In *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, Coontz explores two centuries of American family life. She attempts to dispel many myths and stereotypes about what the “typical” family structure that has been idealized since the time of “Leave it to Beaver” and the 1950’s era. Through tracing the American family throughout history, Coontz shows that the idea of family has always been a diverse and changing, and many factors contribute to this diversity that include economic, demographic, and political changes.

The first chapters of *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* lay the groundwork of some of the myths about family forms in the past,
showing how difficult it is to make generalizations about current family structures. She
discusses the idealized “Leave It To Beaver” family structure and how it was an
invention in the 1950’s rather than a symbol of tradition. The next chapters dispel the
myths that the changing family structure is a result of changing gender roles—with the
women leaving the traditional housewife role—showcasing the different gender divisions
of labor throughout history and that even in a “typical” household in which the male is
the primary breadwinner, these families were seldom economically or emotionally self
reliant.

The next chapters trace the complex relationship between family privacy and state
intervention, and Coontz shows that families have never been immune from outside
interference and that modern standards of family privacy are largely a product of state
intervention itself. The following chapter zeroes in on several important factors that
contribute to the myth of the collapsing family, including the role of the mother, changes
in the ideas of marriage, how to properly raise children, and the family structure of
African American families.

I found the ideas in *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the
Nostalgia Trap* to be very interesting and informative. Coontz’s research was incredibly
thorough and contributed well to the overall thesis of the book. The idea of a typical
family structure is shown to be more myth than reality, given that there have been so
many family types throughout and history and that families continue to change and
diversify. Where I felt that *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the
Nostalgia Trap* fell short was in the presentation of and overwhelming amount of
research. Coontz takes readers through decades of American history without much
chronology or order in anyway. She would make a statement, go through years of history to substantiate this claim, and somewhere stumble on another statement to make without ever fully explaining her first. I felt as though she tried to address too many issues without going into specific enough detail on any one topic. The idea of The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap is a valuable read for teachers who must remember that each of their students come from varying family structures, not from a “Leave It To Beaver” perfect stereotype. I learned a lot from this book despite the difficulty in staying with Coontz’s ideas. I would recommend it to anyone who wants to teach or study the American family.