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William H. Young, Nancy K. Young. *The 1930s.* Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002. xx + 343 pp. $49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-313-31602-9.

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Popular Culture in Hard Times

For any one decade in American history it may be difficult to single out one aspect that epitomizes the spirit of those years. Thinking of the 1930s, however, such an aspect comes easily to mind. It was the Depression that left an indelible stamp on the decade and the nation's history. It gave coherence to a period ushered in by the Wall Street Crash in October 1929 and ended--symbolically--by the outbreak of World War Two with the German invasion of Poland in September 1939. The Depression made contemporaries think of the decade as an era; and it still does the same for anyone looking back to these years, which stand out as particularly tumultuous and formative ones in American history. With a focus on mass entertainment, this volume, in the series American Popular Culture through History, offers a detailed and highly readable exposition of the decade's most prominent crazes and phenomena. They are interesting on their own terms, and, perhaps even more importantly, well deserve to be studied closely as a reflex to the Depression. Americans gladly turned to, among other things, papers, cartoons, radio, and movies in search of entertainment, minutes or hours of laughter, and optimism in hard times.

As in other volumes of the series, the overview of this decade's popular culture highlights prominent items and developments, i.e., advertising, architecture and design, fashion, food and drink, leisure activities, literature, music, performing arts, travel and recreation, and visual arts. As nearly half of the country's population went to the movies regularly, it is only apt that the authors enlarge on the way these areas of popular culture resounded in the popular movies of the 1930s. Whether with its sketches of everyday life or of the world of youth, with its description of products of decorative art, or with its portrayals of radio and filmstars or of popular cartoon characters such as Little Orphan Annie, Dick Tracy, or Superman, the book brings to life contemporary fads and activities, and illustrates with particular clarity what it meant to live in the 1930s. This is probably its greatest asset.

Furthermore, in delineating a popular culture that tended to be optimistic even in the Depres-

sion, this volume conveys a more comprehensive view of the 1930s. In hindsight, economic, social, and political problems seemed to have overpowered everything else, and yet, there was much more to the decade than distress and despondency. The wealth of popular fads unfolded in these pages testifies to a culture assuring the nation that there was no need to be "afraid of the Big, Bad Wolf," that "Happy Days are here again" because "We're in the Money." And did not Scarlett O'Hara offer comfort for those on the verge--or already in the quagmire--of despair, the proverbial last straw to those trying hard to muddle through, with the words, "I'll think about it tomorrow"? Many elements of the era's popular culture contained no reference at all to the Depression. In fact, the most popular mass media, radio and the movies, preferred to concentrate on a reinforcement of American values and beliefs or the nation's strength, or simply on entertainment most welcome as a contrast to reality.

It is astounding how many characteristics of American culture, including a host of cultural icons, originated in trends and developments of the 1930s. To lead readers to this conclusion is another of the book's assets. Mass media effected a greater standardization of culture, as they reached out for audiences beyond the district or region--despite parallel compartmentalization of audiences. Media themselves underwent a process of standardization, e.g., the press with its turn to syndication. The first supermarkets deserving that name opened, trying to lure customers with low prices, prepackaged products, and a variety of items that were to bring about an "American diet." Cartoons in the newspapers and, as a new form, in comic books emerged as a new facet of national literature. Science fiction, clad, among others, in the form of pulp magazines (of which 150 million were sold each month), experienced an upsurge of popularity. In music, the popular fancy was dominated almost entirely by swing. The New York World's Fair in 1939-40, especially the "Futurama," emphasized the newly gained importance of the industrial designer, who streamlined everyday products from cutlery to automobiles and popularized the idea of American industry eventually overcoming the Depression. What is more, Futurama and the Fair impressively demonstrated that people could still set their hopes for a better life in American mastery of technology.

Readers taking up this book can (re)discover these and many more interpretations and presentations of popular culture in the 1930s. If it may be put in the style of advertisers: those interested in the Depression years and popular culture are well advised not "to think about it tomorrow" but to "just do it."

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