H-Net Reviews
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Leigh Eric Schmidt. *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995. xvi + 363 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-02980-1.

Reviewed by Joanne Fritz (University of Iowa)
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American Holidays as Popular Culture

Consumer Rites is a welcome addition to the literature on consumption in American culture. Eschewing the simplistic approach of many critics of consumption, Schmidt withholds judgment and focuses on the evolution of American holidays from and in addition to religious traditions. He explores the complex interactions between holiday and market; religious culture and consumer culture. In addition, he includes a look at the anthropology of festival, celebration, and gift exchange. No elitist, he is genuinely interested in the meanings with which people imbue material things. Schmidt is particularly sensitive to the role women have played in domestic ritual, shopping, gift giving and the management of holidays. Rather than denigrating this feminization of holidays and consumption, he treats women's role with respect and looks for the underlying societal meanings of so much gender specialization.

Consumer Rites looks primarily at four American holidays: Valentine's Day, Christmas, Easter and Mother's Day. Within this framework, however, Schmidt ranges widely, exploring festivals, fairs, and Christian martyrdom, as well as candy and Hallmark cards. Recurrent themes run through the discussion of each holiday as the author draws connections among the kitsch of Easter baskets and the sacred/profane qualities of Christmas and Easter extravaganzas. This book is a delightful addition to our understanding of late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century popular culture.

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