NONFICTION SELECTION >>

A fast food restaurant could be a nice place to visit—but you might not want to work there **—especially if you are a teenager.**

Fast Food NATI N

by Eric Schlosser

The Story So Far In *Fast Food Nation*, Eric Schlosser takes you behind the scenes of the fast food industry in often-gory detail. But even when his report isn't turning your stomach, it will surely turn your head.

Throughput

EVERY SATURDAY ELISA ZAMOT GETS UP AT 5:15 IN THE MORNING. IT'S A STRUGGLE, and her head feels groggy as she steps into the shower. Her little sisters, Cookie and Sabrina, are fast asleep in their beds. By 5:30, Elisa's showered, done her hair, and put on her McDonald's uniform. She's sixteen, bright-eyed and olive-skinned, pretty and petite, ready for another day of work. Elisa's mother usually drives her the half-mile or so to the restaurant, but sometimes Elisa walks, leaving home before the sun rises. Her family's modest townhouse sits beside a busy highway on the south side of Colorado Springs, in a largely poor and working-class neighborhood. Throughout the day, sounds of traffic fill the house, the steady whoosh of passing cars. But when Elisa heads for work, the streets are quiet, the sky's still dark, and the lights are out in the small houses and rental apartments along the road.

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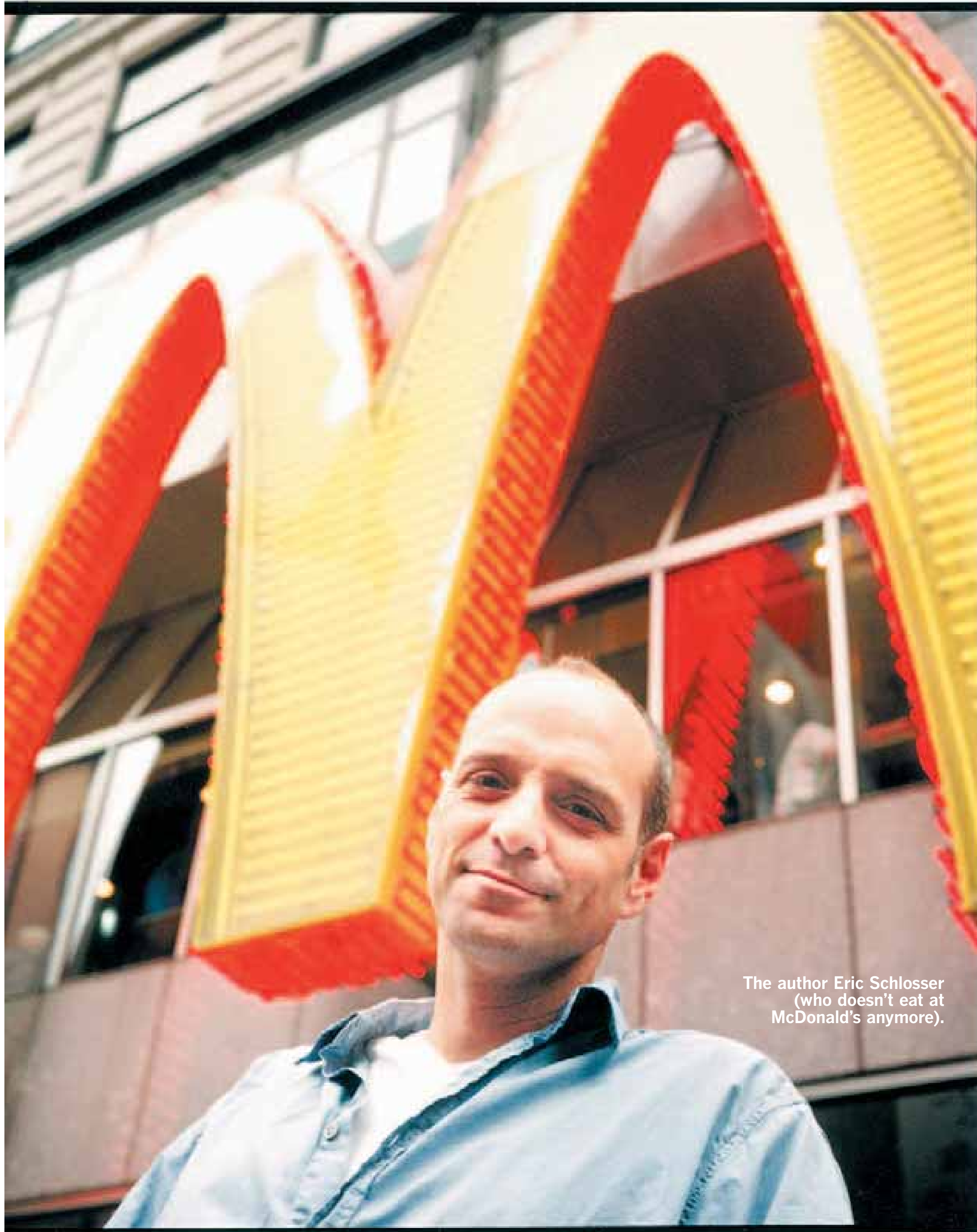

The author Eric Schlosser (who doesn't eat at McDonald's anymore).

HAMBURGER: ©ROYALTY-FREE/CORBIS; SCHLOSSER: ©ANDREW LICHTENSTEIN/AURORA

MEET THE AUTHOR: Eric Schlosser

BORN
New York City

EDUCATION
Princeton and Oxford

STATUS
Married, two children

FAVORITE FOOD (before writing book)
Cheeseburger and fries

REVISED OPINION
"Anyone who brings raw ground beef into his or her kitchen today must regard it as a potential biohazard."

THE BUZZ

Critics everywhere have raved about this best-selling exposé of the fast-food industry.

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When Elisa arrives at McDonald's, the manager unlocks the door and lets her in. Sometimes the husband-and-wife cleaning crew are just finishing up. More often, it's just Elisa and the manager in the restaurant, surrounded by an empty parking lot. For the next hour or so, the two of them get everything ready. They turn on the ovens and grills. They go downstairs into the basement and get food and supplies for the morning shift. They get the paper cups, wrappers, cardboard containers, and packets of condiments. They step into the big freezer and get the frozen bacon, the frozen pancakes, and the frozen cinnamon rolls. They get the frozen hash browns, the frozen biscuits, the frozen McMuffins. They get the cartons of scrambled egg mix and orange juice mix. They bring the food upstairs and start preparing it before any customers appear, thawing some things in the microwave and cooking other things on the grill. They put the cooked food in special cabinets to keep it warm.

No other industry in the United States has a workforce so dominated by adolescents. About two-thirds of the nation's fast food workers are under the age of twenty.

The restaurant opens for business at seven o'clock, and for the next hour or so, Elisa and the manager hold down the fort, handling all the orders. As the place starts to get busy, other employees arrive. Elisa works behind the counter. She takes orders and hands food to customers from breakfast through lunch. When she finally walks home, after seven hours of standing at a cash register, her feet hurt. She's wiped out. She comes through the front door, flops onto the living room couch, and turns on the TV. And the next morning she gets up at 5:15 again and starts the same routine.

Up and down Academy Boulevard, along South Nevada, Circle Drive, and Woodman Road, teenagers like Elisa run the fast food restaurants of Colorado Springs. Fast food kitchens often seem like a scene from *Bugsy Malone*, a film in which all the actors are children pretending to be adults. No other industry in the United States has a workforce so dominated by adolescents. About two-thirds of the nation's fast food workers are under the age of twenty. Teenagers open the fast food outlets in the morning, close them at night, and keep them going at all hours in between. Even the managers and assistant managers are sometimes in their late teens. Unlike Olympic gymnastics—an activity in which teenagers consistently perform at a higher level than adults—there's nothing about the work in a fast food kitchen that requires young employees. Instead of relying upon a small, stable, well-paid and well-trained workforce, the fast food industry seeks out part-time, unskilled workers who are willing to accept low pay. Teenagers have been the perfect candidates for these jobs, not only because they are less expensive to hire than adults, but also because their youthful inexperience makes them easier to control.

The labor practices of the fast food industry have their origins in the assembly line systems adopted by American manufacturers in the early twentieth century. Business historian Alfred D. Chandler has argued that a high rate of "throughput" was the most important aspect of these mass production systems. A factory's throughput is the speed and volume of its flow—a much more crucial measurement, according to Chandler, than the number of workers it employs or the value of its machinery. With innovative technology and the proper organization, a small number of workers can produce an enormous amount of goods cheaply. Throughput is all about increasing the speed of assembly, about doing things faster in order to make more.

EXCERPT FROM *FAST FOOD NATION* BY ERIC SCHLOSSER. COPYRIGHT © 2001 BY ERIC SCHLOSSER. PUBLISHED BY HOUGHTON MIFFLIN CO.

PHOTOS, LEFT TO RIGHT: ©ARNOLD GOLD/NEW HAVEN REGISTER/THE IMAGE WORKS; RUBBERBALL PRODUCTIONS

Although the McDonald brothers had never encountered the term "throughput" or studied "scientific management," they instinctively grasped the underlying principles and applied them in the Speedee Service System. The restaurant operating scheme they developed has been widely adopted and refined over the past half century. The ethos of the assembly line remains at its core. The fast food industry's obsession with throughput has altered the way millions of Americans work, turned commercial kitchens into small factories, and changed familiar foods into commodities that are manufactured.

At Burger King restaurants, frozen hamburger patties are placed on a conveyer belt and emerge from a broiler ninety seconds later fully cooked. The ovens at Pizza Hut and at Domino's also use conveyer belts to ensure standardized cooking times. The ovens at McDonald's look like commercial laundry presses, with big steel hoods that swing down and grill hamburgers on both sides at once. The burgers, chicken, french fries, and buns are all frozen when they arrive at a McDonald's. The shakes and sodas begin as syrup. At Taco Bell restaurants the food is "assembled," not prepared. The guacamole isn't made by workers in the kitchen; it's made at a factory in Michoacán, Mexico, then frozen and shipped north. The chain's taco meat arrives frozen and precooked in vacuum-sealed plastic bags. The beans are dehydrated and look like brownish corn flakes. The cooking process is fairly simple. "Everything's add water," a Taco Bell employee told me. "Just add hot water."

Although Richard and Mac McDonald introduced the division of labor to the restaurant business, it was a McDonald's executive named Fred Turner who created a production system of unusual thoroughness and attention to detail. In 1958, Turner put together an operations and training manual for the company that was seventy-five pages long, specifying how almost everything should be done. Hamburgers were always to be placed on the grill in six neat rows; french fries had to be exactly 0.28 inches thick. The McDonald's operations manual today has ten times the number of pages and weighs about four pounds. Known within the company as "the Bible," it contains precise instructions on how various appliances should be used, how each item on the menu should look, and how employees should greet customers. Operators who disobey these rules can lose their

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About one quarter of the U.S. population eats fast food every day.

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A typical fast food hamburger contains meat from dozens or hundreds of cattle.

franchises. Cooking instructions are not only printed in the manual, they are often designed into the machines. A McDonald's kitchen is full of buzzers and flashing lights that tell employees what to do.

At the front counter, computerized cash registers issue their own commands. Once an order has been placed, buttons light up and suggest other menu items that can be added. Workers at the counter are told to increase the size of an order by recommending special promotions, pushing dessert, pointing out the financial logic behind the purchase of a larger drink. While doing so, they are instructed to be upbeat and friendly. "Smile with a greeting and make a positive first impression," a Burger King training manual suggests. "Show them you are GLAD TO SEE THEM. Include eye contact with the cheerful greeting."

Since most teenagers still lived at home, they could afford to work for wages too low to support an adult, and until recently, their limited skills attracted few other employers.

The strict regimentation at fast food restaurants creates standardized products. It increases the throughput. And it gives fast food companies an enormous amount of power over their employees. "When management determines exactly how every task is to be done . . . and can impose its own rules about pace, output, quality, and technique," the sociologist Robin Leidner has noted, "[it] makes workers increasingly interchangeable." The management no longer depends upon the talents or skills of its workers—those things are built into the operating system and machines. Jobs that have been "de-skilled" can be filled cheaply. The need to retain any individual worker is greatly reduced by the ease with which he or she can be replaced.

Teenagers have long provided the fast food industry with the bulk of its workforce. The industry's rapid growth coincided with the baby-boom expansion of that age group. Teenagers were in many ways the ideal candidates for these low-paying jobs. Since most teenagers still lived at home, they could afford to work for wages too low to support an adult, and until recently, their limited skills attracted few other employers. A job at a fast food restaurant became an American rite of passage, a first job soon left behind for better things. The flexible terms of employment in the fast food industry also attracted housewives who needed extra income. As the number of baby-boom teenagers declined, the fast food chains began to hire other marginalized workers: recent immigrants, the elderly, and the handicapped.

PHOTOS LEFT TO RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM: ©WILLIAM TAUFIC/CORBIS; CHARLES TRAINOR JR./KRT; ©JIM WEST/THE IMAGE WORKS

English is now the second language of at least one-sixth of the nation's restaurant workers, and about one-third of that group speaks no English at all. The proportion of fast food workers who cannot speak English is even higher. Many know only the names of the items on the menu; they speak "McDonald's English."

The fast food industry now employs some of the most disadvantaged members of American society. It often teaches basic job skills—such as getting to work on time—to people who can barely read, whose lives have been chaotic or shut off from the mainstream. Many individual franchisees are genuinely concerned about the well-being of their workers. But the stance of the fast food industry on issues involving employee training, the minimum wage, labor unions, and overtime pay strongly suggests that its motives in hiring the young, the poor, and the handicapped are hardly altruistic.

Elisa Zamot is a junior at Harrison High. In addition to working at McDonald's on the weekends, she also works there two days a week after school. All together, she spends about thirty to thirty-five hours a week at the restaurant. She earns the minimum wage. Her parents, Carlos and Cynthia, are loving but strict. They're Puerto Rican and moved to Colorado Springs from Lakewood, New Jersey. They make sure Elisa does all her homework and impose a midnight curfew. Elisa's usually too tired to stay out late, anyway. Her school bus arrives at six in the morning, and classes start at seven.

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You Have Rights

EVERY YEAR ABOUT 28,000 TEENAGERS ARE INJURED ON THE JOB AT A FAST FOOD RESTAURANT. HOW CAN YOU PROTECT YOURSELF? ONE WAY IS BY KNOWING YOUR RIGHTS.

1 **Under federal law, teens 16 and up can work as late as they want and for as many hours as they want. But it's their choice. When school is in session, 14- and 15-year-olds can work 18 hours a week, but they can't work during school hours, before 7 a.m., or after 7 p.m. When school is out, they can work 40 hours a week, with a maximum of 8 hours a day, but they can't work before 7 a.m. or after 9 p.m. Note that studies have shown that young people experience benefits of work up to 15 hours a week. At more than 15 hours a week, however, there starts to be a decline in academic performance and an increase in drug and alcohol abuse. When you hit 20 hours a week, the problems are even more significant.**

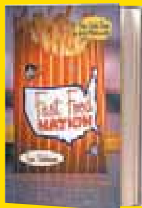
Don't get burned at work.

2 **Under federal law, if you're under 18 you can't drive as a regular part of your job. You also can't operate a forklift, a box crusher, or a meat slicer, or work where you might be exposed to radiation. Other jobs off-limits to anyone under 18: wrecking, demolition, roofing, mining, and logging.**

3 **The federal minimum wage is $5.15 per hour. A special minimum wage of $4.25, however, applies to workers under the age of 20 during their first 90 calendar days of employment. It's considered a transition period. Of course, you don't have to take this low wage. If you want, you can look for another job.**

4 **Employers have the right to set any kind of dress code they want, but they can't require you to pay for the uniform.**

5 **You have the right to report your boss for violating any of your rights. It is illegal for your employer to fire or punish you for reporting a problem in the workplace.**



LC Book Club Questions

1 Why does the author believe the fast food industry employs so many teenagers?

2 Does this excerpt alter your perception of fast food restaurants? If so, how? If not, why not?

20 Minute Essay

>>TAKE 20 MINUTES TO PLAN AND WRITE AN ESSAY ANSWERING THE FOLLOWING QUESTION:
Is a fast food job exploitive to teenagers—or a good work experience?

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Elisa had wanted to work at McDonald's ever since she was a toddler—a feeling shared by many of the McDonald's workers I met in Colorado Springs. But now she hates the job and is desperate to quit. Working at the counter, she constantly has to deal with rude remarks and complaints. Many of the customers look down on fast food workers and feel entitled to treat them with disrespect. Sweet-faced Elisa is often yelled at by strangers angry that their food's taking too long or that something is wrong with their order. One elderly woman threw a hamburger at her because there was mustard on it. Elisa hopes to find her next job at a Wal-Mart, at a clothing store, anywhere but a fast food restaurant. A good friend of hers works at FutureCall, the largest telemarketer in Colorado Springs and a big recruiter of teenaged labor. Her friend works there about forty hours a week, on top of attending Harrison High. The pay is terrific, but the job sounds miserable. The sort of workplace regimentation that the fast food chains pioneered has been taken to new extremes by America's telemarketers.

"IT'S TIME FOR BRINGING IN THE GREEN!" a FutureCall recruiting ad says: "Lots O' Green!" The advertisement promises wages of $10 to $15 an hour for employees who work more than forty hours a week. Elisa's friend is sixteen. After school, she stays at the FutureCall building on North Academy Boulevard until ten o'clock at night, staring at a computer screen. The computer automatically dials people throughout the United States. When somebody picks up the phone, his or her name flashes on the screen, along with the sales pitch that FutureCall's "teleservice representative" (TSR) is supposed to make on behalf of well-known credit card companies, phone companies, and retailers. TSRs are instructed never to let someone refuse a sales pitch without being challenged. The computer screen offers a variety of potential "rebuttals." TSRs make about fifteen "presentations" an hour, going for a sale, throwing out one rebuttal after another to avoid being shot down. About nine out of ten people decline the offer, but the one person who says yes makes the whole enterprise quite profitable. Supervisors walk up and down the rows, past hundreds of identical cubicles, giving pep talks, eavesdropping on phone calls, suggesting rebuttals, and making sure none of the teenage workers is doing homework on the job. The workplace at FutureCall is even more rigorously controlled than the one at McDonald's.

After graduating from Harrison, Elisa hopes to go to Princeton. She's saving most of her earnings to buy a car. The rest is spent on clothes, shoes, and school lunches. A lot of kids at Harrison don't save any of the money earned at their fast food jobs. They buy beepers, cellular phones, stereos, and designer clothes. Kids are wearing Tommy Hilfiger and FUBU at Harrison right now; Calvin Klein is out. Hip-hop culture reigns, the West Coast brand, filtered through Compton and L.A.

During my interviews with local high school kids, I heard numerous stories of fifteen-year-olds working twelve-hour shifts at fast food restaurants and sophomores working long past midnight. The Fair Labor Standards Act prohibits the employment of kids under the age of sixteen for more than three hours on a school day, or later than seven o'clock at night. Colorado state law prohibits the employment of kids under the age of eighteen for more than eight hours a day and also prohibits their employment at jobs involving hazardous machinery. According to the workers I met, violations of these state and federal labor laws are now fairly commonplace in the fast food restaurants of Colorado Springs. George, a former Taco Bell employee, told me that he sometimes helped close the restaurant, staying there until two or three in the morning. He was sixteen at the time. Robbie, a sixteen-year-old Burger King employee, said he routinely worked ten-hour shifts. And Tommy, a seventeen-year-old who works at McDonald's, bragged about his skill with the electric tomato dicer, a machine that should have been off-limits. "I'm like an expert at using the damn thing," he said, "'cause I'm the only one that knows how to work it." He also uses the deep fryer, another labor code

STOPWATCH: PHOTO DISC VIA SODA

violation. None of these teenagers had been forced to break the law; on the contrary, they seemed eager to do it.

Most of the high school students I met liked working at fast food restaurants. They complained that the work was boring and monotonous, but enjoyed earning money, getting away from school and parents, hanging out with friends at work, and goofing off as much as possible. Few of the kids liked working the counter or dealing with customers. They much preferred working in the kitchen, where they could talk to friends and fool around. Food fights were popular. At one Taco Bell, new employees, departing employees, and employees who were merely disliked became targets for the sour cream and guacamole guns. "This kid, Leo, he smelled like guacamole for a month," one of the attackers later bragged.

The personality of a fast food restaurant's manager largely determined whether working there would be an enjoyable experience or an unpleasant one. Good managers created a sense of pride in the work and an upbeat atmosphere. They allowed scheduling changes and encouraged kids to do their schoolwork. Others behaved arbitrarily, picked on workers, yelled at workers, and made unreasonable demands. They were personally responsible for high rates of turnover. An assistant manager at a McDonald's in Colorado Springs always brought her five-year-old daughter to the restaurant and expected crew members to baby-sit for her. The assistant manager was a single mother. One crew member whom I met loved to look after the little girl; another resented it; and both found it hard to watch the child playing for hours amid the busy kitchen, the counter staff, the customers at their tables, and the life-size statue of Ronald McDonald.

> A lot of kids at Harrison don't save any of the money earned at their fast food jobs. They buy beepers, cellular phones, stereos, and designer clothes.

None of the fast food workers I met in Colorado Springs spoke of organizing a union. The thought has probably never occurred to them. When these kids don't like the working conditions or the manager, they quit. Then they find a job at another restaurant, and the cycle goes on and on. ■

Classic Connections

JOURNALISTIC WRITING CAN BE EXTREMELY POWERFUL IN CREATING SOCIAL CHANGE. IN THE 20TH CENTURY, MANY WRITERS BROUGHT IMPORTANT ISSUES INTO THE PUBLIC REALM THROUGH INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING.

THE BOOK	THE ISSUE	THE SOLUTION
THE JUNGLE **(1905)** **by Upton Sinclair**	Sinclair exposed the unsafe and unsanitary working conditions in meatpacking factories in a series of articles in a newspaper that later became a famous book. His exposé was the first of its kind.	As a result of Sinclair's reporting, more stringent regulations were placed on the meatpacking industry and working conditions improved.
SILENT SPRING **(1962)** **by Rachel Carson**	Carson blew the whistle on the use of harmful pesticides such as DDT in farming, proving with scientific evidence that such chemicals can cause permanent damage to humans as well as other animals.	*Silent Spring* put an end to the use of DDT, spurred anti-pesticide legislation, and sparked the environmentalist movement that continues today.
UNSAFE AT ANY SPEED **(1991)** **by Ralph Nader**	Car companies failed to correct dangerous defects in vehicles, and lobbied against mandatory safety features like airbags because it would cost money.	The auto lobbies were successful until Nader's book provoked citizens who urged the government to hold automakers responsible.