
Reviewed by Kerri Hauman, Transylvania University

Janet Carey Eldred's *Literate Zeal: Gender and the Making of a New Yorker Ethos* is an archival research project that focuses on women editors of mid-twentieth century large-circulation magazines, in particular Katharine White of the *New Yorker*. Eldred draws on Deborah Brandt's idea of literacy sponsors in her aim to “get behind the scenes of sponsorship” (180, footnote 6) in order to counter a “liberal elitism” (xv) that has created a false divide between women’s magazines and literature, including supposedly more highbrow magazines like the *New Yorker*. This false divide, Eldred argues, has led people to devalue decades of rhetorical and literary achievements gained through women’s editorial work. In fact, Eldred argues that mid-twentieth century women editors played an important role in establishing magazines—the *New Yorker* and those typically considered women’s magazines such as *Mademoiselle*—as a place to find serious literature, which fostered a growing literacy among middle class Americans.

The preface quickly introduces many players and terms alongside Eldred’s aims for the book. Expectedly, Eldred acknowledges that the book’s contents are a direct result of what she found (and did not find) in the archives. She explains that although the archives do support a full picture of Katharine White, she has opted to present “a heavy, gilded frame” (xi) that draws attention from White and presents glimpses of other women editors’ lives and works. This approach challenges an “exceptional woman” approach that is often criticized in feminist rhetorical history for perpetuating a notion that only a few women were accomplished and worthy of study.

The introduction provides many essential backdrops against which the rest of the book unfolds. The first is the conflicting histories of the work that mid-twentieth century women editors did and the critiques Betty Friedan and other feminists of the 1960s and 1970s leveled against women’s magazines. Eldred pithily presents key arguments from these dueling histories, into which she weaves feminist media scholarship that asks readers to “rethink the dichotomy between women’s magazines as mythmakers and feminists as unveilers” (5). A second backdrop is the changing college curriculum and career expectations for women of the early twentieth century, and a third is the changing conceptions of literacy at this time as it became a “secular faith” (21). Eldred concludes the introduction with excerpts from White’s correspondence and admission that although she believes the women editors she writes about would want to be remembered as “zealots for belletrism” who had a “faith in aesthetics that promised to transcend messy social ills and conflicts” (33), she feels she must present a messier, more critical history to
demonstrate these women’s work as concurrently “pioneering, remarkable, limited [and] flawed” (34).

In chapter 1, Eldred briefly defines her use of “ethos”: not the good man speaking well, but instead, drawing on Michael Hyde, “‘dwelling places’ that ‘define the grounds, abodes or habitats, where a person’s ethics and moral character take form and develop’” (40). This definition of ethos provides justification for Eldred’s use of various primary and secondary sources (i.e., archival documents, trade journals, memoirs, biographies); she must look across the various “dwelling places” that contributed to women’s editors’ and magazines’ ethos. Next, Eldred substantiates her claim that the New Yorker is similar to middlebrow publications, particularly women’s magazines. By drawing on text from Edward Bok, editor of Ladies’ Home Journal from 1889-1919, and Vogue, Eldred demonstrates that these middlebrow women’s magazines share with the New Yorker an aim to provide readers with cultural improvement through the simultaneously instructional and leisurely literature the publications printed and promoted. The bulk of chapter 1 then discusses the New Yorker’s developing ethos, which Eldred shows has been criticized repeatedly for vacillating between humor and realism, between the purposes of entertainment and education. This criticism, Eldred reveals, is often a concern about genre, an accusation that the New Yorker published a “type” of writing with the attendant assumption that for an editor to acknowledge this—or, worse yet, for an author to write with the aim of fitting this type—would diminish a text’s literary value. In the archival evidence provided, readers see the long-standing rhetorical battle between episteme and techné play out. Ultimately, Eldred argues the New Yorker survived precisely because it “never strayed too far from its middlebrow ethos” (71), because it did adhere to a recognizable type, despite various editors’ and readers’ claims that this “type” did not exist.

Chapter 2 continues the discussion of characteristic traits and consequent critiques of the New Yorker, particularly regarding its editing practices. Eldred recognizes one widespread critique that New Yorker editors over-edited, privileging grammatical and factual correctness over literary license. To complicate a simplistic understanding that New Yorker editing policies could either entirely help or hurt authors, Eldred presents two examples from the archives: 1) correspondence between White and Isabel Bolton, and 2) correspondence between White and Frances Gray Patton. While the first example serves to illustrate a more heated interaction and the second a more collaborative endeavor, both finally support Eldred’s claim that many writers “alternately balked at the restraints of the New Yorker system and benefited from the structure and comfort it provided its writers” (97). A theme developed through this chapter, then, is the familiar conflict between notions of an author as an individual genius and recognition of the “social politics, market pressures, individual relationships” (109), including gender and collaboration, that affect authors and authorship.
Chapter 3 compares the *New Yorker* to *Mademoiselle* and other women’s magazines in order to overturn two claims: 1) “that women’s magazines had no significant content,” and 2) “that the *New Yorker* is decidedly not a women’s magazine” (116). After acknowledging differences in audiences, Eldred outlines the history of *Mademoiselle* to argue that it shared with the *New Yorker* “a similar movement from a light and witty magazine to a publication that sponsored serious high letters” (116). To counter criticisms that the *New Yorker* began catering more to women in 1961 with a change in its editorial staff, Eldred shows that the *New Yorker* had, in fact, always appealed to women’s desires, had consistently contained advertisements similar to publications like *Mademoiselle* and *Harper’s Bazaar*, and had even established a long-running, popular fashion column only two years after its 1925 debut. In this chapter, Eldred briefly reiterates the caution from the preface to not oversimplify narratives of women’s magazines, and more importantly, her careful analysis demonstrates how one can present a fuller, more complex rendering.

In its discussion of women editors’ style and the role of “body politics,” the conclusion includes the focused gender analysis I had expected more of in the book. Eldred juxtaposes excerpts from *Vogue* editor Edna Woolman Chase’s memoir that discuss her personal discovery of a sophisticated, elegant style with representations of White’s body – particularly as it aged and in illness – as seen in White’s own writing as well as others’ writing about her and her husband. A key point here is that women editors were unable to fully control their image, including the inability to place focus solely on their work to the exclusion of their bodies.

The afterword acknowledges White’s careful collecting and cataloging of her work in order to donate it to her alma mater, Bryn Mawr College. Eldred also acknowledges that White’s reasons for preserving this work were multifaceted: she sought to reduce the amount of material stored in her house, to receive a tax break, to preserve a text-based literacy in “times of encroaching visual media” (162), to emphasize American literature in a time when British literature was privileged, and to discredit a book published in 1975 that marred the ethos she had so carefully worked to create for the *New Yorker*.

*Literate Zeal* is a book that crosses several disciplines including writing studies, media studies, communication, women’s/gender studies, and American literature. Within writing studies, it will especially appeal to scholars of literacy studies, genre, and feminist rhetoric. Although Eldred does include some mention of how the archives she used affected her final product, I found myself wanting more explanation of her methods and of the methodologies guiding her work. Selfishly, as a scholar interested in the politics of gender and technology, I longed for more discussion of the role of technology in these stories. I also longed to read more discussion of the excerpts that Eldred used to demonstrate White’s “woman-centered” (146) and collaborative editorial style. Likewise, issues of race receive a few mentions and footnotes but not
much focused discussion. Indeed, as Eldred admits early in the book, there is enough material here for several other projects. Ultimately, though, this does not detract from what is overall an excellent book. Eldred’s careful and thoughtful work presents a rich portrayal of Katharine White’s work and the contributions women’s magazines and women editors made to mid-twentieth century United States literacy and literature.

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