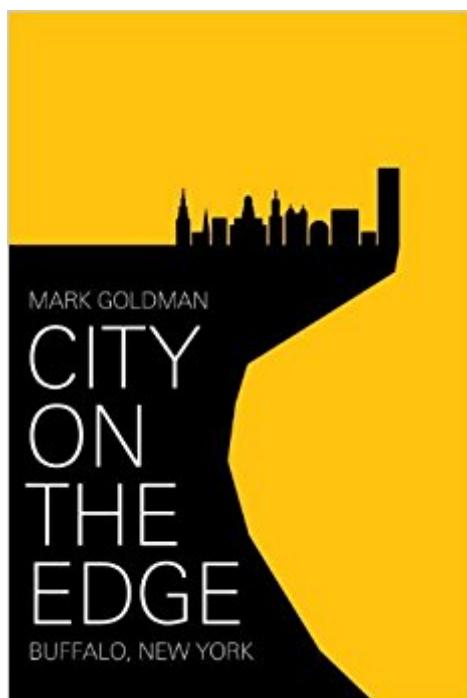


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City On The Edge: Buffalo, New York, 1900 - Present



Synopsis

In a sweeping narrative that speaks to the serious student of urban studies as well as the general reader, Mark Goldman tells the story of twentieth-century Buffalo, New York. Goldman covers all of the major developments: The rise and decline of the city's downtown and ethnic neighborhoods The impact of racial change and suburbanization The role and function of the arts in the life of the community Urban politics, urban design, and city planning While describing the changes that so drastically altered the form, function, and character of the city, Goldman, through detailed descriptions of special people and special places, gives a sense of intimacy and immediacy to these otherwise impersonal historical forces. *City on the Edge* unflinchingly documents and describes how Buffalo has been battered by the tides of history. But it also describes the unique characteristics that have encouraged an innovative cultural climate, including Buffalo's dynamic survival instinct that continues to lead to a surprisingly and inspiringly high quality of community life. Finally, it offers a road map, which—if followed—could point the way to a new and exciting future for this long-troubled city.

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Customer Reviews

Mark Goldman (Buffalo, NY), a successful entrepreneur who has played a major role in revitalizing the cultural life of downtown Buffalo, is the author of *City on the Lake: The Challenge of Change in Buffalo, New York*.

Buffalo lost a great deal more than four Super bowls in the twentieth century. The Queen City of the Great Lakes has lost half of its population, most of its substantive economic base, and the redeeming grace and charm of its foliage and distinctive neighborhoods. All decaying Rustbelt cities can point to similarities, but like hurricanes, wars, and recessions, each city's fall is distinct, each its own perfect storm of poor planning, illusions of grandeur, outside interests, corrupt politics, and citizenry impervious to the need for urban reinvention. Mark Goldman's chronicle of Buffalo through the twentieth century is indeed a page turner. The fact that we know the outcome makes each step of the journey the harder the bear, because the reader knows that it is the wrong step, and the tendency to cry out "What were you thinking?" pervades this work throughout. In many instances Goldman's analyses of "what they were thinking" are clear and brilliant. He covers a wide range of the city's life and how the mistakes of one quadrant interfaced with those of another to create the mosaic of wreckage that stands today. The author tends to go overboard with the cultural arts, and he virtually ignores the Catholic Church, Erie County, and the Mob, [apologies for the juxtapositions], forces of considerable influence upon the city. But on the whole, he tells a compelling and moving story. If the City of Buffalo is jinxed, as some believe, the curse may have been incanted between 1895 and 1900, when city fathers welcomed Pennsylvania's Walter Scranton, President of Lackawanna Steel, to set up shop along a massive tract of prime waterfront property. Not only would Buffalo's future, for better and worse, be inexorably tied to steel and its attendant satellites, but the template was also set in place for a century of dependence upon outside money and corporate enterprise. Perhaps an early indicator of this problematic formula was the 1900 Pan American Exposition, whose scope and grandeur is probably not appreciated by Buffalonians today. Opened with much international fanfare, the Exposition was marred by the assassination of President William McKinley, lost much money, became an object of derision within the city, and closed to the grotesque spectacle of the public electrocution of its mascot elephant--who apparently had the last laugh and walked away unscathed--the first in a century's tradition of "wide rights" and disputed goals for Buffalo's sports fans. If there were Cassandras about Buffalo's developing economic algorithm, boosters could point to the presence of a thriving grain industry and other enterprises that took advantage of Buffalo's remarkable transportation advantage, its strategic position on the Great Lakes waterway. However, no one in the Western New York congressional delegation seemed to have grasped the implications of planning for the St. Lawrence Seaway in the 1950's, and certainly few in Buffalo took to reinventing the city's economy in those pivotal mid-century years, when to all appearances the steel/auto/grain trinity would carry the city into the next millennium. Goldman traces these developments with great care. He contrasts

the conventional thinking of chamber of commerce types to the remarkably imaginative cutting edge emergence of the arts, as the Albright Knox art campus, Kleinhans Music Hall, and the English department of the University of Buffalo were bringing international notice and acclaim to the city. Clearly this is Goldman's forte; his narrative of cultural opportunity and festivals in the 1960-70 era is worth the price of the book. However, all of the great minds who graced the city during this period did not significantly alter Buffalo's image as a "lunch bucket town." Certainly, there was no communication between the artists and the urban planners. By 1960 there was considerable concern among city leaders about the growth of Erie County, Buffalo's suburbs such as Tonawanda, Orchard Park, Clarence, and Hamburg, among others. As in many other cities there was an exodus to the suburbs, in Buffalo's case exacerbated by incompetent city government and police corruption, declining public schools, and racial tension. Goldman describes the near frantic efforts of downtown Buffalo merchants to draw people into the old shopping hub, primarily by making downtown Buffalo auto friendly. This strategy had been employed as early as the 1920's; Goldman chronicles the destruction of trees and venerable buildings, and the rerouting of entire avenues prior to WW II. In its 1960 edition, Buffalo's express highway compulsion destroyed long existent neighborhoods. The two great boondoggles of mis-engineering were the destruction of Humboldt Parkway for a submerged freeway, and later the destruction of Main Street with a poor man's rapid transit line that connected the old UB campus with the downtown Buffalo Sabres' original arena...at a time when town and gown relations had deteriorated considerably after Viet Nam War demonstrations, treated in considerable detail. What is notable in Goldman's overview is that the very qualities which made Buffalo distinctive were also the ones that killed the city. Goldman reveres the ethnic neighborhoods, but the parochial mentality [which still hamstrings the city] made wholesale planning and reform nearly impossible. Buffalo, for much of the past four decades, has been a prolonged and unfruitful standoff among the city hall old guard, public and private unions, an increasingly inept state legislature, and racial interests too busy to collectively take care of business, literally and figuratively. Thus the city has found itself at the mercy of emigrating employers and the John Rigas with alluring promises. Goldman's solution for the future--revitalization of the neighborhoods--is worthy [see Savannah, Georgia] but in my view still parochial. Buffalo has never had real money. Its economy and culture demand interdependence with county, state, and now international forces to rebuild a workable substructure. Given the scandalously protracted dispute over a project as simple as rebuilding the Peace Bridge across the Niagara River, Buffalo still appears to be a city strangled in special interest for the foreseeable future.

Mark Goldman's "City on the Edge: Buffalo, New York" tracks the history of the titular city from the Pan-American Exposition and arrival of Lackawanna Steel Company at the dawn of the twentieth century through the early twenty-first century and the blizzard of 2006. Of the city's history he argues, "Like so many other like-minded people, I was becoming increasingly frustrated and disappointed by public officials who, distracted by the lure of big-money, 'silver-bullet' projects, failed to recognize the incredible power that local people working on small, local projects can have on the life of a community" (pg. 11). Indeed, several of his chapters compare some public initiative against the everyday struggles of people living in Buffalo to get by. While the level of detail in this book and its use of local geography will make it appeal mostly to those in or from Buffalo, Goldman's chapters (complete with notes at the end) would work well as readings for teaching an upper-level high school or college freshman class. The city of Buffalo and Goldman's examples work well as a case study for twentieth-century American politics.

Mark Goodman provides valuable information and insight on Buffalo's decline. I was born and raised in the Allentown Section and my family still owns a home there. I attended Our Lady of Lourdes, Fallon High School, and Canisius College. So, I found Goodman's insights on Allentown and Buffalo in general to be informative, well-researched, and reasonably thorough. Goodman rightly notes that the serial big-government, high cost, schemes for reviving the Downtown section were disastrous. Goodman rightly contrasts the promises of "Urban Renewal" schemes with the damage they caused to Buffalo's social fabric. Nevertheless, Goodman never seems to connect other, important, dots in Buffalo's decline including how New York State's and Buffalo's high tax rates drove businesses away. Goodman seems to admire Judge John Curtin. Yet, it was Curtin's edicts that accelerated the exodus from Buffalo and gave its citizens a sense that they did not control their own destiny. Nor does Goodman ever consider conservative critics, many whom shared observations similar to Goodman, but came to somewhat different conclusions including Alfreda Slominski, John Otto, Jack Kemp, or even Jane Jacobs. It is an excellent book, but it is written from a limited frame of reference.

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