

Review

James Landers. *The Improbable First Century of Cosmopolitan Magazine*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2010. 368 pp. ISBN: 978-0-82621-906-0, \$34.95 (cloth).

How is it, asks James Landers, that *Cosmopolitan* was able to survive its first hundred years when the fate of other comparable magazines was not so fortunate? He observes that, since its founding issue in 1886, *Cosmopolitan* had transformed itself multiple times. *The Improbable First Century of Cosmopolitan Magazine* describes ways in which survival of an American magazine has been intimately connected to its editorial dynamics. Landers constructs his narrative in ten chapters arranged around dynamic personalities of its editors. If *Cosmopolitan* is to endure in the future, Landers writes, it will be because of the “imagination, intelligence, and self-confidence of a person who believes people will respond to ideas expressed by the magazine” (296). The book is based on a large amount of data, amassed from over one thousand issues of *Cosmopolitan*, articles from a number of other newspapers, court documents, correspondence, and various municipal and university libraries. Most valuably, perhaps, Landers was able to conduct two in-depth personal interviews with Helen Gurley Brown.

Cosmopolitan came to life when twenty-nine year old Paul Schlicht became president of an office equipment corporation. Schlicht sensed an opportunity. Discretionary income was rising, literacy grew, population in the cities expanded, and there was a growing interest for information and entertainment. As products were increasingly manufactured by national corporations rather than locally, magazines carried the brand-name to the consumers. Unlike quality literary magazines which relied primarily on subscription for revenue, *Cosmopolitan* was to be an affordable family magazine that would substitute revenue with advertising. To try to build up circulation, Schlicht used items from the company’s inventory as gifts to subscribers and offered high fees to entice famous writers. But there was much to learn about competition in magazine publishing. Two years after it was launched, Schlicht secretly transferred ownership of the

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Cosmopolitan Magazine Company to investors in Manhattan and left his former corporation behind in bankruptcy.

The next notable personality in the history of *Cosmopolitan* was John Brisbane Walker who sold property in Colorado to move to Manhattan for a new adventure. Having resources available, Walker had other strategies to promote the magazine. His female editor with no travel experience was sent on a trip around the world. A very generous salary offered to a prominent author to become editor of *Cosmopolitan* attracted the likes of Mark Twain, the young Theodore Roosevelt, G.H. Wells, Anton Chekhov, and Leo Tolstoy. A contest for best essays on air travel had the inventor Thomas Edison as evaluator. Socially progressive, Walker had other ideas, including a correspondence-based and tuition-free institution called Cosmopolitan University, which attracted more than twenty thousand applicants but came short of money to pay for the faculty. *Cosmopolitan* covered issues from technological innovations to American expansionist policies, treatment of the working people, race and gender discrimination, and education. As profits grew and the magazine gained in popularity, Walker was facing a new low priced but quality competitor. His response was to enter into a price war. As a result, there was less reporting and more pages devoted to ads. In his later years, Walker lost his progressive edge so that when other magazines published exposés on corporate illegal activities to a great interest of the public, Walker praised the robber barons for their leadership. Not able to follow the shifts in public sentiment, subscriptions and monthly distribution dropped.

In 1905, *Cosmopolitan* was sold to William Randolph Hearst, a media mogul with presidential aspirations. Hearst had a taste for sensational reporting. *Cosmopolitan's* series on corruption in the Senate angered President Theodore Roosevelt who famously discredited the exposé as “muckraking”. After loses in his runs for office, Hearst began to occupy himself with construction of two grandiose residences in California and switched the magazine's focus to fiction. The new editor, Ray Long, was finely tuned to the literary tastes of the readers. In exchange for raising the magazine's circulation and advertisement revenue, the editor demanded extravagant payment not only for his own talent but also for the talent of the writers whom he attracted to the magazine. As the stock market crashed on Wall Street in 1929, Hearst continued funneling money to his construction projects in California, and Long insisted on high fees for the authors. Hearst Corporation's general manager responded with a call for cost controls. With Hearst's agreement, a corporate finance committee was set up to keep tight controls of the budget and high pressure on ad sales. Long resigned and with him went the fame of the magazine.

Through this transition, this same general manager eventually became the president of Hearst Corporation while Hearst himself was gradually pushed away and finally banished from corporate decision making. The magazine survived through the Depression era and the World War II but its fiscal policy pushed it into mediocrity.

By 1950s, the Hearst Corporation saw *Cosmopolitan* as a liability and was ready to liquidate the magazine. Along came Helen Gurley Brown with a bestselling book about single women and their relationships with men. Her ambition was to have a magazine for younger career oriented women with a taste for celebrity lifestyles and unconventional interpersonal relationships. Gurley Brown wined and dined with corporate leaders to persuade them to advertise in *Cosmopolitan*, reported on fabulous travels and Hollywood parties, and enticed celebrities to pose naked for the cover. Her model of womanhood clashed with the feminist movement in the 1960s, which understood that mass-mediated images of the kinds published in *Cosmopolitan* help perpetuate gender inequality. Through her long editorship between 1965 and 1996, Gurley Brown transformed *Cosmopolitan* into the niche magazine it is today.

The Improbable First Century of Cosmopolitan Magazine is for anyone interested in the history of American mass media and popular culture and will be useful in undergraduate classes in cultural studies and communication. The book is filled with interesting empirical snippets that point to elements in the larger social context that could help Landers analyze, rather than simply narrate, the economic, cultural, social, and psychological dynamics of magazine publishing in the United States. Conceptually, therefore, this is a missed opportunity. The lack of any kind of a theoretical framework and the minimal engagement with scholarly literature will be a disappointment to those who are looking for theoretical contributions.

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doi:10.1093/es/kht009