

## Eldred, Janet Carey. *Literate Zeal: Gender and the Making of a New Yorker Ethos*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2012. Print.

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The central figure in Janet Carey Eldred's *Literate Zeal* is Katherine S. White, editor at the *New Yorker* magazine from 1925 to 1960. Long excerpts from White's correspondence with authors and with other *New Yorker* staff comprise so much of *Literate Zeal* that one may enjoy the book as an intimate and revealing epistolary biography of an important figure in twentieth-century American print culture. And *Literate Zeal* is indeed such a book, but Eldred clearly has more than that in mind, writing, "One can't simply make autobiography, memoir, and personal letters stand in for critical histories" (34). And as a critical history, *Literate Zeal* is a pointed intervention in the history of feminist media studies and a persuasive challenge to the popular conception of the *New Yorker* as the epitome of highbrow sophistication, worlds apart from popular (and thus lowbrow) women's magazines such as *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Vogue*, or *Mademoiselle*. As a work of feminist media studies, *Literate Zeal* "tread[s] the vast middle waters" between oversimplified binaries and sweeping polemical claims. Eldred respectfully—almost deferentially—challenges the assertion of late 1960s and 1970s feminism that all women's magazines are "irredeemably sexist," tools of patriarchy which keep their readers—like poor Marge Simpson, who looks up from her copy of *Better Homes than Yours* to see a fawn grazing in her living room—striving for a domestic ideal while feeling always that their own efforts are inadequate. But Eldred knows it would be just as extreme and fallacious to claim that feminism "created ex nihilo the fiction of Stepford wives" (35). And though Eldred will show that the brow heights of *New Yorker* readers and *Vogue* readers are not so different after all, it would be foolish to refute these misconceptions by claiming that "there is no difference between the *Paris Review* and *People Magazine*" (35).

By 1930, 23% of American magazine editors were women. As Eldred explains in the Introduction, a number of forces motivated women in the 1930s and 1940s to seek work as editors. More women were going to college, majoring in English, and feeling the simultaneous influence of careerism and progressive education, the latter elevating literacy to "a kind of secular faith" (21). And though the standard critique of the era's "glossy women's magazines" is

that they were “designed to lull readers into complacency and conformity” (18), Eldred argues that this critique only works if one discounts the motives and experiences of women editors, who zealously exercised their considerable literate agency in the interest of women’s issues, social causes, and the democratization of elite literature.

Chapter one, “Between the Sheets: Editing and the Making of a *New Yorker* Ethos,” engages the oxymoron in the previous sentence: the desire to popularize the exclusive. Eldred presents the *New Yorker* as a middlebrow publication with a highbrow “ethos,” a term Eldred defines as a rhetorically crafted place of identification. The *New Yorker’s* editors crafted its ethos, its character of place, as “simultaneously accessible and secure from infiltration” (47). As a businesswoman working for a magazine competing with “women’s magazines” to publish the best new literature, Katherine White sought to attract advertisers and increase circulation. As a savvy editor, White gave the *New Yorker’s* readers accessible, familiar, perspicuous, and often sentimental fiction and nonfiction, within a space whose ethos persuaded these readers that they were “sophisticated, highbrow, high-class, [and] supremely literate” (80). As a gifted rhetor, White flattered the genius of submitting authors while justifying the magazine’s often heavy-handed editing in the interest of clarity for the sake of “our rather straight forward and not esoteric public” (49, from a letter to Djuna Barnes). “In the pages of the magazine,” Eldred writes, “the editorial ‘we’ frequently alluded to the sophistication of its discerning audience. Between the sheets, the editors frequently drew a picture of a different audience, . . . one impatient with lengthy or difficult or challenging pieces” (49). “Oh I loathe it,” wrote editor-in-chief Harold Ross to White, regarding a poem by Louise Bogan. “I suspect she writes it with a dictionary, to gain superiority. Think she writes for poets, and the arty poets at that” (51–2). Though the *New Yorker* certainly published important literature, its audience was not those whom Dorothy Parker derided as “the booksie-wooksies” (“Words, Words, Words” 522).

Eldred’s spatial, community-centered definition of ethos bridges two understandings of “character”: character as the true self (the genius author), and character as something performed (the “original” work, in reality heavily edited and located within the ethos and the genres of the *New Yorker*). Over time, the *New Yorker* was increasingly criticized, by Corey Ford, Brendan Gill, and Tom Wolfe among others, on the grounds that its character had become caricature, its type of story all too typical: “self-analytical and pastel stories-without-plots,” as Ford described them (61). In this way, ethos is at the heart of both the possibilities and the potential problems of a magazine’s identity. For without some distinctive type (pun intended, I suppose), there cannot be a magazine. Something—and someone—must make the content coherent. The audience too, both invoked and addressed, must in some ways be typical. Yet

Katherine White took personally the criticism of the *New Yorker* and its types, and it consumed her to the point of distraction. For the criticism, as Eldred explains in Chapter two, targeted the *New Yorker's* now notorious editing practices, practices critical not only to the *New Yorker's* character but to the progressive zeal of its editors. And indeed, as the chapter title indicates, editing at the *New Yorker* involved "More Than Just Commas." Editors routinely made "significant changes in plot, character, dialog, or setting in order to align individual authorial vision with the *New Yorker's* editorial vision" (98). But were they editing away the voice and genius of "unspoiled literariness" (109)? Ross saw the editors "as collaborators free to make suggestions" (98). Some authors accepted, out of appreciation or economic necessity, the "collaboration." Others refused it and decided to publish elsewhere. Many of the latter, White wrote to Ross, "write so badly they haven't a leg to stand on but some write well and even the foreigners like to feel their individual style can be kept" (106). If this conversation about the *New Yorker's* editing practices is beginning to sound like a conversation about students' writing, Eldred herself notes that it "takes us to the edge of a central issue in rhetorical studies, the degree to which composition is (or should be) a product of individual genius or collaboration" (83).

Despite the omnipresence of Katherine White, the subject of gender has seemed mostly beside the point in the first two chapters. It returns as an explicit focus in Chapter three, "*Mademoiselle, the New Yorker, and Other Women's Magazines.*" To Eldred, the argument that the *New Yorker's* editing practices and its characteristic ethos "produced substandard literature" is a gendered argument, one which considers writing that is "in any degree collaborative" or is read by "middle-class consumers (women among them)" as "emasculated" (109). Eldred is after a more "complex appreciation" of *New Yorker* writing, and indeed the matter seems even more complex than her assertions here suggest. For one of Eldred's examples of particularly heavy and insistent editing involves White's work with the author Frances Gray Patton. But White states directly that her goal in this particular "collaboration" is to make Patton's writing "more masculine" (102). So while the stereotypical figure of authorial genius is certainly gendered masculine (Hemingway and Faulkner would accept no editorial queries [107]), it does not necessarily follow that all acts of collaboration must therefore emasculate the product. Yet *Literate Zeal* is less about disputing normative attitudes toward masculine and feminine writing than dismantling, with the *New Yorker* as the center of focus, the stereotypical distinctions between masculine and feminine magazines. This dismantling is thorough and persuasive. First, while many may think of Harold Ross as the embodiment of the *New Yorker*, the direct, hands-on influence of Katherine White and of resident grammarian Eleanor Gould made the *New Yorker*, in a quite literal and physical sense, a women's magazine. Second, the

*New Yorker* competed in the short story market with magazines like *Redbook* and *Mademoiselle*, the latter known for lighter editing and a willingness to take chances with more difficult or experimental fiction. Here the gendered terms and stereotypes are turned neatly on their heads: *Mademoiselle*, the “women’s magazine,” lets genius be, and confidently publishes less traditional, sentimental literature. Third, Eldred points to the prevalence in the *New Yorker* of advertisements targeting women and to the enduring popularity of Lois Long’s fashion column. So just as Eldred has challenged the class myth that the *New Yorker* is, compared to other large-circulation magazines, “an icon of literary sophistication,” she here upends the gender myth that “women’s magazines had no significant literary content” and “that the *New Yorker* is decidedly not a women’s magazine” (116).

Reviews sometimes criticize a book for not being a different book, or for omitting something which may in truth be more important to the reviewer than to the author or the argument. At the risk of doing that, I will say that I often found myself expecting the relationship between the *New Yorker*’s belletristic ethos and the belletristic tradition in rhetoric to receive more than a note in the introduction stating that belletrism is “a term from rhetoric” (vii). Eldred convincingly characterizes the *New Yorker* as “haute literacy” by showing that its content was similar to that of the fashionable women’s magazines and its purpose to that of progressivism. But to me, to use the word belletrism in a conversation about attitudes toward, and uses of, literature is to conjure the spirit of Hugh Blair. In his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783), so influential on nineteenth-century higher education, Blair writes, “The most busy man, in the most active sphere” needs something to fill life’s “vacant spaces” (13). And what could be “more agreeable in itself, or more consonant in the dignity of the human mind, than in the entertainments of taste, and the study of polite literature?” (13–14). Blair could be describing the *New Yorker*, its haute literacy derived from an attitude toward literature as improving the reader but also as a “leisured commodity” (ix). And though it would be anachronistic—and wrong—to call Blair a progressivist educator, both his belletrism and the *New Yorker*’s share progressivism’s paradox: belles lettres cannot improve all minds or entertain all readers without ceasing to be belles lettres. As a former student of mine said in a discussion of Oprah’s book club, “If those people are reading *Beloved*, what’s the point of us being *here*?” It is a “correct and delicate” taste for literature, Blair asserts, that separates “the polished nations of Europe” (9) from “Hotentots” and “Laplanders” (20). *New Yorker* editors struck a delicate balance astride this paradox, inviting readers to feel sophisticated and discerning, and competing in the literary and advertising marketplace, all while maintaining an ethos of exclusivity and difference. This tension in both belletrism and progressivism can be seen in the contrast between the

rhetorical virtuosity of Katherine White's correspondence with authors, where she convinces them that their works of high genius might be just a touch too challenging for *New Yorker* readers, and the ethos—in the sense of a space—that the *New Yorker* created for its readers: an aspirational address of exclusive taste and class. Taste is the quality which distinguishes the sophisticate from the masses, and perspicuity—the quality Ross, White, Gould, and the other *New Yorker* editors worked so hard to present—is the most important element in rhetoric, according to belletrism (Winterowd 21). In response to criticism of the *New Yorker's* heavy-handed editing, White began to second-guess herself, wondering if the editors should make a distinction between amateur and professional writers. But what if they can't tell them apart? What if they are not able to "spot when a beginner ceases to be a beginner" (108)? And what if an amateur—especially possible if there really is a *New Yorker* type—is able to pretend to be a professional? This anxiety is belletrism's anxiety too: invention strategies like the *topoi* allow the student to become an effective rhetor "without any genius at all" (Blair 317). *Literate Zeal* locates the *New Yorker* within the context of other magazines, the rise of "the lady editor," and progressivist attitudes toward literature and literacy. As the fourth side of this location, the history of belletrism is comparatively underdeveloped.

On the other hand, it is a pleasure to read *Literate Zeal* with some knowledge of the history of rhetoric and see the spectre of Blair without having it pointed out each time. And a reader primarily interested in media studies or in the *New Yorker* itself might find a more thorough history of belletristic rhetoric largely uninteresting and unpleasurable. And this book *needs* to be interesting and pleasurable, not to mention perspicuous. To write about the *New Yorker* in ponderous academic prose would be a (rather ironic) rhetorical failure; to write in imitation of *New Yorker* style would seem precious and affected. In her introduction, Eldred provides a concise thesis for her book:

Drawing on histories of U.S. women's rhetoric and theories of literacy, I analyze archival sources to argue that editors, including many women editors, committed themselves with missionary zeal to a publishing culture in which high American letters became something to be consumed alongside haute couture. (x)

Anyone who has tried to succinctly yet thoroughly answer the question, "What is your book about?" knows how difficult it is. Yet right from the start, Eldred makes perspicuity look effortless.

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## About the Author

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