13th generational malaise

"I can see a crisis brewing," says 13th Gen (Vintage/Random House, $12.50 paper) co-author Neil Howe, "and sadly, it begins with some crazed old boomer setting off a major catastrophe.”

I shook my head, chuckling. Here we were, sitting in L’Hotel — L’HOTEL — the epitome of boomer/yuppie numb-skull extravagance, complete with squared, tinted glass shooting upwards at dizzying angles. $6 “premium brew” and the mandatory just-came-off-the-boat-from-Nice waitron. This 1993 world of debt-soaked, indulgent artifice — could any coming catastrophe be worse than this? Such grim irony.

"13th Gen is a sort of sequel to our last book, Generations," Howe explains. "Bill [Strauss, the co-author] and I received a great deal of feedback about Generations, especially about the last group we described, the 13th American generation, born from 1961 to 1981. People were interested in what made this ‘bad-kid’ generation tick, and why.

The bad rep build-up began slowly — the “devil baby” flicks of the late ’60s; the “hustler kid” characters of the ’70s (best exemplified by the infamous Scott Baio film Bugsy Malone); the ”me first, kids second” pop-psychology of the ’60s and ’70s, culminating in huge rises in divorce rates and “latch-key kids” — and by 1980, the media were flooded with reports that kids were dumber, meaner, and more greedy than their boomer counterparts were at that age. Older Americans became shocked and angered at what had become of their youth.

"Your generation," says Howe, a 40-ish boomer, "gets a raw deal in so many endeavors. Forty-year-old newspaper columnists, who love to write about how dumb the kids are today, wouldn’t have jobs if it wasn’t for the 23-year-old whiz-kid coming around to fix their computers. No one writes about that.

Howe isn’t a mouth-breathing shill for the virtues of young-folk. No one will mistake 13th Gen for The Greening of America — none of that boomer utopian fuckery. There are lots of screwed-up, depressed and flat-out dumb 13ers, argues Howe; it’s just that there are extenuating circumstances.

Thirteeners, especially ones born in the ’70s, were the guinea pigs in a largely failed educational revolution. More than anything else, the 13th gen were raised to become good-feeling, more “open” human beings. Grammar and math (unless it was the now-aggressively-ridiculed New Math) lessons took the backseat. These were the kids of Free to Be You and Me. Of course, when they got out of school, the kids quickly realized that no one gave a goddamn about their precious “feelings,” and crueler still, of divorce. Thirteeners also believe in things like loyalty and honor. To boomers, those are antiquated concepts, but 13ers see these as real society-building values.

"What I see coming in the next 10 years is the next great generation gap," he says. "I think it started a couple of years ago, and now it’s heading into full swing. You can see kids staking out their own territory, with rap and grunge music, for instance. It’s a complete rejection of everything boomers stand for. Boomers are increasingly concerned about ‘values’ and ‘public spirit.’ Notice that boomers say the schools are teaching courses about ‘ethics.’ But 13ers didn’t see much of this kind of pious talk in the ’80s when many boomers were out there driving BMWs and eating nouvelle cuisine.

At the end of 13th Gen, Howe and Strauss make a few predictions about the fate of the 13ers. Thirteeners, they say, knowing first-hand the legacy of a “me-first” society, will be the first generation in a long while to make real sacrifices for the good of the country. Families, government and infrastructures will be rebuilt, all on the backs of the 13er.

And by the mid-21st century, a major boomer-started crisis will have been averted by the work of pragmatic 13ers. "Think about it,” the authors write. “Of all of today’s living generations, which one is someday most likely to risk blowing up the world just to prove a point? When that nightmare possibility appears, it may compel a grown-up cadre of shouted-at Breakfast Clubbers to insist on having the last word after all — and to demand that principle defer to survival.”

While it may sound like the work of weird futurists (or worse, Popcorn-Toffler acolytes), 13th Gen is best read as the work of two top-level historians. While its agenda is the 13th generation, it can also be seen as an incredibly well-written and exhaustive history of America from 1961 to 1981 — examining the era through everything except the traditional historical subjects (war, politics, famine, etc.).

After the interview deal was done, we talked about how the book relates to the Canadian experience. “You can see it in your politics,” Howe said. “Trudeau was from the ‘G.I’ generation. He was a no-nonsense builder of great institutions, though some might argue about exactly how great they were. Mulroney was a classic ‘silent generation’ leader. [The ‘silent generation’ came directly before the baby boom.] He was preoccupied with concepts like ‘process’ and ‘consensus.’ He loved to ‘negotiate a compromise solution.’ And Campbell, she’s a classic boomer. Everything’s “new with her. She’s a ‘values and ideas,’ new age politician.”

Howe asked for the cheque. Our waiter came around with some apple pie. Huge plate, small slice. I can’t say much for the pie’s flavor, but it was tastefully arranged.