

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Ronald Weber. *Hired Pens: Professional Writers in America's Golden Age of Print.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 1997. 315 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8214-1205-3; \$44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8214-1204-6.

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The American humorist Robert Benchley once quipped that freelance writers received payment in one of three ways: "per word, per piece, or perhaps"; the history of these writers is examined by Ronald Weber in *Hired Pens: Professional Writers in America's Golden Age of Print.*

Weber's survey of professional writers in America extends from the mid-1800s, with the pioneering freelance magazine work of Edgar Allen Poe and Nathaniel Parker Willis, to the collapse of the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1969, the death of which, Weber argues, marked the passing of a "major weekly market that, even if one failed to make its pages, proclaimed the possibilities of professional writing in a way matched by no other single publication" (p. 250). Although he covers a vast historical period, his material coheres owing to the fact that from the first appearance of mass-market magazines in the late 19th century until the monolithic rise of television in the mid-20th, one of the main forms of American popular entertainment consisted of the printed word.

As the subtitle of this book indicates, Weber feels that our cultural move away from the printed word has had a detrimental effect upon American letters. Weber notes that although there are still professional authors in America, their numbers have decreased in direct proportion to the disappearance of the general magazines and Sunday editions; whereby a great literary training ground has been lost. He points to the ramification of this lessened market for freelance writing through a statement made by Gore Vidal who described writing as "a trade that, sometimes, mysteriously, proved to be an art"

(p. 4).

As Weber rightly notes, the history of professional authorship in America has not been extensively documented, a worrisome fact since, as he indicates, without the financial support provided by "Grub Street" authors such as Jack London, Zane Grey, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and "Max Brand" (Frederick Faust) may have found other careers. Indeed, he indicates that Zane Grey was a perfectly successful, if very unhappy, dentist before his first sales allowed him to make a career change. Weber's thesis, understated and reflective rather than alarmist, is that we live at the end of the "Golden Age of Print."

Although the vast historical scope of this text, and Weber's determination to document the writing histories of a large number of otherwise forgotten authors, creates a somewhat disjointed narrative flow, anyone interested in the mechanics of how popular culture is produced, and, more importantly, why practical concerns must be included in any examination of authorship in America, will find what they are looking for in this text. More specifically, this book should be of interest to members of the PCA/ACA since it neatly demonstrates how popular culture is intertwined with "high culture," a situation which necessitates the knowledge and study of both.

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