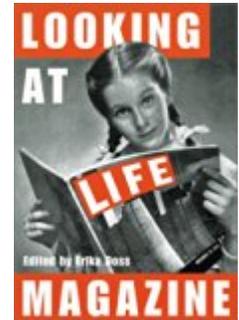


Erika Doss, ed.. *Looking at Life Magazine*. Washington, D.C. and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001. xiv + 286 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-56098-989-9.



Reviewed by Mark Rice

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For more than thirty years, from the 1930s to the 1970s, *Life* magazine was one of the most important magazines published in the United States. One study revealed that in a given thirteen-week period in 1950, "about half of all Americans, ten years and older, had seen one or more copies" of the magazine (p. 42), suggesting the range and scope of the magazine's potential audience. Promoted by its founder, Henry Luce, to be "The Show-Book of the World," for an imagined national audience whom Luce wanted to entertain and instruct through a format of photo essays that the magazine perfected, *Life's* readership was actually primarily urban and suburban, white, and middle-class. Moreover, "the world" that Luce promised to deliver to his readers was a world that was defined and revealed through the magazine's own editorial policies. Nevertheless, it is difficult to dispute the significance of *Life* both as a publishing phenomenon and as a cultural symbol of post-World War II American life. Thirty years after its demise as a weekly magazine (*Life* reappeared for several years as a monthly magazine and continues to publish "special issues" occasionally), *Life* maintains its grip on the minds and

memories of many Americans. Still stored in countless basement and attic collections, *Life* has the power to evoke both nostalgic longings for a supposedly "simpler" time in the nation's past and condescending sneers from more "enlightened" folk who recognize the magazine's limited perspective.

In recent years, *Life* magazine has become the subject of serious attention by scholars interested in the intent and the impact of what is arguably the most important magazine ever to be published in the United States. In 1994, Wendy Kozol published *Life's America: Family and Nation in Postwar Photojournalism*, which studied the ideals of middle-class domesticity in the pages of *Life*. Now, in a volume that both complements and enriches Kozol's study, comes *Looking at Life Magazine*, a book whose genesis was a 1995 conference hosted by the American Studies Program at the University of Colorado called, "Looking at *Life*: Rethinking America's Favorite Magazine, 1936 to 1972." Drawing together a diverse range of scholars, the four-day gathering was the first academic conference "to center specifically on

how *Life* magazine ... shaped and influenced ideas about class, ethnicity, gender, and race in America, and throughout the world" (p. xiii), a description that suggests what the book is about. Edited by the art historian, Erika Doss, *Looking at Life Magazine* is a lively and engaging collection of essays written by a number of leading historians, art historians, and media-studies specialists, including Doss, Peter Bacon Hales, Neil Harris, and Kozol. As befits a book that is concerned with "Life's look: its visual style" (p. 19) *Looking at Life Magazine* is artfully designed and is heavily illustrated with black-and-white reproductions of photographs and advertisements that appeared in the magazine's pages.

The twelve essays in *Looking at Life Magazine* cover a wide range of subjects, with many of them, indeed, about issues of class, ethnicity, gender, and race, in addition to such other topics as the iconography of the atomic age and the coverage of political extremism in World War II-era America. While the book delves into some topics that the reader might not expect to see, other entries that one might expect to encounter are absent. For example, there are no essays examining 1950s youth culture, postwar domesticity, or the magazine's coverage of mainstream American politics. However, there are essays that discuss wartime images of the Chinese, American corporate culture, religion in the United States, racial segregation, and the magazine's regular feature, "Life Goes to a Party."

The essays are separated into five parts, each of which takes its name from a single passage from Luce's prospectus for the magazine, or else from passages edited and arranged to suggest the overarching theme of the part. For example, in Part 1, "To See Life" (as Luce's prospectus begins), the meaning of the word "Life" is playfully doubled. Not only does "Life" refer to all of humanity (as Luce would have it), but also it more directly refers to the magazine itself so that, by analyzing the editorial decisions and the audience of *Life*,

the limits of Luce's vision become magnified. "To See Life" includes Terry Smith's essay, "Life-Style Modernity: Making Modern America," which discusses the relationship between a modernist visual aesthetic and the promotion of a particular kind of American Dream in the pages of *Life*, and James Baughman's essay, "Who Read *Life*? The Circulation of America's Favorite Magazine," which is an especially useful study that deflates the notion that *Life* was read by virtually everyone in the country. Similarly, in Part 4, "To See Things Thousands of Miles Away, Things Hidden Behind Walls and Within Rooms, Things Dangerous to Come To; The Women That Men Love" the essays revolve around topics that threaten the white, middle-class, conservative, and heterosexual "norm" that Luce envisioned. These essays include a discussion about masculinity and homoeroticism in the pages of *Life* by John Ibson, Rickie Solinger's analysis of "The Smutty Side of *Life*," and Erika Doss's study of the career of Gordon Parks at the magazine, a career that included sympathetic images of Harlem gang leaders and leaders of the Black Panther Party.

The book's organization allows the essays to move simultaneously in two directions: while moving in a rough chronology from the magazine's founding in 1936 to its folding in 1972, the essays also move laterally through the various realms of "life" that Luce promised his magazine would reveal. Using Luce's words to name the five parts also works as a centripetal force that binds what might otherwise seem disparate essays. Ironically, the use of Luce's prospectus works better in the book than it did in the pages of *Life*. More than one of the essays points out that Luce's attempt to present a coherent vision of the world to an imagined unified audience flew in the face of reality. The tensions between unity and diversity, between the tidiness of the magazine and the messiness of the world are what give scholars so much meat to work with in analyzing *Life*. These tensions, which eventually led to the magazine's

undoing, are what most successfully hold the collection together.

There is no concluding essay in *Looking at Life Magazine*, and--to my mind--that's too bad. While the final essay talks about the unraveling of the consensus mystique that *Life* tried mightily to hold on to, and does a nice job explaining the magazine's demise, no real effort is made in the volume to tie all of the essays together in a fashion that would allow the reader to put the book down and say, "Ah--so that's what all of these essays mean; that's why *Life* was so important a magazine." Doss states in the book's introduction that "single-minded or monolithic interpretations of the magazine and its meanings are open to challenge" (p. 7). *Looking at Life Magazine's* essays certainly make that clear. What remains unclear, however, is how we should combine these multiple interpretations of the magazine with the undeniable appeal that the magazine held for its readers, in order to better know exactly how the magazine achieved its status as cultural icon. How many readers picked up on the homoerotic advertisements published by *Life* during World War II? Were they the same readers who were interested in stories about the Chinese during the war or about "babes" after the war ended? Of course, we can never know the answer to these questions. Pinning down how the magazine influenced its readers is probably impossible. Perhaps the best description of how we should view the magazine comes from the concluding passage of Baughman's essay: "*Life* undoubtedly shaped the political and cultural values of many Americans. But they were a minority. *Life* was not to be found in most homes or apartments. And many non-subscribers occasionally sampling the magazine merely looked at the pictures, while having their hair cut or curled" (p. 48).

I'd say something similar about *Looking at Life Magazine*. The essays in this book will likely shape the direction of future studies not only of *Life* magazine, but also of twentieth-century

American culture. Theoretically charged, but written in straightforward prose styles, the essays don't over-rely on theoretical jargon. Like the magazine it analyzes, *Looking at Life Magazine* is both important and just plain interesting.

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