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Journal of Magazine Media, Volume 18, Number 1, Fall 2017, (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jmm.2017.0010>

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Book Review: For, By, With, Against? Women's Shaky Position in Magazines

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Women in Magazines: Research, Representation, Production and Consumption. Rachel Ritchie, Sue Hawkins, Nicola Phillips, S. Jay Kleinberg (Eds.) Routledge, 2016. 266 pp. \$145 hardcover.

An edited collection that emerged from a homonymous conference, *Women in Magazines* (2016) is a potpourri of 15 thought-provoking papers examining “racial and ethnic identities, second wave feminism and married women’s employment” in relation to magazines (p. 18). Divided into five sections, the chapters could hardly be distilled into a single theme. Perhaps the best synopsis of the book is that “the relationship between women and magazines is characterized by ambiguity and tensions” (p. 17).

The first section offers a framework for the study of women’s magazines. The opening chapter argues for an “inclusive rather than fragmentary” (p. 26) methodology for magazine research. The second study is an examination of women’s magazines and their readers in the context of 1960s British culture, with a goal to “encourage others to reflect critically on assumptions about the status of magazines and their readers” (p. 41). It is this critical review of assumptions that grounds all of the chapters that follow.

Part Two investigates the negotiation of gender norms across cultures, with women’s magazines as forums “in which women’s roles were argued about and also often stylised in an effort to support the sale of consumer items” (p. 11). The opening study offers insight into an ideological rift between male and female free-love advocates in the London-based journal *The Adult*—the former emphasizing male domination; the latter championing social change (p. 62). The second chapter examines how women’s magazines in inter-war Czechoslovakia focused on “culture, politics, practical matters and women’s achievements as well as wanting visuals of fashion, film and the world at large” (p. 76). The third chapter analyses a distillery’s 1950-1969 ad campaign in *Gourmet*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *Life*, targeting “middle- and upper-class white women ... in their capacity as housewives rather than as drinkers of hard liquor in order to imbue alcohol use with respectability” (p. 81). The final chapter examines how the magazine of the Young Americans for Freedom both emphasized “juggling politics and social expectations of marriage and family” and offered “unique opportunities for women who often found themselves searching for political space” (p. 100).

Part Three comprises four chapters about women’s employment—in magazines or as depicted by magazines. The opening chapter studies the role of an “agony aunt,” focusing on journalist Leonora Eyles, who encouraged “women to demand more; not only a ‘living’, that is, but also a ‘life’ that was rewarding and fulfilling” (p. 120). Next is an exploration of the magazine writings of Constance Maynard, the founding Mistress of Westfield College, who, after retiring, managed to “engage in a wider world as she integrated her intellectual and spiritual beliefs” (p. 133). The portrayal of married working women in the Canadian

Chatelaine is the focus of the next chapter, which reveals a “cultural unease” through the coexistence of articles advocating for married women’s paid work and “piercing criticisms of the wife in the labour force” (p. 143). The last chapter analyzes magazine readers’ letters as a “forum for heated debates about the frustrations mothers and nannies felt in their relationships with one another and their feelings about children” (p. 151).

Part Four includes two case studies of young women’s depictions in magazines. The first examines *Ladies’ Home Journal’s* early-20th-century portrayals of the “American Girl” as an “icon of United States idealism in accordance with mass cultural constructs of race and female sexuality” (p. 165). The second analyzes how *Honey* magazine used fashion “to carve out a distinctly new image of youthful femininity that resonated with readers” (p. 183).

The final section focuses on women’s physical form. An analysis of *Cleo* magazine’s sexual liberation content reveals how not only activists but “ordinary women too struggled for equality within the limitations imposed by class, race and limited education” (p. 211). The next chapter examines how *Ladies’ Home Journal* provided readers with health information from 1969 to 1975 “on an individual ‘therapeutic feminism’ basis ... in line with the women’s health movement distribution of health content to individual women” (p. 225). The last study explores the role of *Beauty Trade*—sometimes reinforcing and sometimes challenging dominant ideologies—in the rise of Black hair magazines in the U.S.

A part of Routledge’s Research in Gender and History series, *Women in Magazines* is “not simply about women’s magazines” but rather about “the position of women *in* magazines” (p. 1). An anthology of women’s depictions in—as well as contributions to—magazines, the volume contains essential readings for media and feminist scholars as well as historians. In the classroom, the collection could provide fodder for discussions in upper-level undergraduate or graduate level courses in magazine media, journalism, and women and gender studies. Individual chapters would also be at home as required reading for a variety of history courses in either upper-level undergraduate or graduate programs.