

Carolyn Kitch. *Pages from the Past: History & Memory in American Magazines.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. 241 pp. \$18.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8078-5649-9.



Reviewed by Elliot King (Loyola College, Maryland)

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That newspapers are "the first draft of history" is one of the more enduring, and perhaps tired, clichés of media analysis. Nonetheless, as with most pieces of conventional wisdom, the cliché about newspapers does contain a nugget of truth. As opposed to televised news, which can provide real-time transmission of events as they occur, events reported for newspapers are inevitably placed within some sort of context. Moreover, given the definition of news, journalists report those aspects they believe are significant and omit what they decide is not important. News reporting is a first claim that a public should attend to something that happened. Remembered history itself is a similar, more significant claim of the same nature.

In *Pages from the Past: History and Memory in American Magazines*, Carolyn Kitch, associate professor of journalism at Temple University and author of *The Girl on the Magazine Cover: The Origins of Visual Stereotypes in American Mass Media* (2001), argues that magazines should be seen as the second (or perhaps subsequent) draft of history. In fact, Kitch, a former editor at *Good*

Housekeeping magazine who is emerging as one of the most astute analysts of the social and cultural impact of magazines, aims to prove two points. First, that magazines play an important role in the creation of public history--the emergence and maintenance of a shared understanding of the past usable by the general public in the present. Secondly, in part due to their function in the creation of public history, magazine content is as worthy of study as other media that contribute to public history, most notably film. Indeed, while Kitch acknowledges film's ability to be "a legitimate conveyor of memory and history," she also posits that "perhaps more so than fictional media, journalistic media are a useful meeting ground for historians and media professionals, who do not work in such different realms and towards such different outcomes after all" (p. 7).

In pursuit of these objectives, Kitch provides textual analysis of more than 60 American magazines specifically geared to memorialize, reflect upon, or reminisce about a specific period of time, person, or event. Unlike newspapers, which are often used to wrap the next day's garbage,

many of magazines that Kitch studied were intended to be collectibles--that is, saved for a long periods of time by the purchaser. Moreover, she notes, many emerged as bestselling issues.

Kitch has approached the subject thematically. She includes chapters on magazines that attempt to summarize arbitrary periods of time such as decades, the century, and the millennium, and chapters that explore the emergence of the ordinary person as hero in the wake of September 11. Other chapters focus on reflections on celebrities--usually with their death as the news hook; the African-American experience; the meaning of youth and "new generations"; and finally, how magazines celebrate their own milestone anniversaries. Interesting the book's title *Pages from the Past* seems to be drawn from a similarly named feature that ran in a *Good Housekeeping* anniversary issue.

Anyone who has heard Kitch present her preliminary findings at academic conferences over the years knows that her work is both carefully done and insightful. For example, in the chapter that looks at how magazines attempt to make sense of the century, the millennium, and specific decades, she notes that most of the stories in those issues conform to six specific narrative structures--individualism, the rise of the underdog, the fall from grace of the greedy and immoral, the triumph of democracy, the survival of the small town, and the role of technology in making the world a better place. She also notes a relentless focus on individuals and individual stories, both of prominent people and "ordinary Joes."

In her chapter on magazines that discuss the emergence and labeling of generations, she has also identified common themes. Part of the "news" in these issues is that the current generation of youth--whatever that generation is--is different than the generation that has come before it; at the same time, though, there is an underlying notion that certain aspects of youth are timeless. What's

more, the newness of youth eventually transforms into the grist of nostalgia.

As could be expected, some chapters are stronger than others. For example, I wasn't really sure what to make of the chapter that explored two magazines devoted to reminiscing. I have never even seen either of the magazines examined--*Good Old Days* and *Reminisce*--and I simply am not sure how significant socially these two specific magazines are. Moreover, the book vigorously focuses on textual analysis. Consequently, a significant amount of space is devoted to describing exactly what appeared in the magazine pages. And at times, this kind of description can be heavy sledding.

Those quibbles aside, this is an interesting, smart book. Moreover, I think Kitch achieves her aims. Magazines do play a role in the creation of public history, though, based on my reading of this book, an extremely distorted public history. But that is a different argument. Moreover, magazines should not be considered a weak step-sibling in the world of media analysis. Kitch has demonstrated that they are as worthy of study as any other popular medium of communication.

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