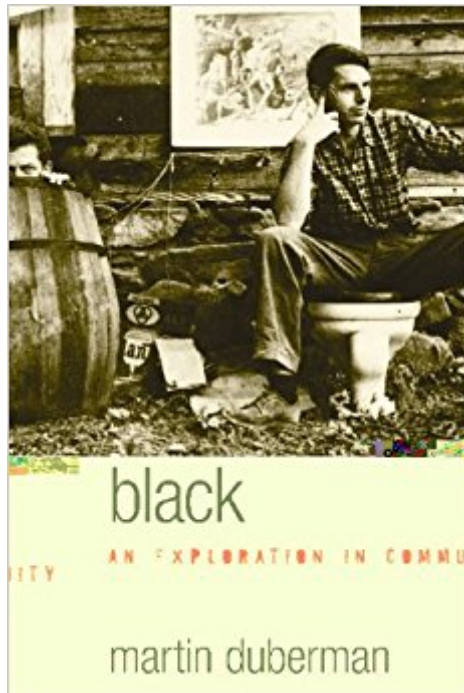


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# Black Mountain: An Exploration In Community



## Synopsis

With faculty and alumni that included John Cage, Robert Creeley, Merce Cunningham, Buckminster Fuller, Charles Olson, Josef and Anni Albers, Paul Goodman, and Robert Rauschenberg, Black Mountain College ranked among the most important artistic and intellectual communities of the twentieth century. In his groundbreaking history, Martin Duberman uses interviews, anecdotes, and research to depict the relationships that made Black Mountain College what it was. Black Mountain documents the college's twenty-three-year tenure, from its most brilliant moments of self-reinvention to its lowest moments of petty infighting. It records the financial difficulties that beleaguered the community throughout its existence and the determination it took to keep the college in operation. Duberman creates a nuanced portrait of this community so essential to the development of American arts and counterculture.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Fascinating history with a resonance that far exceeds the experience of the Black Mountaineers themselves."&#151;Newsweek

Â Â Martin Duberman is distinguished Professor Emeritus of History at the City University of New York. He is the author of some twenty books, including Charles Francis Adams (winner of the Bancroft Prize); James Russell Lowell (finalist for the National Book Award); Paul Robeson (winner of the George Freedley Memorial Award); Left Out: The Politics of Exclusion, Essays 1964-2002;

The Worlds of Lincoln Kirstein (finalist for the 2007 Pulitzer Prize in Biography); and Cures: A Gay Man's Odyssey. His recent novel Haymarket has been published in several languages, and his play In White America won the Drama Desk Award. He lives in New York City.

great examination of this important college.

perfect

a great review of the most influential artists and teachers of the 20th century

When was the last time you tore through a 440 page work of non-fiction on education? Well, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* captures your imagination and takes you on an intense and important ride. It tells a tale of hope, tragedy, and future possibilities. Although it only had under 200 students, in its 1933-1957 history, the College attracted some of the most important artists and visionaries of the 20th Century. We're talking names such as John Cage, Buckminster Fuller, Merce Cunningham, Willem De Kooning, and Robert Rauschenberg. This book was of immense value, not because of the celebrity appeal of some of its intellectuals. This is the story of an experiment in seeking a new way to learn. There were no course requirements, and no majors. There was no external Board of Trustees, but students did sit on the governing Board of Fellows. Faculty firings were on occasion over-turned by organized student outcry. The Black Mountain story is one dominated by big egos and flawed personalities. Internal conflicts at Black Mountain constantly split it apart. Despite its desire to be a democratic, faculty-(worker)-owned community, Black Mountain never figured out how to rise above its own eccentricities, its pretensions, or its false senses of self. It never figured out how to become a sustainable institution, either financially, or culturally. In three decades, it became consumed by its schisms and drama. The experience makes you realize how much humanity has grown in the 80 years since Black Mountain's founding. And how important the science of human conflict resolution is to the future of any other innovative group project. I read *Black Mountain* as a case study in a field I personally am exploring, as a social entrepreneur: radical education. In a world of over-priced, cookie-cutter colleges, the time is right to start a new experimental college. What would the next Black Mountain look like? This book has taught me much of what not to do. Duberman, a radical historian, is interested in anarchism, communes of the 70's, and gay liberation. The book was written in the early 70's, and Duberman ponders out loud, often in early chapters, how much of himself to put into the book. He decides to give himself plenty

of leeway, but just as often lets the story tell itself. The weakest point of the book is the final third, which seems rushed. Duberman often seems mesmerized by the artistic extroverts who came to define this history. Duberman praises the over-sized personality of poet/rector Charles Olson, but the Olson we get in the book is a boor, a misogynist, and a blowhard. The best part of the book is the first third, the Black Mountain community was at its strongest. Spontaneous concerts were given on pianos scattered around the campus. People were painting and drawing all the time, led by star teacher Joseph Albers (a strong disciplinarian, formerly of the Bauhaus). People new to the theatre were pulled into doing plays - theatre was almost a cultural requirement. It was widely acknowledged that doing theatre helped people grow. This College was an immersion in constant intellectual stimulation, not a retreat, not a party. It was a place of real practical knowledge, a place of beauty and wisdom taking on human flesh. It was an important step forward.

Duberman's classic "Black Mountain" is the definitive work of scholarship on the school that gave America its most pivotal and influential artists of the 20th century. A sheer joy to read, this account of the rise and fall of Black Mountain engages the reader into a world of ideas, community and art that is all too rare in today's considerations. Teachers can learn how to Teach and Do at the same time. Students can learn the meaning of involvement, responsibility and creativity. Parents might learn a thing or two about choices. And administrators will see where they've gone wrong. Something for nearly everyone in this erudite, and poignant dissertation. If there was one idea that pervades the book, and, indeed, pervaded the college it was that "living" and "learning" should be intertwined, and a favorite slogan at Black Mountain was that "as much real education took place over the coffee cups as in the classrooms." There is much that we all can learn from this account. But read it for the adventure! Think of it as a sort of Intellectual Indiana Jones where the treasure is that harmonious mix of education, art, community and life -- in other words, the very gem that these brave and gifted women and men of eminence sought at Black Mountain. We owe these pioneers a great deal. Honor them with your mind, and read this wondrous account by one of Black Mountain's own. Dave Beckwith Founder/President Charlotte Internet Society

Most of this history of Black Mountain College is devoted to institutional history (governance, finances, who sided with who in this or that petty dispute, etc.). Some attention is given to community aspects. We learn next to nothing about the academic side of things. The one exception is art, which is given some attention and only here are there some accounts of what actually went on in the classrooms. Art was central from the start and Black Mountain College became artier with

the years and is perhaps best remembered as an art school today, but I still think there is good reason to be dissatisfied with this one-sided perspective, especially considering the founder Rice's very explicit rejection of the idea of the college as an art school: "'God, no!' he'd thunder, 'that's the last thing I want. They're the most awful places in the world!'" (p. 55). The following brief summary is essentially all we learn about how the college functioned academically: "Classes varied considerably in format, since each teacher was left to his own devices. Some would lecture or direct discussions more than others; some would settle for words, others would show pictures and play music; and occasional seminar would be taught by three or four instructors, and many classes had staff members or their wives sitting in as students. Most instructors privately jotted down grades, but only---so went the rationale, anyway---in case a student later needed a 'record' for transfer or for graduate school. The grades were never passed on to the students themselves, and never, therefore, became the focus of energy or the standards for evaluating self-worth ... The only exams given at Black Mountain were those to pass from junior to senior (specialized) division, and those set by outside examiners when a student felt ready to graduate. For the division exam, students were given all day, free use of the library and wide choice among many questions (which often included conundrums like 'How do you know the Philippine Islands exist?', or 'How do you know the sky is blue?'). ... Black Mountain never managed to get accreditation." (p. 108). Other interesting topics on which we would have liked to learn more include things like John Dewey's relation to the college. Dewey visited several times and became a member of the college's advisory board, but for some reason Duberman thinks that this should earn him no more than two short paragraphs (p. 102). The general conclusion from the entire experiment is fairly predictable: the college attracted interesting students (when fired from Rollins College, Rice "had few doubts about the students interested in starting a new school; 'top flight,' according to Rice, 'not a second-rater in the lot'---and indeed they included the president of the student body and the editor of the undergraduate paper." (p. 28)), and dedicated faculty (In 1942 "the community tried various expediciencies in order to cut costs. Having already contributed its labor in putting up the new plant, the faculty now decided to contribute its pathetic salaries as well; it agreed not to draw any money, beyond \$10 a month per person, until it looked reasonable clear that the college would be able to survive (and in some cases faculty members turned down offers to teach elsewhere, including one that carried a \$10,000 salary)" (p. 165)), although "at its worst, the community consisted of little more than a group of squabbling prima donnas---many professional, others in training" (p. 12).

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