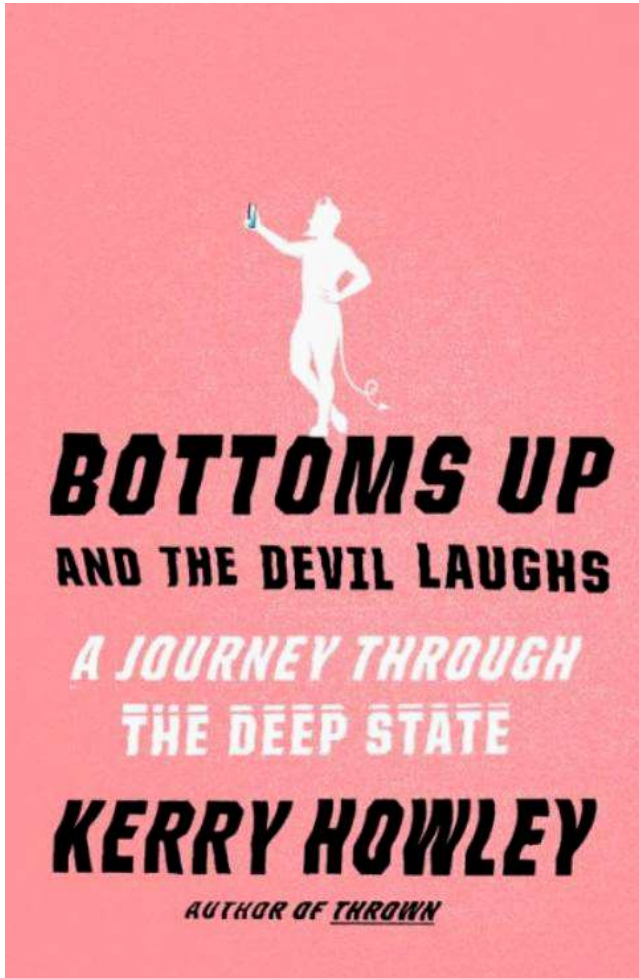


A Journey through the Deep State

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“Bottoms Up and the Devil Laughs: A Journey Through the Deep State” by Kerry Howley. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2023, 257 pages (hardcover).



“In the early years of the twenty-first century, everyone is amassing digital information but no one knows how to sort through it,” Kerry Howley explains near the beginning of “Bottoms Up and the Devil Laughs: A Journey Through the Deep State,” her mesmerizing journey through the darker realities of the modern era. “Closets are stacked with old computers. It would be better, of course, to go through all of one’s photos and keep only those worth keeping, but the thought of this induces paralyzing exhaustion. This would involve decision-making, which is cognitively taxing. This would involve delving deep into our personal histories, our pasts, which may involve feelings we don’t like feeling.”

“It’s best to just take another photograph,” she continues. “Keep building up the database. Throw it into the cloud, whatever that is... In the United States in the early years of the twenty-first century, this has been the approach intelligence agencies take toward information: Absorb everything, all of it, at once. Stash it somewhere. Worry about it later.”

As book reviews go, this one was somewhat of a departure for me. If I am being completely

honest – and I always try to earn that increasingly rare distinction – Howley’s narrative was oddly reassuring. Most readers have no doubt heard of the proverbial “deep state.” Some fervently believe in its existence; some think it is a conspiracy-fraught myth created by the pathologically paranoid. Regardless of your personal assessment of its efficacy, however, I believe most would find “Bottoms Up” to be an engaging read. The author is an exceptional storyteller, interspersing her personal experience with the overall subject matter at hand.

Consider the following from “Diesel Reezle,” one of the chapters which showcase Howley’s linguistic prowess in some detail:

“Once, when the girls were small, Billie and Ron had taken them to SeaWorld. They took in a show, watched sleek gray dolphins leap in unison, their sweet-sounding squeals elicited on command. Brittany was loving it. At which point her little sister – ever the explainer, ever the scold – declared that in captivity, the dolphins’ signals bounce crazily off the walls; their capacity for echolocation drives them mad. For Brittany, the show was ruined. It had been easier not to know what was hidden below the visible, beneath the bright surface of the cage.”

Reflect on the deceptively complex point the author is making for a moment and see if you can relate it to the worldview espoused by many Americans these days.

The further you submerge yourself into Howley's prose, the more apparent her *modus operandi* becomes. It slowly begins to dawn on you what she is describing. Equal parts explanation, enlightenment and cautionary tale, more than anything else, "Bottoms Up" is a wake-up call. It is easy to feel overwhelmed by the constantly cascading avalanche of information we are continually confronted with on a daily basis. It is easier still to feel completely at the mercy of forces that are beyond our control.

But could the reality actually be that there is no one behind the curtain pulling the levers? What if there is no overarching conspiracy? What if the end result of the digital age is the unintentional obliteration of our ability to discern truth from lies? Keep in mind, civilizations have always depended on their capability, both individually and collectively, to make that distinction.

"Zero America was conceived in a time when the legitimacy of the state was assured, unquestioned," Howley notes in "Zero Hippo," a chapter dealing with just these kinds of questions. "But the state's infrastructure was hard and solid and the sense of legitimacy a mist already burning off. The structure would outlast the faith that built it. Julian Assange established WikiLeaks in 2007. It was a list of links. It was 'an uncensorable Wikipedia for untraceable mass document leaking.'"

"We're going to crack the world open," Assange said. He cited Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and compared himself to academics forced to labor in Russian camps," Howley continues. "True belief begins only with a jackboot at the door. True belief forms when led into the dock and referred to in the third person. True belief is when a distant voice booms 'the prisoner shall now rise' and no one else in the room stands." He released a report about the corrupt president of Kenya. A copy of the British counter-insurgency manual. A cache of emails from a speechwriter to Hugo Chavez. He couldn't get the mainstream media to cover the documents. If he had cracked the world open, no one cared to look down the chasm."

A Lannan Foundation Fellow, Howley earned her Master of Fine Arts (MFA) from the University of Iowa, where she also served as a professor in the celebrated Nonfiction Writing Program. Currently, she is a feature writer at New York magazine; her work has appeared in The Paris Review, Granta, Best American Sportswriting, The New York Times Magazine, and Harper's. This is her second book; the first being "Thrown," a New York Times Editors' Choice and pick for best-of-the-year lists in Time, Salon, Slate, and other publications.

"Bottoms Up" is a thoroughly contemporary treatise that more Americans need to dissect. Its implications are clear. Near the end of the book, for example, Howley explores the events of January 6, 2021, within the context of her primary thesis.

"When authorities searched through the communications of people who tried to take the Capitol that day, they would find people who had been living placid, pandemic-constrained lives behind screens and had become desperate for experience beyond the coldly visual. Sometimes, the disease stripped its victims of the ability to taste or to smell. 'I wanted to do something,' a rioter later told me. 'I didn't want to just stay home.'"

As I often do when confronted with a book like "Bottoms Up," I searched for others' take on the manuscript. Perhaps Chris Hayes, MSNBC commentator and bestselling author of "A Colony in a Nation" best captures the sentiment I was searching for: "I love this book because I can't quite describe what it is. It bristles with the precise kind of strangeness that we live in but cannot name. Howley is one of the very best nonfiction writers working today and she is in peak form here. I'm jealous of her prose."

Agreed. And highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.