

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David E. Sumner. *The Magazine Century: American Magazines since 1900*. Mediating American History Series. New York: Peter Lang, 2010. viii + 242 pp. \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4331-0493-0; \$119.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4331-0494-7.

Reviewed by Brian Thornton (University of N. Florida)

Published on Jhistory (June, 2011)

Commissioned by Donna Harrington-Lueker



## The Heyday of American Magazines

If you are a magazine aficionado, you might grow nostalgic while reading David E. Sumner's excellent book, *The Magazine Century*. That is because Sumner provides compelling evidence that the twentieth century was indeed the heyday of magazines. This convincing book leaves me wondering what, if anything, will take the place of magazines in the brave new world of this century. What will bring us together again as a people and provide excitement, offer entertainment, and covertly educate us about the world the way *Life*, *Look*, *Time*, *Ebony*, *Jet*, *People*, and *Sports Illustrated* once did? Sumner, a Ball State professor, describes with engaging anecdotes how all these publications got their start in the 1900s and went on to achieve greatness. He tells the human story of the people who started them—the rich, the powerful, the eccentric, and the gutsy. Henry Luce, for instance, must have been one of the country's wildest gamblers. Sumner describes how Luce launched a full-color, glossy, slick magazine called *Fortune* in 1930, just four months after the great stock market crash of 1929—and charged readers one dollar per copy at a time when you could buy the Sunday *New York Times* for a nickel.

Sumner concludes the book by arguing in effect that “the kids”—the magazines, that is—“are gonna be all right” in the future (p. 222). First, he shows that magazines have grown in circulation in the past ten years, an amazing feat when compared with newspapers. Sumner quotes University of Mississippi professor Samir Husni, who calls magazines comfort media, much like comfort food.

Husni explains in Sumner's book that successful magazines make you feel good about yourself. As opposed to television, magazines are positive agents of information, Husni says. For her part, Cathie Black of Hearst Magazines argues in Sumner's book that magazines offer a respite, a retreat, a place to be yourself, to be inspired and develop creative ideas. Rather than forcing readers to go out and search for something the way the Internet does, magazines find you, the reader, and provide you with wonderful surprises as you lounge comfortably on your couch, says Maria Rodale, Rodale Inc's CEO, near the end of the book. There is an emotional connection that readers have with their favorite magazines that means the media will not die, Rodale concludes. I hope she is right.

One of the good things Sumner's book achieves is that readers can appreciate it both on an academic/theoretical level or simply as a good read, like their favorite magazine. For example, those who crave theory will enjoy Sumner's theoretical framework explaining why magazines grew so fast and so extensively between 1900 and 2000 and permeated nearly all of modern society. In academic circles, Sumner's explanation for this growth might be called dense, meaning there is a lot of credible material here that Sumner presents to explain a historical phenomenon. For instance, he offers the expanding interest theory that claims an expanding number of mass media inventions, such as radio and TV, whet the appetite for still more new sources of informa-

tion that magazines provided. Sumner also explains that as technology made magazines cheaper and advertisers picked up more of the tab, the intellectual and literary content declined as the magazines reached wider audiences.

Theory certainly has its place, but Sumner bluntly says in his book, “if you want to skip the theory and move to the big story, then you can turn to the next chapter now” (p. 3). I like the author’s refreshing candor and humor. Both are found frequently throughout the book.

The book is not perfect. If I were writing it, for instance, I would not organize the book by decades and in chronological order. Instead, I would try to feature even more of the personal stories that Sumner tells about the magazine industry’s movers and shakers. These include *Vogue*’s infamously cold Anna Wintour who tripled her magazine’s circulation in the space of just a few years. Sumner includes in the book the unlikely tale of the wealthy son of a baby formula magnate, Jann Wenner. He was a National Merit Scholar finalist and two years into earning an English major from the University of California at Berkeley when suddenly in 1966 he quit school and started singing the psychedelic praises of LSD. He took a job with an upstart “alternative lifestyle” magazine called *Sunday Ramparts*. The magazine went down in flames pretty quickly. Wenner then worked as a mail carrier to survive while he cooked up a scheme to start another magazine, *Rolling Stone*, which against all odds,

went on to become a huge success. Stories like these make magazines and the century just gone by accessible to all.

Sumner’s book joins a mere handful of serious and in-depth magazine history books. Out of that exclusive group, an even smaller number have become the standard in the field and are “must reads” for magazine historians. The must-reads include: John Tebbel and Mary Ellen Zuckerman’s 1990 work, *The Magazine in America, 1741-1990*, and James Playsted Wood’s 1971 *Magazines in the United States*. Frank Luther Mott’s Pulitzer-Prize winning *A History of American Magazines*, volume 3, published in 1939, is, of course, another classic. I have closely read these three books many times now judging from their dog-eared condition. I am truly delighted to add Sumner’s book to my collection to read and reread.

Many undergraduate students may never have heard of Harold Hayes, *Esquire*, New Journalism, or Gay Talese. But tell them, as Sumner does, how Talese rebelled against the constraints of 1960 objective reporting, started adopting short-story fiction techniques to journalism, and ended up with gems like “Frank Sinatra has a Cold,” and students will enjoy learning and easily remember significant developments in the field. In the hands of this historian and writer, colorful vignettes and personal stories put a beguiling human face on a century of magazines: I am confident my students will actually read and enjoy this informative and entertaining book.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/jhistory>

**Citation:** Brian Thornton. Review of Sumner, David E., *The Magazine Century: American Magazines since 1900*. Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. June, 2011.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=33328>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.