

# H-Net Reviews

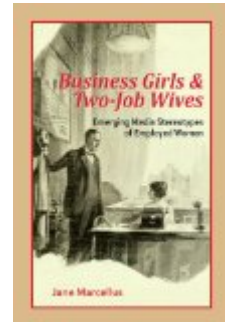
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jane Marcellus. *Business Girls and Two-Job Wives: Emerging Media Stereotypes of Employed Women*. Cresskill: Hampton Press, 2011. xii + 277 pp. \$67.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57273-988-8; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57273-989-5.

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## From “Office Wife” to “Two-Job Wife”: Magazine Stereotypes of Working Women in the 1920s and 1930s

The book builds on the work of Carolyn Kitch, who in her book *The Girl on the Magazine Cover* (2001), examined visual depictions of women in magazines from 1895 to 1930 and identified “the first mass media stereotype.”[1] Though the time periods overlap, Jane Marcellus, author of *Business Girls and Two-Job Wives*, narrows her examination to the magazine stereotypes of working women during the interwar years, 1918 to 1941, an era that reflects not only a new political empowerment for women in the post-suffrage period, but also the economic boom and bust of both the Jazz Age and the Great Depression. Unsurprisingly, the stereotypes of working women “reinscribed employed women into a traditionally feminine, domestic discourse” by making women’s work seem to be an extension of their roles as wives and consumers (pp. 4-5).

The strength of this work is that Marcellus examines not only a broad range of publications (from magazines for business men like *Forbes* and *Fortune* to upscale publications like *Harper’s* and the *Atlantic* to women’s titles like *Ladies’ Home Journal* and *Woman’s Home Companion*) but also a broad range of sources such as advertisements, visual images, readers’ letters, pieces of fiction, and nonfiction articles. Marcellus uses this material to construct a useful framework of working women’s stereotypes that includes “the Office Wife,” the “Two-Job Wife,” the “Woman as Expert” and “Woman as Exception.” These stereotypes are discussed in chapters 3 through 6 of the book, while chapters 7 and 8 examine

specific portrayals of black women in *Crisis* and *Opportunity*, portrayals of white women in *Independent Woman*, and readers’ own depictions of themselves in letters.

In chapter 3, Marcellus argues that magazine images undermined women’s economic independence by portraying secretarial work as a temporary stop on the road towards marriage. Thus, the secretary was often portrayed as either the “Office Wife,” an apprentice wife who longed to graduate from the workplace to the home, or the “Typewriter,” a machine operator in a factory of document production. Writes Marcellus: “As a Typewriter, she is an apprentice, with the actual typing machine functioning as a mechanized womb through which she might bring forth, in cyborg fashion, her office husband’s creativity in preparation for the time she will trade her typewriter-womb for the use of her real womb” (p. 95). By comparison, women portrayed as telephone operators were depicted as self-assured and independent, more powerful than secretaries whose “duties on the job and relationship to her male boss mirror ideas about the duties of a wife to her husband” (p. 95).

A domestic discourse also characterizes advertising depictions of women who are exceptions to the secretarial stereotype, writes Marcellus in chapter 4. The “Expert Woman” stereotype portrays women with an expertise in a specific professional area such as teaching or nursing, exploiting their authority to portray them as experts on being women. “Thus, she is the teacher who prescribes

laxatives or breakfast cereal, the nurse who cleans bathtubs” in these advertisements, Marcellus writes (p. 118). Profiles that portray the “Woman as Exception” function to reassure readers that despite the oddity of a woman’s job, she is still feminine. Furthermore, the discourse surrounding the controversial figure of the “Two-Job Wife,” a stereotype examined in chapter 6, focuses solely on whether married women should work. Articles dealing with this stereotype were often anonymous and offered no advice about how to balance demands at work and at home. “That the Depression might bring an end to married women’s employment was actually seen as a silver lining,” Marcellus writes. “At last, some believed, women were returning to homemaking—that is, returning to being *women*, rather than *workers*” (p. 162; the italics are Marcellus’s).

Chapter 5 examines the depictions of women’s bodies, identifying not only the various stereotypes used with each profession (round, motherly nurses versus tall, thin, modern maids, for example), but also the objectifying demands on women’s appearances. Marcellus points out that these discourses ignored actual health-related issues surrounding women’s bodies in the workplace, which “underscores the ideological purpose of mainstream representation, which was to reintegrate women into traditional discourses of femininity and domesticity and keep them there” (p. 142).

Chapters 7 and 8 provide some of the most interesting and provocative contrasts in the book. Chapter 7 describes portrayals of black women in two periodicals published for black audiences: *Opportunity*, published by the National Urban League, and *Crisis*, published by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Marcellus found that hypersexualized and infantilized portrayals of women were absent and that “femininity in these magazines is defined in terms of wisdom gained through experience, including paid labor, rather than as an ideal that might be threatened if a woman took a job” (p. 168). The exceptional woman was not an oddity or a threat to femininity, but rather seen “in terms of [her] contribution to the well-being and success of the whole race” (p. 168). While “Blacks writing in their own media space reconstructed their identities against the hegemonic grain of the mainstream” (p. 181), white middle-class women also reconstructed working women’s identities, but not always so supportively. Here, Marcellus examines articles and letters in the magazine *Independent Woman*, published by the National Federation of Business and Professional Women’s Clubs, including a series of articles by public relations expert Doris Fleishman. Fleishman inverts contempo-

rary stereotypes in an article about a female boss and her male secretary. Such articles “went far beyond other mainstream attempts to reframe the employed woman, yet even that was built on phallogocentric discourse ... the effort was merely an inversion of prevailing hegemony—in other words, counterhegemony” (p. 204). These two chapters identify interesting discourses regarding the interwar portrayals of gender, power, work, and race, discourses that invite deeper analysis of how whiteness and blackness functioned in relation to working women. This is perhaps outside of Marcellus’s purpose; nevertheless, one hopes future historians will address the issue with more complexity and contextualization.

Finally, in chapter 9, Marcellus demonstrates that these interwar stereotypes survive today, providing compelling evidence of the usefulness of her analysis and the significance of the framework she has created. Yet this chapter doesn’t quite measure up to the rest of the book. For example, the narrative departs from examining magazines to concentrating principally on television programs, a choice justified on pages 212-213. Yet one still longs for a deeper analysis of modern magazines than is provided on pages 222-226. Though the narrative focuses on mass media images more broadly, the author seems unsure of how to demonstrate the existence of these patterns on the Internet (p. 226), when women’s self-portrayals in blogs would seem to be a natural extension of the self-portrayals described in the reader letters cited in chapter 8. I particularly applaud the inclusion of modern stereotypes globally in this chapter, but wonder why international magazines during the interwar period weren’t examined for a main chapter in the heart of the book. Finally, Marcellus defines a concept she calls “the symbolic echo” in the book’s introduction as the process by which early stereotypes influence portrayals of women today. Chapter 9 and the subsequent epilogue would seem to be the ideal place to explicitly describe her conceptualization of this process, its functions, and its implications for media theory. Yet the process is only described in a few sentences in the final two paragraphs of the chapter.

Despite these criticisms of the book’s final chapters, Marcellus provides a compelling and broad framework of stereotypes of working women that will no doubt be of use to future scholars.

#### Note

[1]. Carolyn L. Kitch, *The Girl on the Magazine Cover: The Origins of Visual Stereotypes in American Mass Media* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

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