

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Ben Yagoda.** *About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made.* New York: Scribner, 2000. 480 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-684-81605-0.

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Ben Yagoda provides a fitting tribute for The New Yorker's seventy-fifth anniversary. In his expansive book, Yagoda sets out to tell the story of The New Yorker and its importance to culture. Throughout the book, he not only relates how The New Yorker fit in and changed culture, he also tells the story of the people who shaped the magazine and literary tastes of America throughout the twentieth century.

Yagoda opens the book with quotes from long-time New Yorker readers, seeking through a survey to discover what kept them reading over the years. Readers relate their association with the magazine's sophistication and culture as well as the rituals involved in reading it. Ritual and sophistication are words that resonate throughout the book. A sophistication in the writing made The New Yorker the sought after venue for many writers works. Yagoda shows how rituals were not only important to the readers, but also to the editors and the writers on the staff of The New Yorker.

Previous biographies, collections and other works about The New Yorker relied mainly on personal accounts and recollections. Yagoda, however, had access to three thousand boxes of archival records including correspondence, interoffice memos and edited manuscripts. The book becomes a biography of the magazine and its workings, rather than only a story of its principals. It is richer in detail and inside information than previous works. Yagoda concentrates on the Harold Ross and William Shawn years, choosing to gloss over the recent history of the magazine.

Combing the archives of The New Yorker, Yagoda culls stories, anecdotes and tales of founder and first editor Harold Ross, second editor William Shawn and other New Yorker staff members. Explaining Ross's vision for the magazine is an important part of this work. Ross saw The New Yorker as a humor magazine and envisioned it to "be a reflection in word and picture of metropolitan life. It will be human. Its general tenor will be one of gaiety, wit and satire, but it will be more than a jester. ...It

will hate bunk" (38). Demonstrating how Ross carried out this vision and how his vision was modified over the years as life in New York and the United States changed is a central point in Yagoda's work. The theories behind the editorial practices of the magazine were quite different than others of its era. The advertising and editorial division were separate, for example, so writers did not have to worry about finances of the enterprise. Articles took a different tact on war reporting, choosing to focus on anecdotes, letters and opinions rather than factual coverage. Long time staffers such as Katherine Angell White, E.B. White, James Thurber and Edmund Wilson all contributed to the tenor and tone of the magazine. Through personal preferences fiction editors, such as Katherine Angell White, shaped the magazine's style and taste for fiction. A certain kind of writer was a New Yorker writer. White's idea of "the "perfect New Yorker writer" was Jane Austen which gives an idea of the strength and limitations of her taste" (215). White did not like "experimentation or abstraction (in form)" and did not care for characters that were below upper middle class but she realized her limitations and prejudices and relied on other editors to balance her decisions. Along with William Maxwell and Harold Ross, White served as "the final watchdog making sure that every fictional emperor was clothed..." (215) during the mid-twentieth century.

The magazine itself is the true character in this book. Various aspects of The New Yorker's character are highlighted. The New Yorker cartoon, or drawing as editors referred to them, are now an American art form. "The Talk of the Town" and "Notes and Comments" depict the nature of The New Yorker. William Shawn published essays which influenced political and social thought. Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring," James Baldwin's "The Fire Next Time," and Hannah Arendt's "Eichmann in Jerusalem," are but a few of the well known pieces first published as New Yorker articles. And, of course, many fiction writers and poets still strive to become part of the long list of well known New Yorker authors.

*About Town: The New Yorker and the World it Made* will delight New Yorker fans but it will also interest students of popular culture, history and journalism. It is a well written, fascinating book that is well worth the time.

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