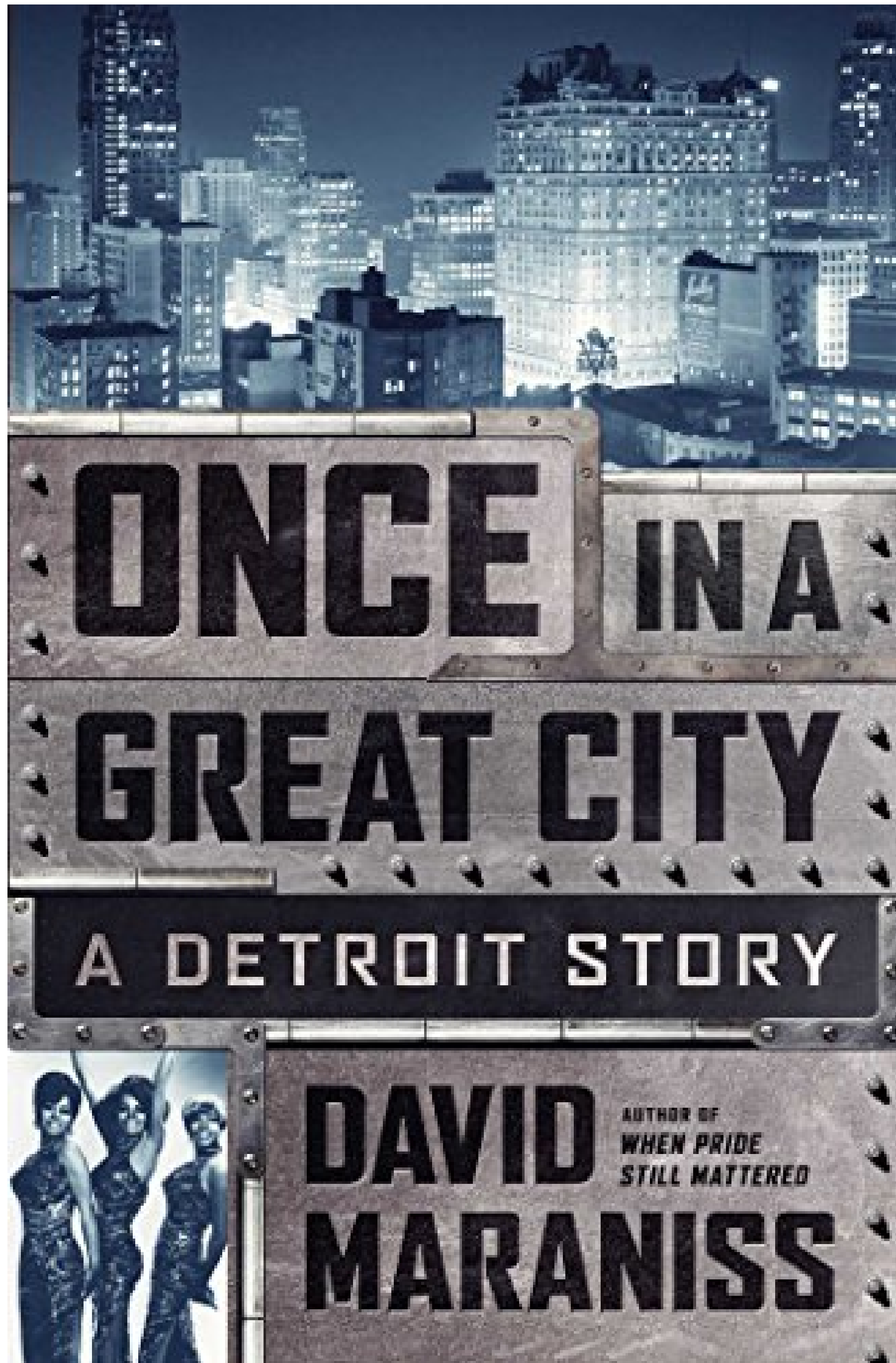

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Review
* A Best Book of 2015 (The Economist) *

* Winner - Robert F. Kennedy Book Award *

“Elegiac and richly detailed . . . Maraniss . . . conjures those boom years of his former hometown with novelistic ardor. Using overlapping portraits of Detroiters (from politicians to musicians to auto execs), he creates a mosaiclike picture of the city that has the sort of intimacy and tactile emotion that Larry McMurtry brought to his depictions of the Old West, and the gritty sweep of David Simon’s HBO series “The Wire.” . . . People’s experiences intersect or collide or resonate with one another, and Mr. Maraniss uses them as windows on the larger cultural and political changes convulsing the nation in the ‘60s . . . [Maraniss] succeeds with authoritative, adrenaline-laced flair. . . . Maraniss cuts among story lines about the auto industry, the civil rights movement and City Hall, and among subplots involving Ford’s development of its top-secret new car (the singular Mustang), the police commissioner’s efforts to get the goods on the mobster Tony Giacalone and Berry Gordy’s construction of a hit factory with Motown. The result is a buoyant Frederick Lewis Allen-like social history that’s animated by an infectious soundtrack and lots of tactile details, and injected with a keen understanding of larger historical forces at work – both in Detroit and America at large. . . . Maraniss’s evocative book provides a wistful look back at an era when those cracks were only just beginning to show, and the city still seemed a place of “uncommon possibility” and was creating “wondrous and lasting things.” (Michiko Kakutani for The New York Times)

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“A sobering portrait of a city that felt itself to be at the peak of its power and influence in a "time of uncommon possibility and freedom when Detroit created wondrous and lasting things," even as the forces that would topple it had set about their work. The principal strength of Maraniss's book lies in his skill at marshaling copious research to serve his sophisticated account of a complex, vibrant city balanced on its tipping point. . . . Sadly, one can't avoid the conclusion that never again will it be the city David Maraniss portrays with empathy and candor in this impressive book.” (Shelf Awareness)

“Maraniss . . . aptly traces these two narratives — cars and race — in chronicling a pivotal period of his hometown’s history. Spanning autumn 1962 to spring 1964, the book bustles with vivid characters, from Berry Gordy and C.L. Franklin (Aretha’s father), to Walter Reuther and George Romney (Mitt’s father). “It all looked so promising,” Maraniss writes, paraphrasing Detroit Mayor Jerome Cavanagh’s conversation with President Johnson after his 1964 visit, but even in those halcyon days, “some part of Detroit was dying,” a casualty of white flight, the demise of labor unions, and a changing world. This is a beautifully written tribute to that lost, great city.” (The Boston Globe)

“Combining hindsight and insight with deep-dive research, Maraniss provides a clear-eyed flashback to a once-powerful manufacturing metropolis intoxicated by cheap gasoline, swaggering hubris and blue-sky confidence. . . . Maraniss examines modern history in the dogged manner of David Halberstam and Robert Caro. Between the lines, he leaves an unwritten thought for both today’s optimists and pessimists. If things could go change so much in just 50 years, what might the next half-century bring?” (The Detroit News)

“One of America’s finest non-fiction writers, a son of Detroit, offers a lively and meticulously researched account of how the city, once the engine room of America, began sputtering.” (The Economist)

“Maraniss’ well-written and researched book well remembers the city of Detroit in the early 1960s as a place where factories hummed, Motown rocked and the present gave little warning that Detroit would become a ‘city of decay.’” (Seattle Times)

About the Author
Born in Detroit, David Maraniss is an associate editor at The Washington Post. Maraniss is a Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist and bestselling author of Once in a Great City: A Detroit Story; First in His Class:

A Biography of Bill Clinton; Rome 1960: The Olympics that Stirred the World; Barack Obama: The Story; Clemente: The Passion and Grace of Baseball's Last Hero; They Marched into Sunlight: War and Peace, Vietnam and America, October 1967; and When Pride Still Mattered: A Life of Vince Lombardi, which was hailed by Sports Illustrated as "maybe the best sports biography ever published." He lives in Washington, DC, and Madison, Wisconsin.

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Once in a Great City Chapter 1 GONE

THE NINTH OF NOVEMBER 1962 was unseasonably pleasant in the Detroit area. It was an accommodating day for holiday activity at the Ford Rotunda, where a company of workmen were installing exhibits for the Christmas Fantasy scheduled to open just after Thanksgiving. Not far from a main lobby display of glistening next-model Ford Thunderbirds and Galaxies and Fairlanes and one-of-a-kind custom dream cars, craftsmen were constructing a life-size Nativity scene and a Santa's North Pole workshop surrounded by looping tracks of miniature trains and bountiful bundles of toys. This quintessentially American harmonic convergence of religiosity and consumerism was expected to attract more than three-quarters of a million visitors before the season was out, and for a generation of children it would provide a lifetime memory—walking past the live reindeer Donner and Blitzen, up the long incline toward a merry band of hardworking elves, and finally reaching Santa Claus and his commodious lap.

The Ford Rotunda was circular in an automotive manufacturing kind of way. It was shaped like an enormous set of grooved transmission gears, one fitting neatly inside the next, rising first 80 then 90 then 100 then 110 feet, to the equivalent of ten stories. Virtually windowless, with its steel frame and exterior sheath of Indiana limestone, this unusual structure was the creation of Albert Kahn, the prolific architect of Detroit's industrial age. Kahn had designed it for the Century of Progress exposition in Chicago, where Ford's 1934 exhibit hall chronicled the history of transportation from the horse-drawn carriage to the latest Ford V-8. When that Depression-era fair shuttered, workers dismantled the Rotunda and moved it from the south side shore of Lake Michigan to Dearborn, on the southwest rim of Detroit, where it was reconstructed to serve as a showroom and visitors center across from what was then Ford Motor Company's world headquarters. Later two wings were added, one to hold Ford's archives and the other for a theater.

In the fullness of the postwar fifties, with the rise of suburbs and two-car garages and urban freeways and the long-distance federal interstate system, millions of Americans paid homage to Detroit's grand motor palace. For a time, the top five tourist attractions in the United States were Niagara Falls, the Great Smokey Mountains National Park, the Smithsonian Institution, the Lincoln Memorial, and the Ford Rotunda. The Rotunda drew more visitors than Yellowstone, Mount Vernon, the Statue of Liberty, or the Washington Monument. Or so the Ford publicists claimed. Chances are you have not heard of it.

To appreciate what the Rotunda and its environs signified then to Detroiters, a guide would be useful, and for this occasion Robert C. Ankony fills the role. Ankony (who went on to become an army paratrooper and narcotics squad officer, eventually earning a PhD in sociology from Wayne State University) was fourteen in November 1962, a chronic juvenile delinquent who specialized in torching garages. Desperate to avoid drudgery and boredom, he knew the Rotunda the way a disaffected boy might know it. Along with the Penobscot Building, the tallest skyscraper downtown, the Rotunda was among his favorite places to hang out when he played hooky, something he did as often as possible, including on that late fall Friday morning.

"The Highway" is what Ankony and his friends called the area where they lived in the southwest corner of Detroit. The highway was West Vernor, a thoroughfare that ran east through the neighborhood toward

Michigan Central Station, the grand old beaux arts train depot, and west into adjacent Dearborn toward Ford's massive River Rouge Complex, another Albert Kahn creation and the epicenter of Ford's manufacturing might. In Detroit Industry, the legendary twenty-seven-panel murals at the Detroit Institute of Arts painted by Diego Rivera and commissioned by Edsel Ford, the founder's son, among the few distinguishable portraits within the scenes of muscular Ford machines and workers is that of Kahn, wearing wire-rim glasses and work overalls. Ankony experienced Detroit industry with all of his senses: the smoke and dust and smells drifted downwind in the direction of his family's house two miles away on Woodmere at the edge of Patton Park. His mother, Ruth, who could see the smokestacks from her rear window, hosed the factory soot off her front porch every day. What others considered a noxious odor the Ankonys and their neighbors would describe as the smell of home.

On the morning of November 9, young Bob reported to Wilson Junior High, found another boy who was his frequent collaborator in truancy, and hatched plans for the day. After homeroom, they pushed through the double doors with the horizontal brass panic bars, ran across the school grounds and over a two-foot metal fence, scooted down the back alley, and were free, making their way to West Vernor and out toward Ford country.

It was a survival course on the streets, enlivened by the thrill of avoiding the cops. Slater's bakery for day-old doughnuts, claw-shaped with date fillings, three cents apiece. Scrounging curbs and garbage cans for empty soda bottles and turning them in for two cents each. If they had enough pennies, maybe go for a dog at the Coney Island on Vernor. Rounding the curve where Vernor turned to Dix, past the Dearborn Mosque and the Arab storefronts of east Dearborn. (Ankony's parents were Lebanese and French; he grew up being called a camel jockey and "little A-rab.") Fooling around at the massive slag piles near Eagle Pass. Dipping down into the tunnel leading toward the Rouge, leaning over a walkway railing and urinating on cars passing below, then up past the factory bars, Salamie's and Johnny's, and filching lunches in white cardboard boxes from the ledge of a sandwich shop catering to autoworkers on shift change. Skirting the historic overpass at Miller Road near Rouge's Gate 4, where on an afternoon in late May 1937 Walter Reuther and his fellow union organizers were beaten by Ford security goons, a violent encounter that Ankony's father, who grew up only blocks away, told his family he had witnessed. Gazing in awe at the Rouge plant's fearsomely majestic industrial landscape from the bridge at Rotunda Road, then on to the Rotunda itself, where workmen were everywhere, not only inside installing the Christmas displays but also outside repairing the roof.

To Ankony, the Rotunda was a wonderland. No worries about truant officers; every day brought school groups, so few would take notice of two stray boys. With other visitors, including on that day a school group from South Bend, they took in the new car displays and a movie about Henry Ford, then blended in with the crowd for a factory tour that left by bus from the side of the Rotunda over to the Rouge plant, then the largest industrial complex in the United States. Ankony had toured the Rouge often, yet the flow of molten metal, the intricacies of the engine plant, the mechanized perfection of the assembly, all the different-colored car parts coming down the line and matching up, the wonder of raw material going in and a finished product coming out, the reality of scenes depicted in Rivera's murals, thrilled him anew every time. The Rouge itself energized him even as Rivera's famed murals frightened him. The art, more than the place itself, reminded him of the gray, mechanized life of a factory worker "in those dark dungeons" that seemed expected of a working-class Detroit boy and that he so much yearned to avoid.

When the Rouge tour ended in early afternoon, Ankony and his pal had had enough of Ford for the day and left for a shoplifting spree at the nearby Montgomery Ward store at the corner of Schaefer Road and Michigan Avenue, across the street from Dearborn's city hall. They were in the basement sporting goods department, checking out ammo and firearms, when they heard a siren outside, then another, a cacophony of wailing fire trucks and screeching police cars. The boys scrambled up and out and saw smoke billowing in

the distance. Fire!—and they didn't start it. Fire in the direction of the Rotunda. They raced toward it.

Roof repairmen since midmorning had been taking advantage of the fifty-degree weather to waterproof the Rotunda's geodesic dome panels. Using propane heaters, they had been warming a transparent sealant so that it would spray more easily. At around 1 p.m., a heater ignited sealant vapors, sparking a small fire, and though workmen tried to douse the flames with extinguishers they could not keep pace and the fire spread. The South Bend school group had just left the building. Another tour for thirty-five visitors was soon to begin. There was a skeleton staff of eighteen office workers inside; many Rotunda employees were at lunch. A parking lot guard noticed the flames and radioed inside. Alarm bells were sounded, the building was evacuated, the roof repairmen crab-walked to a hatch and scrambled down an inside stairwell, and the Dearborn and Ford fire departments were summoned, their sirens piercing the autumn air, alerting, among others, two truant boys in the Monkey Ward's basement.

By the time firefighters reached the Rotunda, the entire roof, made of highly combustible plastic and fiberglass, was ablaze. Two aerial trucks circled around to the rear driveway. From the other side, firefighters and volunteers stretched hoses from Schaefer Road and moved forward cautiously. It was too hot, and the water pressure too limited, to douse the fire with sprays up and over the 110 feet to the roof. The structure's steel frame began to buckle. At 1:56, fire captains ordered their men away from the building, just in time. Robert Dawson, who worked in the Lincoln-Mercury building across the street, looked over and saw a "ball of fire" on the roof but at first no flames below. "Suddenly the roof crashed through. Everything inside turned to flame. Smoke began sifting through the limestone walls. Then, starting at the north corner, the walls crumbled. It was as though you had stacked dominoes and pushed them over." The fire had reached the Christmas displays, fresh and potent kindling, and raged out of control, bright flames now shooting fifty feet into the sky. The entire building collapsed in a shuddering roar, a whirlwind of hurtling limestone and concrete and dust.

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* Winner - Robert F. Kennedy Book Award (2016) *

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As David Maraniss captures it with power and affection, Detroit summed up America’s path to music and prosperity that was already past history.

It’s 1963 and Detroit is on top of the world. The city’s leaders are among the most visionary in America: Grandson of the first Ford; Henry Ford II; influential labor leader Walter Reuther; Motown’s founder Berry Gordy; the Reverend C.L. Franklin and his daughter, the amazing Aretha; Governor George Romney, Mormon and Civil Rights advocate; super car salesman Lee Iacocca; Mayor Jerome Cavanagh, a Kennedy acolyte; Police Commissioner George Edwards; Martin Luther King. It was the American auto makers’ best year; the revolution in music and politics was underway. Reuther’s UAW had helped lift the middle class.

The time was full of promise. The auto industry was selling more cars than ever before and inventing the Mustang. Motown was capturing the world with its amazing artists. The progressive labor movement was rooted in Detroit with the UAW. Martin Luther King delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech there two months before he made it famous in the Washington march.

Once in a Great City shows that the shadows of collapse were evident even then. Before the devastating riot. Before the decades of civic corruption and neglect, and white flight. Before people trotted out the grab bag of rust belt infirmities—from harsh weather to high labor costs—and competition from abroad to explain Detroit’s collapse, one could see the signs of a city’s ruin. Detroit at its peak was threatened by its own design. It was being abandoned by the new world. Yet so much of what Detroit gave America lasts.

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“[A] glimmering portrait of Detroit . . . that will leave the reader thoroughly haunted. . . . Once in a Great City has it all: significant scenes, tremendously charismatic figures, even a starry soundtrack. . . . Reading about the city in its hey day is like falling backward in time and running into someone whose youthful blush you’d completely forgotten. Detroit is that someone. She is bright and laughing, flickering before you like a specter from the past. I doubt I’ll forget her anytime soon.” (Bookpage)

"Maraniss . . . undoubtedly will attract notice and focus even more attention on Detroit. . . . a unique and absorbing take. . . . As often as authors have told the story of Gordy and the rise of Motown, Maraniss still captures the vitality and enterprise on West Grand Boulevard in a fresh way. . . . [Maraniss] is equally adept at capturing the white-run city’s complex racial dynamics at a time when black leaders were becoming more militant and clashing with each other over the proper level of assertiveness. Maraniss . . . is a skillful storyteller, and his interpretation of events in Detroit a half century ago is well founded. . . . Maraniss will only add to his reputation with Once in a Great City. It’s a good read if your interest is only to visit Detroit’s remarkable recent past. It’s even a better read if you are interested in the city’s extraordinary devolution. In either case, it’s a story that is haunting, thought-provoking and, in the end, sad." (DeadlineDETROIT.com)

“A sobering portrait of a city that felt itself to be at the peak of its power and influence in a "time of uncommon possibility and freedom when Detroit created wondrous and lasting things," even as the forces that would topple it had set about their work. The principal strength of Maraniss's book lies in his skill at marshaling copious research to serve his sophisticated account of a complex, vibrant city balanced on its tipping point. . . . Sadly, one can't avoid the conclusion that never again will it be the city David Maraniss portrays with empathy and candor in this impressive book.” (Shelf Awareness)

“Maraniss . . . aptly traces these two narratives — cars and race — in chronicling a pivotal period of his hometown’s history. Spanning autumn 1962 to spring 1964, the book bustles with vivid characters, from Berry Gordy and C.L. Franklin (Aretha’s father), to Walter Reuther and George Romney (Mitt’s father). “It all looked so promising,” Maraniss writes, paraphrasing Detroit Mayor Jerome Cavanagh’s conversation with President Johnson after his 1964 visit, but even in those halcyon days, “some part of Detroit was dying,” a casualty of white flight, the demise of labor unions, and a changing world. This is a beautifully written tribute to that lost, great city.” (The Boston Globe)

“Combining hindsight and insight with deep-dive research, Maraniss provides a clear-eyed flashback to a once-powerful manufacturing metropolis intoxicated by cheap gasoline, swaggering hubris and blue-sky confidence. . . . Maraniss examines modern history in the dogged manner of David Halberstam and Robert Caro. Between the lines, he leaves an unwritten thought for both today’s optimists and pessimists. If things could go change so much in just 50 years, what might the next half-century bring?” (The Detroit News)

“One of America’s finest non-fiction writers, a son of Detroit, offers a lively and meticulously researched account of how the city, once the engine room of America, began sputtering.” (The Economist)

“Maraniss’ well-written and researched book well remembers the city of Detroit in the early 1960s as a place where factories hummed, Motown rocked and the present gave little warning that Detroit would become a ‘city of decay.’” (Seattle Times)

About the Author
Born in Detroit, David Maraniss is an associate editor at The Washington Post. Maraniss is a Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist and bestselling author of Once in a Great City: A Detroit Story; First in His Class: A Biography of Bill Clinton; Rome 1960: The Olympics that Stirred the World; Barack Obama: The Story; Clemente: The Passion and Grace of Baseball’s Last Hero; They Marched into Sunlight: War and Peace, Vietnam and America, October 1967; and When Pride Still Mattered: A Life of Vince Lombardi, which was hailed by Sports Illustrated as “maybe the best sports biography ever published.” He lives in Washington, DC, and Madison, Wisconsin.

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Once in a Great City Chapter 1 GONE

THE NINTH OF NOVEMBER 1962 was unseasonably pleasant in the Detroit area. It was an accommodating day for holiday activity at the Ford Rotunda, where a company of workmen were installing exhibits for the Christmas Fantasy scheduled to open just after Thanksgiving. Not far from a main lobby display of glistening next-model Ford Thunderbirds and Galaxies and Fairlanes and one-of-a-kind custom dream cars, craftsmen were constructing a life-size Nativity scene and a Santa’s North Pole workshop surrounded by looping tracks of miniature trains and bountiful bundles of toys. This quintessentially American harmonic convergence of religiosity and consumerism was expected to attract more than three-quarters of a million visitors before the season was out, and for a generation of children it would provide a lifetime memory—walking past the live reindeer Donner and Blitzen, up the long incline toward a merry band of hardworking elves, and finally reaching Santa Claus and his commodious lap.

The Ford Rotunda was circular in an automotive manufacturing kind of way. It was shaped like an enormous set of grooved transmission gears, one fitting neatly inside the next, rising first 80 then 90 then 100 then 110 feet, to the equivalent of ten stories. Virtually windowless, with its steel frame and exterior sheath of Indiana limestone, this unusual structure was the creation of Albert Kahn, the prolific architect of Detroit’s industrial age. Kahn had designed it for the Century of Progress exposition in Chicago, where Ford’s 1934 exhibit hall

chronicled the history of transportation from the horse-drawn carriage to the latest Ford V-8. When that Depression-era fair shuttered, workers dismantled the Rotunda and moved it from the south side shore of Lake Michigan to Dearborn, on the southwest rim of Detroit, where it was reconstructed to serve as a showroom and visitors center across from what was then Ford Motor Company's world headquarters. Later two wings were added, one to hold Ford's archives and the other for a theater.

In the fullness of the postwar fifties, with the rise of suburbs and two-car garages and urban freeways and the long-distance federal interstate system, millions of Americans paid homage to Detroit's grand motor palace. For a time, the top five tourist attractions in the United States were Niagara Falls, the Great Smokey Mountains National Park, the Smithsonian Institution, the Lincoln Memorial, and the Ford Rotunda. The Rotunda drew more visitors than Yellowstone, Mount Vernon, the Statue of Liberty, or the Washington Monument. Or so the Ford publicists claimed. Chances are you have not heard of it.

To appreciate what the Rotunda and its environs signified then to Detroiters, a guide would be useful, and for this occasion Robert C. Ankony fills the role. Ankony (who went on to become an army paratrooper and narcotics squad officer, eventually earning a PhD in sociology from Wayne State University) was fourteen in November 1962, a chronic juvenile delinquent who specialized in torching garages. Desperate to avoid drudgery and boredom, he knew the Rotunda the way a disaffected boy might know it. Along with the Penobscot Building, the tallest skyscraper downtown, the Rotunda was among his favorite places to hang out when he played hooky, something he did as often as possible, including on that late fall Friday morning.

"The Highway" is what Ankony and his friends called the area where they lived in the southwest corner of Detroit. The highway was West Vernor, a thoroughfare that ran east through the neighborhood toward Michigan Central Station, the grand old beaux arts train depot, and west into adjacent Dearborn toward Ford's massive River Rouge Complex, another Albert Kahn creation and the epicenter of Ford's manufacturing might. In Detroit Industry, the legendary twenty-seven-panel murals at the Detroit Institute of Arts painted by Diego Rivera and commissioned by Edsel Ford, the founder's son, among the few distinguishable portraits within the scenes of muscular Ford machines and workers is that of Kahn, wearing wire-rim glasses and work overalls. Ankony experienced Detroit industry with all of his senses: the smoke and dust and smells drifted downwind in the direction of his family's house two miles away on Woodmere at the edge of Patton Park. His mother, Ruth, who could see the smokestacks from her rear window, hosed the factory soot off her front porch every day. What others considered a noxious odor the Ankonys and their neighbors would describe as the smell of home.

On the morning of November 9, young Bob reported to Wilson Junior High, found another boy who was his frequent collaborator in truancy, and hatched plans for the day. After homeroom, they pushed through the double doors with the horizontal brass panic bars, ran across the school grounds and over a two-foot metal fence, scooted down the back alley, and were free, making their way to West Vernor and out toward Ford country.

It was a survival course on the streets, enlivened by the thrill of avoiding the cops. Slater's bakery for day-old doughnuts, claw-shaped with date fillings, three cents apiece. Scrounging curbs and garbage cans for empty soda bottles and turning them in for two cents each. If they had enough pennies, maybe go for a dog at the Coney Island on Vernor. Rounding the curve where Vernor turned to Dix, past the Dearborn Mosque and the Arab storefronts of east Dearborn. (Ankony's parents were Lebanese and French; he grew up being called a camel jockey and "little A-rab.") Fooling around at the massive slag piles near Eagle Pass. Dipping down into the tunnel leading toward the Rouge, leaning over a walkway railing and urinating on cars passing below, then up past the factory bars, Salamie's and Johnny's, and filching lunches in white cardboard boxes from the ledge of a sandwich shop catering to autoworkers on shift change. Skirting the historic overpass at

Miller Road near Rouge's Gate 4, where on an afternoon in late May 1937 Walter Reuther and his fellow union organizers were beaten by Ford security goons, a violent encounter that Ankony's father, who grew up only blocks away, told his family he had witnessed. Gazing in awe at the Rouge plant's fearsomely majestic industrial landscape from the bridge at Rotunda Road, then on to the Rotunda itself, where workmen were everywhere, not only inside installing the Christmas displays but also outside repairing the roof.

To Ankony, the Rotunda was a wonderland. No worries about truant officers; every day brought school groups, so few would take notice of two stray boys. With other visitors, including on that day a school group from South Bend, they took in the new car displays and a movie about Henry Ford, then blended in with the crowd for a factory tour that left by bus from the side of the Rotunda over to the Rouge plant, then the largest industrial complex in the United States. Ankony had toured the Rouge often, yet the flow of molten metal, the intricacies of the engine plant, the mechanized perfection of the assembly, all the different-colored car parts coming down the line and matching up, the wonder of raw material going in and a finished product coming out, the reality of scenes depicted in Rivera's murals, thrilled him anew every time. The Rouge itself energized him even as Rivera's famed murals frightened him. The art, more than the place itself, reminded him of the gray, mechanized life of a factory worker "in those dark dungeons" that seemed expected of a working-class Detroit boy and that he so much yearned to avoid.

When the Rouge tour ended in early afternoon, Ankony and his pal had had enough of Ford for the day and left for a shoplifting spree at the nearby Montgomery Ward store at the corner of Schaefer Road and Michigan Avenue, across the street from Dearborn's city hall. They were in the basement sporting goods department, checking out ammo and firearms, when they heard a siren outside, then another, a cacophony of wailing fire trucks and screeching police cars. The boys scrambled up and out and saw smoke billowing in the distance. Fire!—and they didn't start it. Fire in the direction of the Rotunda. They raced toward it.

Roof repairmen since midmorning had been taking advantage of the fifty-degree weather to waterproof the Rotunda's geodesic dome panels. Using propane heaters, they had been warming a transparent sealant so that it would spray more easily. At around 1 p.m., a heater ignited sealant vapors, sparking a small fire, and though workmen tried to douse the flames with extinguishers they could not keep pace and the fire spread. The South Bend school group had just left the building. Another tour for thirty-five visitors was soon to begin. There was a skeleton staff of eighteen office workers inside; many Rotunda employees were at lunch. A parking lot guard noticed the flames and radioed inside. Alarm bells were sounded, the building was evacuated, the roof repairmen crab-walked to a hatch and scrambled down an inside stairwell, and the Dearborn and Ford fire departments were summoned, their sirens piercing the autumn air, alerting, among others, two truant boys in the Monkey Ward's basement.

By the time firefighters reached the Rotunda, the entire roof, made of highly combustible plastic and fiberglass, was ablaze. Two aerial trucks circled around to the rear driveway. From the other side, firefighters and volunteers stretched hoses from Schaefer Road and moved forward cautiously. It was too hot, and the water pressure too limited, to douse the fire with sprays up and over the 110 feet to the roof. The structure's steel frame began to buckle. At 1:56, fire captains ordered their men away from the building, just in time. Robert Dawson, who worked in the Lincoln-Mercury building across the street, looked over and saw a "ball of fire" on the roof but at first no flames below. "Suddenly the roof crashed through. Everything inside turned to flame. Smoke began sifting through the limestone walls. Then, starting at the north corner, the walls crumbled. It was as though you had stacked dominoes and pushed them over." The fire had reached the Christmas displays, fresh and potent kindling, and raged out of control, bright flames now shooting fifty feet into the sky. The entire building collapsed in a shuddering roar, a whirlwind of hurtling limestone and concrete and dust.

Most helpful customer reviews

116 of 124 people found the following review helpful.
Maraniss has found the gems in Detroit's storied early 60's and tells them in a wonderful, absorbing and awakening fashion.
By MJC
"Detroit". No American city, or perhaps even an international city to some lesser extent, invokes, excites or incites an opinion as much as Detroit, Michigan. It was a city that was truly deserving to be called "Great" as David Maraniss explains in his fabulous account of Detroit during perhaps its headiest years. I think I should know; I am the eldest son of Jerome P. Cavanagh, the Mayor of Detroit from 1962-1970 whose first two years coincided with Mr. Maraniss's time period. I lived at the epicenter of this beautiful city, met and even to some extent, knew all of the major characters Mr. Maraniss writes about, President Kennedy, President Johnson, Walter Reuther, Barry Gordy, The Supremes, Commissioner George Edwards, Michigan Governors John B. Swainson and his successor, Governor George Romney (Mitt's father), most of the minor characters and even just the "characters". I spent much time at my father's office, became friends with all of his important staffers, attended many functions, celebrations, parades, gatherings, openings (they were almost ALL openings) and traveled with my father around the country to Mayoral conventions and other gatherings of like-minded and elected officials, their families and those involved in their cities. I heard it all and saw it all right at the source. My father never hesitated in making his older children a witness to and a part of these gatherings and these events; he thought them a good experience for us, and they were. The absolute best! We lived for those times and the people who made them happen in Detroit. I was with my father at the Rotunda a week before it burned. I was in the lobby of the Sheraton Cadillac Hotel in Detroit in October 1962, where following a meeting my father had with President Kennedy upstairs in the Presidential suite, the President and my father came downstairs. My father noticed me there in the lobby and had the President come over meet me and shake my hand. Heady times! Dad had only been Mayor of Detroit for 10 months and already he'd become close to President Kennedy. I watched Dad help orchestrate Detroit's pitch to win its selection by President Kennedy through the US Olympic Committee to represent the United States as its host city for the 1968 Olympics.There was magic in the air. In short, while everyone has their opinions, I was a living witness to Detroit's greatness so ably captured in Mr. Maraniss's book. I was old enough to know and understand, but most of all FEEL the greatness of Detroit. Everyone I knew felt the same way. We could feel it changing for the better almost every day.

And yes, I saw it change almost overnight during the 1967 riots (and yes, they were riots). I watched my father's heart break at the crushing blow to the city he deeply loved and cared about. In a few days time, those disturbances seemingly wiped out all the progress and the immensely successful and renowned work he and many others did to make Detroit a "Model City".

And yet as Mr. Maraniss says so insightfully, all of the writing was on the wall. Detroit's trend downwards was ever so subtle yet it had begun 10 years before the time period he chose to write about. While it was not evident to anyone but the scholar at the time, some of the bricks in the Detroit's foundation were beginning to come out. After all, why was the city selected as a "Model City", the subject of a President's grand vision for revitalized urban life and the recipient of hundreds of millions of dollars in federal funds to accomplish that unless there is/was some inherent decay already in existence. Money certainly wasn't what the sick patient needed.

To me, it is obvious that Mr. Maraniss wrote about a city that had meant something to him in one way as a native son and as another as an expatriate and adult, able to have stepped aside and seen the larger picture. And yet, while his book can be viewed as a harbinger or lesson for others to live by, it can also be viewed as a city that has not and will not die. I think of his portrayal of Detroit during this time as similar to Florence

during the Renaissance when from all corners appear the most diverse and singular men and women, injecting their lives into and placing their stamp upon a local place, its results being long-lasting and with far-reaching effects. We are still seeing those effects in many, many examples today. And GREAT cities don't just go away. And it is unfair to say that Detroit was this or was that, as if the past is the only definition of a living thing. Everything changes. We are here to learn from the past. No, Detroit is not what it was when I was the son of the Mayor but it is still alive and getting better all the time with the same solid commitment and determination from its citizens as it has had at any other time. The methodology might be different but the purpose is still the same. Its greatness is what keeps people's hands in the mix; the effort to preserve what can be preserved, restore what can be restored and build what can be built. Do I miss the old Detroit of David Maraniss's book? Of course. And even more so after reading his exquisitely researched, exhaustive character studies and incredibly loving and entertaining book that captures two of the most ground-shaking years of 20th century Detroit.
Ideally, an author writes about what he or she loves. Once completed, the books or poems become their children. Personally, I felt much his personal involvement and even love behind Mr. Maraniss's story. This gives the book part of its vitality. His zeal for his subject is evident and his unmatchable skills as a writer and story teller have helped propel Detroit back into the chatter. No bad can come of this. Cities once "GREAT" never die. Yes, they get a lot of symbolic dirt thrown over their prematurely buried caskets and people want to hang the crepe LONG before the ceremony has begun. But as Detroit did not see its transition from GREAT to deeply troubled occur in weeks, months or a few years, so it will not see its current rebirth occur in one fell swoop. Change is only noticeable to those who have a perch on a high vantage point and years to have passed by from which to assess. Ah yes, then, the less scholarly Monday Morning Quarterbacking begins by people who in most cases were not even involved, present or even alive. The image of Detroit excites this behavior like no other city in the United States does. But as long as the chatter is going, the City is alive. Having been provided with an urban blueprint such as David Maraniss gives us, we should take all the good in it and through away the bad. To use a metaphor, Maraniss's outstanding research and writing has provided us with the cliff notes. He's done the heavy lifting for us. Florence is great, yet its impact ended over 400 years ago. Rome is still great, although it fell in the 500's. Athens is another example. There are many more. Like those "dead" cities, they are still great. And whether one can compare any or all of this fact to Detroit, Mr. Maraniss's powerful rendering of its amazing history in these monumental years between 1962-1964, make me feel that no other city has a past more enviable than Detroit's. It is Detroit's GREAT past that serves as a major component of its present success. As in years gone by Detroit the former "Model City", can and is using the lessons from the past to create something unique again-something unique as the years from 1962-1964 were. We have David Maraniss to thank for clearing our vision so as not to step into the same holes again. We have been reminded of our storied past and been provided with the trajectory. It is up to us. Maraniss has given us a wonderful romp and yet where necessary, a harsh (it's for your own good) bed-side script that we can efficaciously use with respect to Detroit or any other ailing city.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.
including a brilliant biography of Vince Lombardi
By Marc W. Schneider
Even though I have never lived there, I feel a connection with Detroit. My father was born and raised there, I still have some family there,and I was there a few times as a child in what were still the city's glory days. I saw a game at Tiger Stadium, toured a Ford factory (very hot and noisy) and saw a vibrant, dynamic downtown. More than that, as a history buff, Detroit has always fascinated me as, first, the Arsenal of Democracy during World War II, then the engine (no pun intended) of American prosperity during the Cold War, and, finally and sadly, of course, the ultimate symbol of American urban decline.

David Maraniss was a reporter for the Washington Post and has written a number of other books, including a brilliant biography of Vince Lombardi, which I highly recommend. He was born in Detroit although his

family moved when he was young. I think this is a great book.

The book covers the time period roughly from late 1962 to late 1964, with the emphasis being on 1963, a time when America was truly on top of the world although cracks were beginning to show. Detroit was at its height; the country as a whole was prosperous, the car industry was booming, and no one, I'm sure, could possibly have imagined a time when Japanese cars would be a serious threat to the Ford, Chrysler, and GM. Detroit was a vibrant, dynamic city which, in fact, even bid on the 1968 Summer Olympics, a fact which astonished me; indeed, Detroit was selected over Los Angeles as the American bidder for the games. (The Games eventually went to Mexico City.) It's simply incredibly today to think about Detroit as being a serious competitor for the Olympics. But that's what Detroit was in 1963. And the auto industry helped to create a solid middle class African-American community which, ultimately, fueled the growth of Motown, probably one of, if not the, first large-scale African-American enterprises. The auto industry, despite the racism of many union members (and, yes, they were racists), enabled many black families to purchase pianos, which created a pool of musical talent that fueled the Motown sound, which remains one of the aspects of American culture that is most embraced by the rest of the world. (Sorry, Richard Spencer.) When Maraniss was describing the songs that came out, I found myself humming along.

Yet, even in 1963, there were portents of what was to come. Already the city was beginning to lose residents, losing 200,000 between 1960 and 1964. Maraniss suggests that much of this was caused by urban renewal projects, which built freeways through downtown, destroying solid African-American neighborhoods, and enabling whites to move to the suburbs and still easily commute into the city for work. Maraniss argues that the movement of whites into the suburbs created a pool of vacant housing in those neighborhoods; the destruction of the thriving black communities forced African-Americans into those previously white neighborhoods, which, in turn, led to more outmigration by whites, fueled in large part by unscrupulous "blockbusting" realtors.

A lot of conservatives reviewing books on Detroit complain about the emphasis on racism in Detroit's decline. And, while this is beyond the kin of the book, I'm comfortable in saying that there were many other factors besides racism that led to the Detroit we know today. Nevertheless, there was plenty of pure racism in Detroit. In 1963, Detroit had a liberal mayor (Jerome Cavanagh) and the governor of Michigan was George Romney (Mitt's father). George Romney was a Republican of a kind that would beggar belief today; he probably would not be allowed into a Republican convention. Both the mayor and governor were more liberal than a large proportion of their constituents. At the time, many neighborhoods in Detroit had covenants, either official or informal, that either prohibited or restricted selling houses to minorities. Of course, this was especially applied to African-Americans. In 1963, the Detroit City Council considered a bill to outlaw restrictive covenants (w.hich were later outlawed by the US Supreme Court). Because of pressure from whites (and Maraniss quotes several of the letters to the City Council), the Council rejected the bill. (He also cites a statement in a different context by Rush Limbaugh's father to the effect that their home town of Cape Girardeau, Missouri never had a black resident and never would. Like father, like son, I guess).

Still, it's a largely upbeat picture of Detroit in 1963, shadowed, of course, by the knowledge of what is to come. I found the discussion of the car industry and the completely different cultural context most interesting. Maraniss focuses primarily on Ford and, especially, on Henry Ford II, the original Henry Ford's grandson. He was quite a character or a cad depending on your point of view. It's actually pretty amusing reading about how the auto executives lived and how the various neighborhoods were segregated according to how high up people were. Presidents and CEOs of the companies lived in one neighborhood; the even tonier neighborhoods were reserved for people like the Fords. It was a very stratified society; they certainly would not live with the Hoi Polloi. Young women in this set still had elaborate "coming out" parties which, in 1963 had a much different meaning than it does now. It seems quaint and sort of innocent reading about it

today.

The one mistake I think Maraniss made is that he started venturing off into stories that were only tangentially related to Detroit. For example, he spends a lot of time discussing how the team trying to land the Olympics for Detroit went to Switzerland to present to the International Olympic Committee. Fine, but he spends too much time talking about details of the trip that really had nothing to do with Detroit.

Ultimately, this is a sad story because, as I noted, there is always a foreshadowing of what is to come. The arrogance of the Big 3 and its refusal to accept that the public was starting to want smaller cars eventually decimated the American car industry and Detroit itself. Detroit still has a significant car industry (and the concomitant suppliers and contractors to the industry)but much of it is outside of Detroit. The city is slowly recovering I suppose but whatever it becomes it will not be like the Detroit of 1963.

51 of 54 people found the following review helpful.
The Happy and Sad Story of Detroit
By Andy in Washington
It is not always obvious today, but for many years, Detroit was a vibrant city, and a major part of the Great Lakes manufacturing belt. It was a key part of America's economy, and drove more than its share of popular culture. David Maraniss examines this time period, roughly from WWII through the mid-1960's.

=== The Good Stuff ===

* The author captures a comprehensive view of Detroit. He concentrates on the auto and music industries, and incorporates much of the culture and lifestyles of the area. The book delves into the racial tensions, both in the country as a whole and Detroit in particular, and catalogs both the successes and tragedies.

* Parts of the book are excellent. The discussion of Berry Gordy and Motown Records was excellent and I wish the author would break it out as a separate book and cover more of the details. The efforts of Berry and his sisters in starting and guiding Motown through the minefield of 1960's America were incredible to read.

* Maraniss captures very interesting sides to Detroit's history. We see how race relations went through cycles- from relatively peaceful periods of civil-rights progress to more stormy eras of violence and riots. The book stops short of the 1967 riots, but certainly develops the conflicts and tensions that would later explode.

* The best part of the book was the integration of various threads in Detroit. For example, the civil rights struggle crashed into the effort to bring the Olympics to Detroit, and the Olympic bid became a target for disgruntled citizens. The author also incorporates the politics of the UAW and national political parties into the civil-rights movement, and points out how these events affected each other.

* Similarly, the author is able to capture events outside of Detroit, but which had an importance to the city. For example, we see LBJ attempting to placate Walter Reuther (the UAW leader) by supporting his plan to build small cars in Detroit. Reuther envisioned a joint venture between the Big 3 to bring one vehicle to a market that would not support multiple entries. We see LBJ at the pinnacle of his power; He wants to strong-arm the Defense Department to buy 100,000 of "these little things"; He exerts pressure on the DOJ to play along and avoid anti-trust issues. All of this was in an effort to win favor with Reuther, whose voters LBJ relied upon for support. Ironically, LBJ hated small cars, and rode around in quite literally the largest car Ford built.

=== The Not-So-Good Stuff

* Maraniss can get bogged down in details, some of which do not seem to add much to the story. For example, I really have no interest in the Gotham Hotel room number where Goose Tatum (of the Harlem Globetrotters) stayed. It was 603 if anyone is interested BB King got married in 609.

* My biggest complaint is the book highlights some areas for thought, but doesn't provide enough guidance. For example, the book described in detail the effort of Detroit to host the 1964 Olympics, a bid that was ultimately unsuccessful. The process by which Detroit sold itself to the International Olympic Committee was described, and it showed up the best and worst of Detroit's civic pride and its internal tensions. The author taunts us with the possibility that Detroit's future might have been very different if it had secured the 1964 Olympics but does not elaborate.

=== Summary ===

There is a lot to like in this book, and I gained insight into the US in the 1960's. The sections on Motown were fascinating, as were the politics of auto manufacturers, unions and US presidents. The book ends abruptly before the violence of the late 1960's and the anti-war demonstrations, which I wish had been included, but I can see the author's point about limiting the scope. I would have liked to see more analysis, but enjoyed reading the book. I'd recommend it to anyone with an interest in this aspect of US history.

=== Disclaimer ===

I was able to read an advance copy through the courtesy of the publisher and NetGalley.

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ONCE IN A GREAT CITY: A DETROIT STORY BY DAVID MARANISS PDF

Guides Once In A Great City: A Detroit Story By David Maraniss, from basic to complicated one will certainly be a quite helpful works that you could require to change your life. It will certainly not give you unfavorable declaration unless you don't get the meaning. This is definitely to do in reading a book to conquer the significance. Generally, this publication entitled Once In A Great City: A Detroit Story By David Maraniss is checked out because you actually like this type of e-book. So, you can obtain simpler to recognize the impression as well as definition. Once more to constantly remember is by reviewing this book **Once In A Great City: A Detroit Story By David Maraniss**, you can fulfil hat your interest start by finishing this reading book.

Review
* A Best Book of 2015 (The Economist) *

* Winner - Robert F. Kennedy Book Award *

“Elegiac and richly detailed . . . Maraniss . . . conjures those boom years of his former hometown with novelistic ardor. Using overlapping portraits of Detroiters (from politicians to musicians to auto execs), he creates a mosaiclike picture of the city that has the sort of intimacy and tactile emotion that Larry McMurtry brought to his depictions of the Old West, and the gritty sweep of David Simon’s HBO series “The Wire.” . . . People’s experiences intersect or collide or resonate with one another, and Mr. Maraniss uses them as windows on the larger cultural and political changes convulsing the nation in the ‘60s . . . [Maraniss] succeeds with authoritative, adrenaline-laced flair. . . . Maraniss cuts among story lines about the auto industry, the civil rights movement and City Hall, and among subplots involving Ford’s development of its top-secret new car (the singular Mustang), the police commissioner’s efforts to get the goods on the mobster Tony Giacalone and Berry Gordy’s construction of a hit factory with Motown. The result is a buoyant Frederick Lewis Allen-like social history that’s animated by an infectious soundtrack and lots of tactile details, and injected with a keen understanding of larger historical forces at work – both in Detroit and America at large. . . . Maraniss’s evocative book provides a wistful look back at an era when those cracks were only just beginning to show, and the city still seemed a place of “uncommon possibility” and was creating “wondrous and lasting things.” (Michiko Kakutani for The New York Times)

“Captivating . . . Maraniss hears the joyous sound of a city suddenly, improbably filled with hope. . . . Maraniss asks himself what in the city has lasted, a question that often haunts former Detroiters. The songs, he decides. Not the reforms, not the dream of racial justice, not the promise of a Great Society, but the wonderfully exuberant songs that came pouring out of Berry Gordy’s studio. That’s the tragedy at the core of this gracious, generous book. All that remains of the hopeful moment Maraniss so effectively describes is a soundtrack. And that isn’t nearly enough.” (The Washington Post)

“Once in a Great City is incandescent. Through evocative writing and prodigious research, David Maraniss offers us an unforgettable portrait of 1963 Detroit, muscular and musical, during the early days of Motown and the Mustang. Bursting with larger than life figures from Henry Ford II, Walter Reuther, and Mayor Jerome Cavanagh, to Berry Gordy, Martin Luther King, and Reverend C.L. Franklin, Aretha's father, this book is at once the chronicle of a city during its last fine time and also a classic American story of promise

and loss.” (Gay Talese)

“The great virtue of Maraniss’s bighearted book is that it casts a wide net, collecting and seeking to synthesize these seemingly disparate strands. . . . Even where material is familiar, the connections Maraniss makes among these figures feel fresh. He’s even better on the lesser known. . . . Motown is clearly where Maraniss’s heart is, and it is where his materials—music, race, civil rights—come together most naturally. . . . You finish Once in a Great City feeling mildly shattered, which is exactly as it should be.” (New York Times Book Review)

“Maraniss has written a book about the fall of Detroit, and done it, ingeniously, by writing about Detroit at its height, Humpty Dumpty’s most poignant moment being just before he toppled over. . . . An encyclopedic account of Detroit in the early sixties, a kind of hymn to what really was a great city. . . . The display of municipal energies is so impressive that every page haunts us with the questions What went wrong? How could so much go so wrong so rapidly? How did a city of so many fruitful tensions and monuments and intermediary institutions turn into the ruins we see now, with scarcely a third of its 1950 population remaining and so many of the sites that Maraniss mentions ruined or destroyed?” (The New Yorker)

“David Maraniss turns back the clock to paint the picture of an American metropolis in its prime, however, one where the seeds of the city’s future fall were already starting to take root. . . . Maraniss’s recounting of the story of his birthplace has the distinct feeling of the first big drop of a roller coaster. A car chugging upward towards heady heights, but en route takes an inevitable plunge back into cold reality. . . . Maraniss is able to give these characters life by injecting them with foibles along with the force of personality that made them prominent figures in the building of the city. . . . The simple breadth of the book is impressive, with Maraniss merging and wrangling disparate storylines about culture, politics, race, and the Ford Mustang into a single patchwork image of the Motor City.” (Christian Science Monitor)

“David Maraniss is a journalist's journalist. . . . the book explores the optimism that existed in those days and the signs of major problems to come. It's a fascinating political, racial, economic and cultural tapestry.” (Detroit Free Press)

“A compelling portrait of one of America’s most iconic cities. . . . Maraniss highlights the class and race frictions that demarcated and defined the city and gives readers a glimpse of the colorful life of mobsters and moguls, entertainers and entrepreneurs. Among the famous Detroiters he highlights are Henry Ford II, Lee Iacocca, Berry Gordy Jr., George Romney, and the Reverend C. L. Franklin. Maraniss captures Detroit just as it is both thriving and dying, at the peak of its vibrancy and on the verge of its downfall.” (Booklist (starred review))

“A sprawling portrait of Detroit at a pivotal moment.” (Publishers Weekly)

“In celebration of what Detroit represented, this book is equally a study of what was lost and is written with an attractive wistfulness that pulls the reader in. The narrative's tone of reminiscence makes it entertainingly informative. . . A colorful, detailed history of the rise and ultimate decline of Detroit.” (Library Journal)

“Fast-paced,sprawling, copiously detailed look at 18 months—from 1962 to 1964—in the city's past . . . Maraniss' brawny narrative evokes a city still ‘vibrantly alive’ and striving for a renaissance. An illuminating history of a golden era in a city desperately seeking to reclaim the glory.” (Kirkus Reviews)

“[A] glimmering portrait of Detroit . . . that will leave the reader thoroughly haunted. . . . Once in a Great City has it all: significant scenes, tremendously charismatic figures, even a starry soundtrack. . . . Reading

about the city in its hey day is like falling backward in time and running into someone whose youthful blush you'd completely forgotten. Detroit is that someone. She is bright and laughing, flickering before you like a specter from the past. I doubt I'll forget her anytime soon." (Bookpage)

"Maraniss . . . undoubtedly will attract notice and focus even more attention on Detroit. . . . a unique and absorbing take. . . . As often as authors have told the story of Gordy and the rise of Motown, Maraniss still captures the vitality and enterprise on West Grand Boulevard in a fresh way. . . . [Maraniss] is equally adept at capturing the white-run city's complex racial dynamics at a time when black leaders were becoming more militant and clashing with each other over the proper level of assertiveness. Maraniss . . . is a skillful storyteller, and his interpretation of events in Detroit a half century ago is well founded. . . . Maraniss will only add to his reputation with Once in a Great City. It's a good read if your interest is only to visit Detroit's remarkable recent past. It's even a better read if you are interested in the city's extraordinary devolution. In either case, it's a story that is haunting, thought-provoking and, in the end, sad." (DeadlineDETROIT.com)

"A sobering portrait of a city that felt itself to be at the peak of its power and influence in a "time of uncommon possibility and freedom when Detroit created wondrous and lasting things," even as the forces that would topple it had set about their work. The principal strength of Maraniss's book lies in his skill at marshaling copious research to serve his sophisticated account of a complex, vibrant city balanced on its tipping point. . . . Sadly, one can't avoid the conclusion that never again will it be the city David Maraniss portrays with empathy and candor in this impressive book." (Shelf Awareness)

"Maraniss . . . aptly traces these two narratives — cars and race — in chronicling a pivotal period of his hometown's history. Spanning autumn 1962 to spring 1964, the book bustles with vivid characters, from Berry Gordy and C.L. Franklin (Aretha's father), to Walter Reuther and George Romney (Mitt's father). "It all looked so promising," Maraniss writes, paraphrasing Detroit Mayor Jerome Cavanagh's conversation with President Johnson after his 1964 visit, but even in those halcyon days, "some part of Detroit was dying," a casualty of white flight, the demise of labor unions, and a changing world. This is a beautifully written tribute to that lost, great city." (The Boston Globe)

"Combining hindsight and insight with deep-dive research, Maraniss provides a clear-eyed flashback to a once-powerful manufacturing metropolis intoxicated by cheap gasoline, swaggering hubris and blue-sky confidence. . . . Maraniss examines modern history in the dogged manner of David Halberstam and Robert Caro. Between the lines, he leaves an unwritten thought for both today's optimists and pessimists. If things could go change so much in just 50 years, what might the next half-century bring?" (The Detroit News)

"One of America's finest non-fiction writers, a son of Detroit, offers a lively and meticulously researched account of how the city, once the engine room of America, began sputtering." (The Economist)

"Maraniss' well-written and researched book well remembers the city of Detroit in the early 1960s as a place where factories hummed, Motown rocked and the present gave little warning that Detroit would become a 'city of decay.'" (Seattle Times)

About the Author
Born in Detroit, David Maraniss is an associate editor at The Washington Post. Maraniss is a Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist and bestselling author of Once in a Great City: A Detroit Story; First in His Class: A Biography of Bill Clinton; Rome 1960: The Olympics that Stirred the World; Barack Obama: The Story; Clemente: The Passion and Grace of Baseball's Last Hero; They Marched into Sunlight: War and Peace, Vietnam and America, October 1967; and When Pride Still Mattered: A Life of Vince Lombardi, which was hailed by Sports Illustrated as "maybe the best sports biography ever published." He lives in Washington,

DC, and Madison, Wisconsin.

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Once in a Great City Chapter 1 GONE

THE NINTH OF NOVEMBER 1962 was unseasonably pleasant in the Detroit area. It was an accommodating day for holiday activity at the Ford Rotunda, where a company of workmen were installing exhibits for the Christmas Fantasy scheduled to open just after Thanksgiving. Not far from a main lobby display of glistening next-model Ford Thunderbirds and Galaxies and Fairlanes and one-of-a-kind custom dream cars, craftsmen were constructing a life-size Nativity scene and a Santa's North Pole workshop surrounded by looping tracks of miniature trains and bountiful bundles of toys. This quintessentially American harmonic convergence of religiosity and consumerism was expected to attract more than three-quarters of a million visitors before the season was out, and for a generation of children it would provide a lifetime memory—walking past the live reindeer Donner and Blitzen, up the long incline toward a merry band of hardworking elves, and finally reaching Santa Claus and his commodious lap.

The Ford Rotunda was circular in an automotive manufacturing kind of way. It was shaped like an enormous set of grooved transmission gears, one fitting neatly inside the next, rising first 80 then 90 then 100 then 110 feet, to the equivalent of ten stories. Virtually windowless, with its steel frame and exterior sheath of Indiana limestone, this unusual structure was the creation of Albert Kahn, the prolific architect of Detroit's industrial age. Kahn had designed it for the Century of Progress exposition in Chicago, where Ford's 1934 exhibit hall chronicled the history of transportation from the horse-drawn carriage to the latest Ford V-8. When that Depression-era fair shuttered, workers dismantled the Rotunda and moved it from the south side shore of Lake Michigan to Dearborn, on the southwest rim of Detroit, where it was reconstructed to serve as a showroom and visitors center across from what was then Ford Motor Company's world headquarters. Later two wings were added, one to hold Ford's archives and the other for a theater.

In the fullness of the postwar fifties, with the rise of suburbs and two-car garages and urban freeways and the long-distance federal interstate system, millions of Americans paid homage to Detroit's grand motor palace. For a time, the top five tourist attractions in the United States were Niagara Falls, the Great Smokey Mountains National Park, the Smithsonian Institution, the Lincoln Memorial, and the Ford Rotunda. The Rotunda drew more visitors than Yellowstone, Mount Vernon, the Statue of Liberty, or the Washington Monument. Or so the Ford publicists claimed. Chances are you have not heard of it.

To appreciate what the Rotunda and its environs signified then to Detroiters, a guide would be useful, and for this occasion Robert C. Ankony fills the role. Ankony (who went on to become an army paratrooper and narcotics squad officer, eventually earning a PhD in sociology from Wayne State University) was fourteen in November 1962, a chronic juvenile delinquent who specialized in torching garages. Desperate to avoid drudgery and boredom, he knew the Rotunda the way a disaffected boy might know it. Along with the Penobscot Building, the tallest skyscraper downtown, the Rotunda was among his favorite places to hang out when he played hooky, something he did as often as possible, including on that late fall Friday morning.

"The Highway" is what Ankony and his friends called the area where they lived in the southwest corner of Detroit. The highway was West Vernor, a thoroughfare that ran east through the neighborhood toward Michigan Central Station, the grand old beaux arts train depot, and west into adjacent Dearborn toward Ford's massive River Rouge Complex, another Albert Kahn creation and the epicenter of Ford's manufacturing might. In Detroit Industry, the legendary twenty-seven-panel murals at the Detroit Institute of Arts painted by Diego Rivera and commissioned by Edsel Ford, the founder's son, among the few

distinguishable portraits within the scenes of muscular Ford machines and workers is that of Kahn, wearing wire-rim glasses and work overalls. Ankony experienced Detroit industry with all of his senses: the smoke and dust and smells drifted downwind in the direction of his family's house two miles away on Woodmere at the edge of Patton Park. His mother, Ruth, who could see the smokestacks from her rear window, hosed the factory soot off her front porch every day. What others considered a noxious odor the Ankonys and their neighbors would describe as the smell of home.

On the morning of November 9, young Bob reported to Wilson Junior High, found another boy who was his frequent collaborator in truancy, and hatched plans for the day. After homeroom, they pushed through the double doors with the horizontal brass panic bars, ran across the school grounds and over a two-foot metal fence, scooted down the back alley, and were free, making their way to West Vernor and out toward Ford country.

It was a survival course on the streets, enlivened by the thrill of avoiding the cops. Slater's bakery for day-old doughnuts, claw-shaped with date fillings, three cents apiece. Scrounging curbs and garbage cans for empty soda bottles and turning them in for two cents each. If they had enough pennies, maybe go for a dog at the Coney Island on Vernor. Rounding the curve where Vernor turned to Dix, past the Dearborn Mosque and the Arab storefronts of east Dearborn. (Ankony's parents were Lebanese and French; he grew up being called a camel jockey and "little A-rab.") Fooling around at the massive slag piles near Eagle Pass. Dipping down into the tunnel leading toward the Rouge, leaning over a walkway railing and urinating on cars passing below, then up past the factory bars, Salamie's and Johnny's, and filching lunches in white cardboard boxes from the ledge of a sandwich shop catering to autoworkers on shift change. Skirting the historic overpass at Miller Road near Rouge's Gate 4, where on an afternoon in late May 1937 Walter Reuther and his fellow union organizers were beaten by Ford security goons, a violent encounter that Ankony's father, who grew up only blocks away, told his family he had witnessed. Gazing in awe at the Rouge plant's fearsomely majestic industrial landscape from the bridge at Rotunda Road, then on to the Rotunda itself, where workmen were everywhere, not only inside installing the Christmas displays but also outside repairing the roof.

To Ankony, the Rotunda was a wonderland. No worries about truant officers; every day brought school groups, so few would take notice of two stray boys. With other visitors, including on that day a school group from South Bend, they took in the new car displays and a movie about Henry Ford, then blended in with the crowd for a factory tour that left by bus from the side of the Rotunda over to the Rouge plant, then the largest industrial complex in the United States. Ankony had toured the Rouge often, yet the flow of molten metal, the intricacies of the engine plant, the mechanized perfection of the assembly, all the different-colored car parts coming down the line and matching up, the wonder of raw material going in and a finished product coming out, the reality of scenes depicted in Rivera's murals, thrilled him anew every time. The Rouge itself energized him even as Rivera's famed murals frightened him. The art, more than the place itself, reminded him of the gray, mechanized life of a factory worker "in those dark dungeons" that seemed expected of a working-class Detroit boy and that he so much yearned to avoid.

When the Rouge tour ended in early afternoon, Ankony and his pal had had enough of Ford for the day and left for a shoplifting spree at the nearby Montgomery Ward store at the corner of Schaefer Road and Michigan Avenue, across the street from Dearborn's city hall. They were in the basement sporting goods department, checking out ammo and firearms, when they heard a siren outside, then another, a cacophony of wailing fire trucks and screeching police cars. The boys scrambled up and out and saw smoke billowing in the distance. Fire!—and they didn't start it. Fire in the direction of the Rotunda. They raced toward it.

Roof repairmen since midmorning had been taking advantage of the fifty-degree weather to waterproof the Rotunda's geodesic dome panels. Using propane heaters, they had been warming a transparent sealant so that

it would spray more easily. At around 1 p.m., a heater ignited sealant vapors, sparking a small fire, and though workmen tried to douse the flames with extinguishers they could not keep pace and the fire spread. The South Bend school group had just left the building. Another tour for thirty-five visitors was soon to begin. There was a skeleton staff of eighteen office workers inside; many Rotunda employees were at lunch. A parking lot guard noticed the flames and radioed inside. Alarm bells were sounded, the building was evacuated, the roof repairmen crab-walked to a hatch and scrambled down an inside stairwell, and the Dearborn and Ford fire departments were summoned, their sirens piercing the autumn air, alerting, among others, two truant boys in the Monkey Ward's basement.

By the time firefighters reached the Rotunda, the entire roof, made of highly combustible plastic and fiberglass, was ablaze. Two aerial trucks circled around to the rear driveway. From the other side, firefighters and volunteers stretched hoses from Schaefer Road and moved forward cautiously. It was too hot, and the water pressure too limited, to douse the fire with sprays up and over the 110 feet to the roof. The structure's steel frame began to buckle. At 1:56, fire captains ordered their men away from the building, just in time. Robert Dawson, who worked in the Lincoln-Mercury building across the street, looked over and saw a "ball of fire" on the roof but at first no flames below. "Suddenly the roof crashed through. Everything inside turned to flame. Smoke began sifting through the limestone walls. Then, starting at the north corner, the walls crumbled. It was as though you had stacked dominoes and pushed them over." The fire had reached the Christmas displays, fresh and potent kindling, and raged out of control, bright flames now shooting fifty feet into the sky. The entire building collapsed in a shuddering roar, a whirlwind of hurtling limestone and concrete and dust.

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