

Transcendental Meditation in America: How a New Age Movement Remade a Small Town in Iowa, by Joseph Weber. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014. viii, 221 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$18.00 paperback.

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Anyone who views Iowa as being culturally homogenous should take a close look at the extraordinarily diverse spiritual and religious life that has taken root in the eastern half of the state over the past century. Cedar Rapids boasts the longest-standing Muslim mosque in North America (erected in 1934); Hasidic Jews flocked to Postville and built a formidable, if controversial, kosher meatpacking empire; and buggies belonging to the Old Order Amish clatter along the thoroughfares in and around Kalona. And, of course, there is Fairfield, the unlikely Jefferson County home of Maharishi University of Management (MUM) and an epicenter for the Transcendental Meditation (TM) movement in the United States. The story of TM's tumultuous presence in Fairfield is the subject of Joseph Weber's *Transcendental Meditation in America: How a New Age Movement Remade a Small Town in Iowa*.

In this original, concise, and generally engaging account, Weber does not purport to offer a thorough history of TM and its antecedents. Nor does he claim to furnish a comprehensive biography of the movement's founder, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (who achieved global fame in the late 1960s after several celebrities, most notably the members of the Beatles, came under his tutelage). Rather, his aim is to chronicle the myriad tensions that have beset Fairfield since the TM movement took over the campus of the bankrupt Parsons College in 1975.

As Weber tells it, the changeover from Parsons to MUM failed to precipitate the usual assortment of "town versus gown" problems found in many municipalities that feature an academic institution. The TM-based school banned drinking and attracted clean-cut students and faculty who were sincerely interested in achieving enlightenment. (If anything, MUM attracted a more straight-laced crowd than Parsons, which had been a notorious "party school.") But locals wondered about the newcomers—vegetarians who meditated twice daily and followed an Indian guru. Put simply, some feared that the newcomers were religious crackpots. After all, they promised a path toward world peace and touted something called the "Maharishi Effect," the notion that there would be measurable improvements in everyone's quality of life

if just one percent of the population practiced TM. Some of them even endeavored to practice “Yogic Flying” (which was as implausible as it sounds).

Just how much would the quirky beliefs and practices of these interlopers fundamentally alter the character of the town? The heart of Weber’s book is his chronicle of the still-evolving changes wrought in Fairfield by TM: the appearance of Indian restaurants, the emergence of TM practitioners as candidates for political office, the alteration of landmark buildings on the former Parsons campus. For the most part, Weber writes efficiently and even-handedly, in a concise reportorial style that renders the book accessible to a broad audience. (Weber was a journalist for many years before taking up a teaching post at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, and that training is apparent in the breezy prose style employed here.) We see a Fairfield in flux – not necessarily better or worse than it was before the arrival of TM, but undeniably different. And we also see a town where practitioners of TM remain somewhat aloof, even four decades after they started arriving. In one of the book’s most telling passages, a local religious leader tells Weber that Fairfield is made up of “two groups that go our separate ways” (39) – TM devotees, and everyone else.

Books about spirituality inevitably have to grapple with questions of legitimacy and veracity, particularly when groups make grandiose claims, as TM’s exponents often do. Weber, to his credit, does this deftly, charting TM’s successes as well as its failures. He reports that while TM-based programs have produced positive results in primary and secondary schools, the benefits of meditation were not enough to help a MUM student who stabbed and killed a classmate on campus in 2004. Weber offers no verdict on TM’s ultimate truth, but he clearly is not naive about some of the wilder assertions made to promote it.

While admirably fair, Weber’s narrative approach has some drawbacks. The book lacks a clear narrative focus; no single compelling story or character jumps from the pages to bring the story to life in especially vivid or memorable terms. Anecdotes and individuals come and go as Weber recounts how TM practitioners have reshaped Fairfield. Moreover, some extraneous or obscure details probably do not add much to the overall account, and some facts are repeated in several different places.