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'They Opened Up a Whole New World': Narrative, Text and Image in British Women's Magazines in the 1930s.

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Abstract

Drawing on oral testimony, this article focuses on domestic, consumer magazines in the 1930s. It uses the 'magazine-as-window' as a central organising idea to explore the inherent tensions in magazine reading at a time of rapid change when, along with cinema and radio, these publications were important vehicles, mediating women's experience of modernity. A discussion of methodology will be followed by an examination of the social circumstances of the readers interviewed, their: ages, experiences of education, employment, marriage and motherhood and how these may have affected the titles they read. A common culture, or imagined community of readers, it is argued, began to emerge in the period as women of differing ages, educational and economic backgrounds increasingly read the same publications, identifying with the images of working girls, fashionability, housewifery or modern motherhood they found there. The final section explores the meaning and significance of magazine reading through women's words and stories. The term, 'repertoire of realistic escape' identifies a particular emotional economy that, I argue, characterised women's magazine reading in these years. Defined by a desire for pleasure that was, simultaneously always compromised, it signals subjectivities that were both feminine and modern. Tracing a shift from reading, principally romantic fiction, which was conducted clandestinely and in opposition to parental views, to a shared culture of 'looking' at predominantly visual consumer magazines, I demonstrate that complex relationships between text, image and identity sit at the heart of women's narratives of reading magazines.



Introduction: they opened things up

...magazines opened up a whole new world - books and magazines. What else did we have to learn anything, these things weren't talked about or taught in schools. You had to grow up quickly, left school and straight to work. (Kathleen Ash)

I used to read the lot. Yes, I did too. It was the only way we got to know about the outside world... we just sort of took it all in. It was somebody else's life all the time wasn't it really. (Petts Wood Group)

I read every word. I didn't want to waste it. (Petts Wood Group)

LL: They opened your lives up - you learned from reading magazines - I still do.

LH: Yes, they opened things up.

(Lena Lowdell & Lillian Huff)

Two things struck me when listening to women's memories of reading magazines in the 1930s. Firstly, in contrast to characterisations of the women's press as prescriptive and backward-looking due to its emphasis on femininity and the home in these years (White, 1970), women foregrounded the outward-looking, pleasurable and informative aspects of magazines. A form of relaxation and escape, magazine reading also represented a valuable source of stimulation; a means of keeping up-to-date and learning things. 'It was the only way we got to know about the outside world,' as one reader said. Women repeatedly referred to their magazines as 'opening things up' and the metaphor of the window, which several used, seems highly suggestive of the distinctive appeal of magazines at this time. Presenting a view of, in one woman's words, 'somebody else's life,' however, was not the only function these publications served. Their focus on the home and the personal aspects of readers' lives meant that the window doubled as a mirror, reflecting readers back upon themselves and offering them new ways to imagine themselves and their lives. Secondly, whereas contemporary studies represent magazine reading in the first half of the twentieth century as a fragmented, interrupted and distracted process (Leavis, 1932, M-O, 1944), women, on the whole, recollected its absorbing aspects. Their enthusiasm for reading was overwhelming and the majority



were, and in many cases remain, voracious readers; most now, however, prefer books. Whereas much has been made of the visual impact of new colour weeklies such as *Woman* - introduced in the 1930s (McAleer, 1992; Reed, 1997) - it was the reading experience that women remembered, and with great affection. Again and again they described how, after turning to a favourite section (usually the problem page or the latest episode of a serial) they read their magazine 'from cover to cover,' savouring every word. A question of economy and making-the-most of things, the practice also recalls the deep levels of concentration contemporaries noted amongst female cinema audiences, especially those watching melodrama (Petro, 1989). These observations form the starting point of this enquiry into the relationship between text, image and women's narratives of reading magazines. Before examining the methodological issues involved in analysing narratives of magazine reading I will briefly describe the magazines women read.

The study focuses on the 'service' magazine, the genre that went on to dominate women's publishing in the twentieth century and was established in the inter-war years. Magazines such as *Good Housekeeping* (1922), *Modern Woman* (1925) and *Woman and Home* (1926) aimed to render the woman reader 'an intimate personal service' with a secondary emphasis on entertainment, and were initially intended for middle and lower middle-class consumption (White, 1970: 96). The recipe for mass selling periodicals, however, was established by three weekly titles *Woman's Own* (1932), *Woman's Illustrated* (1936) and *Woman* (1937). With its high quality colour illustrations, competitive price (2d in the 1930s) and friendly, reassuring editorial voice, *Woman*, subtitled 'The National Home Weekly,' was targeted at a cross-section of women across the country. It extended the 'service' ethos of practical advice and entertainment to wider readerships amongst the lower middle and working-class; the new female readership for magazines in the period (Ferguson, 1983, McAleer 1992). Pre-war favourites such as *Home Chat* (1895) and *Woman's Weekly* (1911) remained popular, adapting to the new formats.

Reading, Looking, Telling: narratives of magazine reading

'Oral history,' Linda Sandino (2006: 275) observes of the value of oral history for historians of visual and material culture, 'focuses on people in order to understand them



as subjects.’ Design historians, meanwhile, use interviews to understand things, studying objects and practices and their modes of production and consumption to access the society in which they functioned. This study, which takes Angela McRobbie’s (1996: 178) description of magazines as an ‘interdiscursive space,’ involving production, consumption and identity formation, as its starting point, uses magazines as a fulcrum, an intersecting point, for examining the relationship between subjects and things. The research is part of a wider study exploring feminine modernity in the women’s press in the 1920s and 1930s, which includes a study of the producers: publishers, editors, journalists, designers and advertisers, as well as textual and visual analysis of magazines (Hackney, forthcoming 2007). Methodologies of oral history, narrative analyses and existing ethnographic studies of reading, additionally suggests the importance of ‘reading’ these publications through the memories of those who read magazines.

Working with magazines and their context of production has revealed the complex, multi-layered and often contradictory messages that texts composed of advertising, editorial and fiction convey. Such contradictions, I argue, developing Margaret Beetham’s (1996) analysis of the magazine genre, open up a space for alternative or negotiated readings. The relationship between text and image, I found, was particularly fraught. Whereas editorial features in cheap weeklies such as *Home Chat* or *Woman’s Weekly* would often play it safe, preaching conventional ideas about, for instance, cosmetics or the behaviour of domestic servants and office girls, illustrations of confidently made up modern women, stropky maids and girls enjoying workplace sociability tell a different story (Hackney, 2007). Readers’ memories enable further exploration of the opportunities for active negotiation that the organisation of these texts allowed. They provide insight, not only into the titles women read and the thoughts and emotions associated with these, but also into the reading process and the ways in which magazines were encountered and used. Readers’ relationships with their magazines, moreover, as Anna Gough-Yates (2003) observes, are not fixed but continually changing, an important factor when analysing recollections of publications read over sixty years ago.

‘Remembering,’ as Sandino (2006: 278-9) reminds us, is ‘active rather than passive’ and the oral history interview is ‘an interpretative event’ in which social memory is not simply recovered but also articulated. Oral historians must pay attention not only to the



respondent's 'story', but also to the 'how, where, and why' that story is told, to see how language and stories are used to represent experience and its context. Through narrative analysis oral testimony becomes a text that can be opened to the methods of textual as well as content analysis. Identifying counter narratives, meanwhile, allows the historian to explore how dominant stories are being used to tell different things (Giles, 2002).

Furthermore, what is forgotten, misremembered, or repressed is as important as the story that is remembered for, as Annette Kuhn remarks, memory 'is these processes.' In her book *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (1995: 4), Kuhn writes suggestively about the role of visual imagery in 'memory work' and 'memory texts': cultural productions that make it possible to explore connections between 'public events' and 'personal memories,' between relations of class, national and gender identity, family dramas, and more. Composed of images and texts, fragments, anecdotes, a montage of vignettes, evoking public actions and private lives, magazines are ideal memory texts, which enable respondents, and the interviewer, to move beyond personal response towards a consideration of, in Kuhn's (1995: 191) words, 'the intersubjective domain of shared meanings, shared feeling, shared memories.'

Repeated refrains, key phrases, pronouns, the manner in which a narrator positions herself, the tone in which she speaks, what she leaves out, the counter-narratives she may tell, in addition to the content of what she says, all provide a means of exploring the relationship between a speaker, her life, her reading and the personal and collective identities shaped in, around and through magazines. Taking Joke Hermes's ethnographic study of magazine reading as a model (1995), I have extrapolated four 'reading repertoires' from readers' memories of magazine reading: rebellion and realistic escape: 'a little treat every week'; 'a good lesson in life': learning to be a (modern) woman; 'a nice little book': class and cultural values; and materialising modern femininity: change and transformation. The first two are developed from women's descriptions of why they read magazines, and consider it as a form of pleasurable escape and a means of knowledge acquisition. The second two are interpretive and concern processes of conscious and subconscious identity formation and transformation. All suggest how magazine reading was involved in, and contributed to the shaping of subject positions and identities that were feminine and modern. Hermes work, like Janice Radway's (1987) formative study of



romance readers, explores the relationship between reading, subjectivity and lived experience. Both Radway and Hermes use the quotidian nature of their material to examine its everyday social function and, importantly for my study, considered its relation to deeper psychological needs, anxieties and fantasies. Whereas, 'easily put down' became the defining phrase of Hermes study, 'they opened up whole new world' is central to mine. Her readers' lack of articulation – they had very little to say about their magazine reading - became the tiny visible point, signalling the existence of something much greater hidden below (Hermes, 1997). By contrast, the often very detailed and vivid recollections that my readers' recounted as they associated magazines with memories of their youthful everyday lives - first job, first boyfriend, battles with mother, the early years of married life - suggest that for them its meaning had sharpened with the passing of time. Little wonder that their memories were framed by a sense of openness, and the optimism associated with starting out on life. Various tensions and silences, nevertheless, emerged, but before considering these I will briefly describe the sample and the interviewing method I used.

Around thirty women living in Leicester, Sheffield, London and South East England were contacted through clubs, groups and associations, jumble sales, friends, on train journeys and in retirement homes. Readers interviewed range from Mavis Smith, who subscribed to *Woman's Weekly* for over fifty years and others who, either read intermittently or took other types of publication, such as literary journals or the sensational 'bloods' (story papers such as *Red Letter* and *Peg's Paper*). None were selected because they identified particularly strongly with any magazine, but all had read magazines in the 1930s and their memories and observations gave a broad sense of differing responses to a variety of titles. A letter published in *Woman* elicited twenty replies from across the country and provided a core group of dedicated readers, many of whom had subscribed from the first issue. Their memories provide a sense of how collective identities, or an imagined community of readers, centred on one magazine. Interviews were conducted with individuals, pairs and groups of women (two *Women's Co-operative Guild* meetings in Essex, a group in Camberwell, South London, and a sewing circle in suburban Petts Wood, Kent). Questionnaires were sent to the *Woman* readers and, where possible, these were followed with an interview. The sample was



determined by accessibility and produced qualitative insights into the thoughts, feelings, emotions and practices involved in and associated with reading magazines.

I took original copies of magazines along to the interviews as a means of triggering memories about reading what, after all, are highly ephemeral texts. This proved extremely productive and women enjoyed looking through the publications, pointing out familiar advertising slogans such as, 'Friday night is Amami night', or discovering articles by half-forgotten authors such as Beverley Nichols. On one occasion I forgot the magazines and the reader's response was noticeably more generalised. As readers flicked through, or poured over them, the magazines' functioned as memory prompts, eliciting memories and producing stories about the past. This was particularly evident in group interviews where the performative and shared nature of memory work became clear. An advert for Kotex Sanitary Towels, for instance, prompted many memories about the hidden world of menstruation from the Petts Wood group. The tone in which readers expressed themselves, furthermore, provides insight into the meaning and value of magazines. One woman's vivid recollections of the 'romance, hatred and all the agonising' in stories by Ruby Ayres or Ethel M. Dell, which appeared regularly in *Woman's Weekly*, sparked off excited conversation, suggesting the liberating aspects of romantic fiction as a means of imagining and vocalising desire.

The dialogue between Lena Lowdell and Lillian Huff expands on this, giving a sense of how romantic fiction was read within the context of a magazine:

LL: I always turned to the back, to the problem page. Why? Well you learned things.

LH: We didn't know much about sex in them days.

LL: And you learnt it, you learnt various things. Well, someone would write about how they'd been going wi' a lad and he'd been asking her to go with him, should I go with him or not? You know things like that. You see that's how we learnt what to do.

LH: That's how we educated ourselves. They didn't mention anything like a penis, nothing like that in them days.



LL: I also liked a good love story, and if it was a good love story you couldn't leave it alone, you just had to read it.

LL: [about the problem page] I took everything in hook line and sinker, thinking it were true.

The emphasis on magazines as a source of knowledge and information, and Lillian's insistence that she 'took everything in' are characteristic responses. Furthermore, the constant movement back and forth from problem page to romantic fiction, from the imagined world of the magazine to lived experience, and the ways in which these readers 'worked' at these texts, reading across and decoding information from fiction and agony pages, I argue, signal women's active engagement with their magazines.

Radway found that escape in order to find love, or at least an imaginative space in which to be loved, cherished and cared for was the predominant fantasy driving her readers' obsessive consumption of romantic fiction. Hermes concluded that a desire for control, management and resolution motivated her readers of magazines. An ability to balance different, often contradictory, needs and desires combined with a tone of restraint, moderation and an awareness of the need to make the most of things, in contrast, characterised the stories I was told. Pleasure in romantic fiction, for instance, was counter-balanced with 'interesting articles' that helped one 'do things.' Phrases such as: 'I like a book with hints and recipes as well as fiction;' 'informative and light reading and cooking;' they 'taught me to be practical and smart, I hope;' 'you always got something, didn't you, in all the books;' 'a little treat every week,' 'a nice little book,' 'my one luxury,' suggest a system of checks and balances where small pleasures reward resourcefulness, and attention to one's responsibilities.

Tensions, however, also emerged as magazines were variously conceptualised as: a source of pleasurable and escapist fantasy, or a way of 'learning things' (many agreed they were both); 'pie in the sky' or 'down to earth'; a realistic reflection of one's own life - 'these were the things we bought and used' said one respondent, pointing to the advertisements - or a 'window on other people's lives'; a guide to 'new,' 'up-to-date' and 'modern' ideas, or something more conventional. While some readers described their magazine reading



as hidden and private, others perceived it as a more public, shared activity. Comments about a magazine's ability to 'influence' the reader, moreover, ranged from the seemingly complacent, 'I took it all in' to insistent denials. To some extent, such differences may be explained by the dualistic format of magazines, which aimed to please and inform, yet they also reflect readers' diverse social backgrounds and the differing contexts for reading they experienced, something that will be explored in the following sections.

While most women were eager to talk about magazines, particularly if they were long time readers, Barbara Crux, who never looked at women's magazines, was uncomfortable and asked not to participate in further sessions. Barbara's response suggests powerful ways in which magazine reading materialised a shared identity, even in memory, which could make others feel different, or that they did not belong. The topic of etiquette pages, meanwhile, made others uneasy, declaring perhaps too forcefully that they 'didn't need to read that kind of thing.' The 'gaps and silences' in women's narratives, as Judy Giles (2002: 25) reminds us, are as important as what is said and women's sensitivity on this issue suggests the vital importance of knowing how to speak and behave 'correctly' and the role that magazines played in this. The phrase 'they served women's interests,' and others like it, was mentioned by several readers and conveys both a sense of the value and helpfulness of magazines and the collective identities forged through reading them.

This is not to say that women were uncritical readers. To date, the tendency among women of this generation to insist that they 'took it all in' or 'never questioned it' has been taken at face value, fuelling assumptions that they unthinkingly absorbed the dominant messages of magazines (Ballaster et al, 1991). Talking with readers, however, their critical assessment of publications strongly emerged, suggesting the extent to which they resisted or, at the very least, negotiated these. Scepticism about the veracity of agony columns was particularly common. Several told me that they read them for 'a bit of a laugh.' One reader went so far as to send in spoof letters about 'secretaries being bothered by the boss, and that sort of thing.' Demonstrating her knowledge of the genre, she took great pleasure recounting her skill at subverting it. 'Sentimental stories,' meanwhile, were identified by others as something they disliked, and Woman readers in



particular expressed a marked preference for fiction that dealt with 'everyday heroes and heroines.' Magazines, many insisted, gave them 'ideas' that could be adopted, adapted or rejected. A trained dressmaker, for instance, Flo Mansell used magazine patterns but insisted that she always changed or personalised them (Hackney, 1999).

Fine distinctions over title selection demonstrate a high degree of discrimination and self-awareness among readers; they also suggest the urgency of the connection some felt to their magazines. Mavis Smith rejected other, seemingly similar publications for *Woman's Weekly*, which in her view was eminently superior. The close, and sometimes emotional, relationship that could form between reader and magazine is demonstrated most forcefully by the *Woman* readers, all of whom read the title for over sixty years. 'I can only say that I love me weekly copy', one woman told me; 'it was a case of always having it. It was like a friend,' said another. Magazine reading was, and no doubt remains, a complicated business, involving contradictory processes of close identification and critical distance, even when reading a single issue of one publication. These women's memories, however, demonstrate the extent to which women, albeit selectively, identified with magazines and by extension other readers. 'I was choosy', as Eunice Davies put it, 'about magazines, *Woman* supplied my needs.'

The belief of Lena and others that they 'took it all in', however, must be taken seriously. On one level, it may be understood as an example of what Giles (2002: 23) describes as 'the interplay of psychic need and ideology,' signalling subconscious desires that are shaped within prevailing ideologies of femininity, motherhood and the home. 'Taking it all in,' may also be read as an expression of the attention women gave to their magazines and, as such, is analogous to the emotionally absorbed cinematic gaze, which Emilie Altenloh identified in her 1914 study of German cinema audiences. Altenloh attributed the passion for, even addiction to, the cinema which she observed among women of various social classes to its ability to provide a heightened sensory experience that transformed the monotony of everyday life. For the time of the screening, at least, they could, in the words of film historian Miriam Hansen (1983) 'live in another world.' As Patrice Petro (1989) has demonstrated, romance and melodrama, the film genres female audiences preferred, dealt with realistic problems in a heightened, stylized manner that



had much in common with contemporary magazines. She argues that women's absorbed gaze may be traced to certain gender-specific experiences that are addressed or given expression in the films and, I would add, magazines, creating a space in which 'repression is overcome and expressivity achieved.' With their dramatic stories about tragic relationships, for instance, or advice about how to behave with men magazines, like films, served a crucial function mediating women's personal experiences of modernity in a shared and public domain. Readers claim to have 'taken it all in', therefore, may be understood as a counter narrative, a dominant story that reveals another story, particularly when understood in relation to the reception of other, similar forms of contemporary, popular media at this time.

Historic Readers: a common culture

In 1937, the year in which *Woman* first appeared, its readers fell into three categories differentiated by age, occupation and marital status, according to my oral history research. These include: schoolgirls (usually reading their mother's magazines or those of friends and relatives); single working women with some disposable income to spend on small luxuries such as magazines, clothes, the cinema or cosmetics; and married housewives, a small number of whom had children during the period. A few married women continued to work, leaving employment only when they had children, one was a working mother. All were young, their ages ranging from eight to thirty one, most being in their early twenties or late teens. Several moved through all three categories during the 1930s, but the majority were single working women. This section will consider the circumstances of these women's magazine reading, the extent to which they shared common experiences, interests or aspirations and whether title selection was governed by variables of education, employment, marital status and class.

In order to tease out the relationship between perceptions of class and title selection I asked women to describe their social class and list the magazines they read. The twenty *Woman* readers roughly divided between those who considered themselves working-class and those viewing themselves as middle-class. Among the other readers, thirteen said that they were middle-class, ranging from 'upper middle-class' Barbara Crux whose father worked in the Admiralty, to 'lower middle-class' Doris Moore, whose father was a



hospital orderly. Barbara read her father's copies of *The Sphere* and *Argosy*, eschewing women's magazines, while Doris read *Peg's Paper* and *Woman's Weekly*. Fifteen women identified themselves as working-class, including G. J. Till who described herself as 'upper working-class'. Till's father was an engineer, she went to grammar school and read *Woman* regularly and *Home Chat*.

Two factors emerged. Firstly, the ambiguities surrounding what it meant to be middle-class in the period. This was particularly evident among those, such as Till or the *Woman* readers Marge Coupe and Joyce Haynes, who described themselves as 'upper working/lower middle-class.' Marge's father was a marine engineer and her family lived in their own detached house in Lancashire while Joyce, whose father was a machine operator, lived with her family in a rented terrace house. Connections with technical professions such as engineering associated these women with what the social historian Ross McKibbin (1998) describes as the 'new middle classes.' The new middle classes were particularly evident among the *Woman* readers, of whom only three: Anna Parkhurst, who lived in a detached house and whose father owned his own business, M. Reed whose husband was an architect (they lived in their own house in West Sussex) and Eunice Davies whose father worked in the family sheet metal business and owned a detached house in Middlesex, could be described as 'traditional' middle class. Mabel Cunningham, whose engineer father was unemployed in the 1930s, notably classified herself as working-class. The second significant factor is that the majority of women read at least one, and often more, 'women's interest' or domestic magazines. The new weeklies: *Woman* and *Woman's Own*, the monthly *Woman* and *Home* and *Woman's Own* were generally popular. Among the *Woman* readers only C. C. Russell, whose father was a labourer, mentioned reading cheaper story papers such as *Peg's Paper* or *Red Letter* which were identified with the working-class (Melman, 1988). Others who mentioned 'bloods' include Lena Lowdell (*Red Letter*, *People's Friend*), whose father was a collier, and Avis Randle who only read *Peg's Paper*. Her father was an unemployed machine operator in Leicester.

All attended elementary school, the majority leaving at fourteen or fifteen, although some stayed on until sixteen. The *Woman* readers, however, stayed longer in education, only



four leaving after elementary education; eight did the school certificate at secondary school and the rest stayed on until sixteen or eighteen. Those attending secondary school went to grammar, central, convent, high school or were privately educated. A number continued in professional or vocational training such as teaching, the civil service, at secretarial college or night classes. The limited opportunities for working-class schoolgirls to gain a secondary education (McKibbin, 1998) were reflected in the fact that only three in this position: Muriel Danpure, Mabel Cunningham and G. J. Till, transferred from elementary to Grammar schools; Cunningham and Till had fathers who were engineers. Those remaining longer in education, irrespective of class, were more likely to take a new weekly and a greater range of other magazines. Muriel Danpure, a postman's daughter who went on to do clerical work at the Foreign Office before becoming a technical assistant at the B.B.C., listed *Woman*, *Woman's Weekly*, *Woman and Home* and *Home Chat* as her favourite titles. Mabel Cunningham gave an even more extensive list, including *Woman*, *Woman and Home*, *Good Housekeeping* and *People's Friend* which, she read regularly and *Picture Post* and *Picturegoer* which, she sometimes 'looked through.' C. C. Russell and Florence Spike, two working-class girls who attended central school, also read the new weeklies, *Woman* and *Woman's Own*.

Whilst the women's educational experiences varied, having a job, at least before marriage, was common almost to all. This was characteristic of a period when young women from all social classes entered the labour market. In 1931 1,680,283 girls aged between fourteen and twenty were in full-time work, 75.1 per cent of this age group (Lewis, 1984: 149). Most girls, furthermore, did not marry until their twenties and an increasing number did not marry at all. Single women comprised 51 per cent of the female workforce aged over 35 years in 1931 and the percentage of young wives in the labour market grew (Todd, 2004: 122). Clerical jobs for women increased during and after the First World War and by 1931 women accounted for 42 per cent of the clerical workforce (Holloway, 2005). The *Woman* readers, in particular, reflected these trends. The majority were employed in 'white-blouse' office work until marriage which often came relatively late. M.B., for instance, was a clerical worker for seventeen years, before marriage to a corporation official. Gretta Robinson worked for thirteen years as a telephonist and secretary in accounts, marrying at twenty eight. And Muriel Wakeham spent twelve years



as a shorthand typist until she married aged twenty seven. Others were employed in retail or factory work. O. C. worked in a fruit shop, Joyce Haynes served in a department store and Elena Smith did piece-work on an assembly line making EKO radios. M. Kirkaldy, a nursemaid, was the only reader in the sample who performed domestic work. Marjorie Denut, who became a teacher, and the civil servant and later social worker, Margaret Coupe, were characteristic of the relatively small numbers of women in the professions (Holloway, 2005). Disparities in educational opportunities continued into the workplace, with the better educated enjoying, for instance, secretarial work while elementary school leavers had to content themselves with 'dead end general office jobs' (Tinkler, 1995: 32).

Readers working lives were reflected in these purportedly domestic magazines. Dress patterns, advertisements and employment columns addressed the business girl, while the working woman became a staple heroine of romantic fiction. Fostering a shared sense of identity based on the work place, representations of working women also reflected the differences in educational and employment opportunities that structured the workplace. Whereas middle-class monthlies addressed professional women, a wider and sometimes more disgruntled audience was evidenced in the pages of cheaper weekly magazines. For example, while the *Modern Woman* (01.1930: 37) feature 'Dressing to your salary' gave patterns for the thoroughly middle-class occupations of: 'secretary,' 'hotel hostess,' 'woman doctor,' and 'general manager' in a large firm, 'That Job You Don't Like' in *Woman's Weekly* (20.03.1929: 340) dealt with Doris who was, 'forever grumbling and grouching about her rotten job.' Although, editorial placed the blame for Doris's discomfort firmly at her own door, claiming that she was too lazy to improve her situation, the illustration of fashionable girls chatting in the typing pool shows an image of work-place sociability that, no doubt, would have exerted its own appeal. [Fig. 1]



THAT JOB YOU DON'T LIKE

Stick It Without Grumbling—You'll Reap Your Reward When The Better One Comes Along!

The Robin

I SAW a robin hopping on
The grass, to-day;
His beady eyes looked up at me,
In such a way

That I forgot the winds of March,
And winter weather;
The robin and the spring and I
Belonged together!

The robin and the spring and I,
All felt like humming,
It was as if, throughout the world,
New faith were coming!

New faith and April—ah, they wait
Each year to greet us,
To tell us that no winter world
Can quite defeat us!

MARGARET SANGSTER



The Jazz Pochette

- MATERIAL REQUIRED.**
- 1/2 yard canvas, 12 inches wide.
 - 1/2 yard silk for lining.
 - 1 wool needle.
 - 1 skein each of 3 different purples, black, white, dark grey wools (1d. each).
 - 2 skeins light grey wool.
 - 2 patent fasteners.

CUT off the selvages of the canvas and turn it down about four threads all round. Work the border in satin stitch with black and white wools, working the same stitch over four threads of the canvas all along to make a stripe of satin stitches. This stripe consists of about 15 white satin stitches, 15 black, 15 white, and so on, giving the appearance of short bars.

Fill in the pochette in the same way, but instead of regular bars of black and white, work bars of varying length in the other colours, using more of the light grey wool than the bright purples.

When the canvas is filled in, line with silk, press thoroughly, fold into pochette shape, join the sides and sew on two fasteners. Your bag is finished!

DORIS is a shorthand-typist at a shipping office—and she simply loathes her job!

To hear her talk, you would imagine that she works in a den of lions, and gets nothing for it.

But I happen to know that she gets a very good salary. So good, indeed, that she will be a long time finding another job where she will get as much, unless she adds to her qualifications—which she doesn't want to do.

No, she won't take the trouble to work a little harder, and take evening lessons for a time, so that she can move without losing money. And neither will she lose the money.

But what she will do is to make everybody miserable with her continual complaints. She grumbles and grouses over her rotten job from morning till night, and really, if she acts at the office like she does at home, I don't wonder that they are uncivil to her!

Of course you will say that if her job is so unbearable, surely it is worth while, losing a little of the money to get a job, where she would be happier?

MONEY OR HAPPINESS

WHICH means most, money or happiness? Doris has decided that money matters more than anything else, and now she cries because she can't have her cake and eat it, too.

Well, who can? Perhaps she must have the money, you say. Perhaps so, but if she looks matters in the face and realises that she can't do without it, why, then she must accept other drawbacks.

Other girls get comfortable jobs, at good salaries, you say.



Don't you believe it!

Nobody finds that working for a living is a sunshiny and joyous process, but it can be tackled bravely, and made very interesting—and the compensations can be counted.

The girls who have the wonderful jobs that you sigh after might not have anything better than you—but they are probably making a better job of it.

Every job can teach you something. Whether it is the loathsome invoicing at Blank's or the troublesome books at Smith's, you are steadily learning, and being fitted for something better.

But if you are going to whine about it you won't learn. You will only be a nuisance with a slack mind and an undisciplined brain.

STICK IT—WITHOUT GRUMBLING

IT will make a wonderful difference to your mental muscles if you tackle that job you don't like, and hang on to it until you are master. The next job will be easier, and your mind will be more elastic.

All through life you are going to meet jobs that you don't like. Even when you are married, and safely through the magic gateway, you will find those tiresome jobs cropping up.

When it rains, and the clothes simply won't dry. When Jack comes home early with a bad cold. When you have a wretched headache, and the sweep is due at ten o'clock, and the "char" doesn't turn up.

Well, what about it? You can't run away from the disagreeable jobs all your life, you know. What about sticking that one you've got?

Believe me, you'll reap your reward when the better one comes along.

GREEDY!

YOUNG Jimmie Doodle's very bad:
His thumb he always sucks,
And in the park he eats the bread
We've brought to feed the ducks!

IRENE HEATH



Fig. 1 – 'That job that you don't like' *Women's Weekly* 20.03.1929



Irrespective of education, employment or class the women, with the exception of Joy Drewett-Browne who relished her single status, working in a bank and living in a working girls' hostel, were united by an ambition to marry and have families. Even the civil servant Madge Taylor who, supporting a widowed mother and younger brother, remained single, had wanted children; Madge sublimated these maternal feelings by knitting garments for her nephews and nieces, using patterns from her magazine. There was, it seems, a ready audience for the domestic emphasis in magazines and the new housewifery, with its promise of higher standards of health and efficiency, had real significance for readers who wanted improved lives for themselves and their families. Dramatic colour advertisements, such as the one for Hoover vacuum cleaners [Fig. 2] which appeared in the first issue of *Woman*, signalled an alluring world of glamour, competence, convenience and satisfaction for readers such as C. C. Russell, who considered housework 'an important job.' Having been brought up by her mother, after her father moved out, Russell's ambition when she married was to make a 'nice homely home,' which was materially and, implicitly emotionally better than that of her childhood; working full-time her mother, as Mrs. Russell put it, 'wasn't house-proud.'



I'VE JUST GOT A MAID AT 4° A DAY!

AND you could have one too! There are some thousands of maids and additional maids going at this very low figure. Tireless workers who never need afternoons off or evenings out. To describe them in one simple word—Hoovers. This year it costs only fourpence a day to own a Hoover—the cleaner that is really three cleaners in one. It *beats* the grit from carpets just as they lie—it *sweeps* up fluff and animal hairs—it *suctions* away every trace of dust.

Fourpence a day is all it need cost to give you time for a life apart from housekeeping . . . time to enjoy a summer morning. 10/- down for a Hoover Junior (cash price £10.15—cleaning tools £2.2.6) or £1 down for the World's Best Cleaner (cash price £19.19—cleaning tools £3.3). Your old cleaner will be taken in part exchange. Surely drudgery isn't worth while when so little can end it for good? Post the coupon for further particulars.

The HOOVER
REGISTERED TRADE MARK

COUPON
To HOOVER Ltd.,
Dept. W.N.I., Perivale,
Greenford, Middlesex.
Without obligation please send me particulars of all Hoover electric cleaners.

NAME _____
ADDRESS _____

Remember — It Beats . . . as it Sweeps . . . as it Cleans

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Fig. 2 – 'I've Just Got a Maid at 4d a Day!' Hoover advertisement, *Woman*, 05.06.1937.



C. C. Russell received her first copy of *Woman* from her father when she was sixteen and, in his view, had graduated to womanhood. Others, such as R. Shoobert, Rose Wedgbury and Florence Spike who read sensational story papers as girls and left elementary school at fourteen, graduated to domestic magazines on marriage; Shoobert read *Home Chat* and the other two took *Woman*. As with education and employment, marriage and motherhood, it seems, were more significant factors than class in determining women's selection of magazines. The consensus about marriage was matched by similar agreement over the value of 'good' motherhood. And, whilst opinions differed as to whether or not a married woman should work, and some such as Viola Higgins did, all except Lucy Boswell who was unusual, being a feminist and union activist, felt strongly that mothers should remain at home. Six out of the seven women who had children in the period did just that. The consequent loss of income could produce tensions, however, and elements of negotiation emerged. Flo Mansell, for instance, who gave up a lucrative job as a dressmaker, became cook at her children's school in order to earn income and still be near them. More often than not, moreover, marriage, meant change of one sort or another, whether social, spatial or psychological. Magazine reading, for some, became bound up in the dislocations, as well as the opportunities resulting from new structures of housing, finance and employment. Viola Higgins, who abandoned work in 1938 when her husband's job with Imperial Tobacco caused the couple to move from Bristol to Kent, recalled feeling very isolated in a strange place with a young baby and her husband away a good deal. The gap was filled by *Woman* which, over sixty years later she described warmly as, 'a good friend.'

Ambiguities around class, slowly improving educational prospects, and the growing number of women who worked in the period, at least before marriage and motherhood, produced a ready audience of women who looked to magazines for ideas and advice about how to participate in, benefit from and deal with, the opportunities and problems that modern life opened up, both inside and outside the home. Women from diverse backgrounds, furthermore, were increasingly reading the same magazines, suggesting that an imagined community of readers with interests, values, habits of dress, manners and childcare, for instance, in common was beginning to form. M. Reed, for example, the wife of an architect and mother of two who lived in the family's detached house in West



Sussex, and M. Kirkaldy, a chauffeur's daughter who earned 30s a month working as a nursemaid, both read *Woman* and *Woman's Own* regularly and looked at *Woman's Weekly* and *Home Chat*. Of all the women in the sample, however, Mabel Cunningham perhaps best expresses the possibilities and tensions that characterised women's lives and motivated their magazine reading. The eldest of six children, Mabel's ambitions were frustrated at an early age when her engineer father's unemployment forced her to give up grammar school and find a job as a brewer's wages clerk. Reading in the evening and 'to pass the time' on the bus to work, Mabel read a large number of magazines. *Woman*, however, was the title she liked best because, while others seemed 'old-fashioned,' *Woman* was 'modern,' and offered a 'window on other people's lives.' Grammar school educated yet forced into a dead end job, reading *Woman* enabled Mabel to imaginatively identify with and participate in a world of exciting new fashions, romantic dilemmas and career opportunities. Its 'down-to-earth' ethos, practical advice and pragmatic tone, what's more, as I will demonstrate in the following section, suggested that these dreams were not beyond the realms of possibility.

Rebellion and Realistic Escape: 'a little treat every week'

The phrase 'a little treat every week' was frequently employed by readers to describe their magazines. Connoting small but regular pleasures, it expresses an economy of desire that was respectably controlled, and suggests moderate dreams that did not stray too far from the bounds of possibility. For these women, the management of pleasure, and its associated dreams of transformation, was habitual and deeply embedded in their psyches. Whereas, contemporaries regarded escapist reading as a temporary release from poverty and hardship, or 'a drug' to stupefy (Leavis, 1932: 31), these narratives suggest, what I term, a repertoire of 'realistic escape,' something very different from stupefaction. In this section I will explore the nature and meaning of escape for women reading domestic magazines, identifying two significantly different responses to, and understandings of it. The first centres on text, specifically romantic fiction, and demonstrates how reading was a rebellious activity for young women escaping, literally and symbolically, from the limitations of their mothers' lives. The second concerns the visual culture of consumption promoted in new weeklies such as *Woman*. Escape here, I argue, was a less furtive and more open affair, a pleasure that could be shared with friends, work



colleagues, or even mothers, as girls pored over and gossiped about fashion pages or movie star portraits.

Firstly, I want to consider the meaning of the term 'escape' in relation to popular media, and the ways in which women addressed and expressed escapism in magazines. Janice Radway (1987), concluded from her research with the Smithtown women, a group of dedicated Harlequin romance readers, that escape specifies the distance readers found it necessary to maintain between their fantasies and their lives. Escape, she suggests, refers both to the condition left behind and its intention, the projection of a utopian (or at least improved) future. I found this conceptualisation of the relationship between current contingencies and future possibilities, fantasy and reality, suggestive. Bringing together the contradictory processes of seeing things for what they are and imagining them differently, of keeping things in perspective and entirely letting go, it resonated with women's stories about magazines, and seemed to present a particularly helpful thinking about the dual function of magazines.

Most women associated escapism and pleasurable relaxation with romantic fiction, an imaginative compartmentalism that reflects the organisation of magazines into different sections and departments (White, 1970). 'Stories,' as Margaret Coupe put it, 'provided escapism, whilst articles provided information and ideas.' The longer serials of the period were remembered with particular affection, answering in Gretta Robinson's words, a 'deeply felt need.' Even in recollection, however, such indulgent pleasures were swiftly checked and qualified. Mavis Smith, who read magazines as a young housewife, said:

When I was younger it was always the fiction first. I tried to ration myself a bit. I suppose romantic fiction in those days... I don't know why you go for romanticism, perhaps because you are plunged into the world of washing nappies and whatnot. I think the magazine's romanticism was sheer escapism. The expense of the recipes was a consideration, whether they are practical or what I term pie-in-the-sky.



Identifying herself as someone who 'tried to ration' her reading, Mavis evokes a sense of guilty pleasures; the product of contemporary fears about popular fiction's addictive effects (Leavis, 1932). Immediately tempered by pragmatic considerations about the cost of recipes, her memories of the 'sheer escapism' of romance suggest the degree to which women were constantly torn between escapist pleasures and domestic responsibilities.

Escapism and pragmatism, however, were not entirely opposed. The growth of advertorials (combined adverts and editorials) and the introduction of short stories based on readers 'real life' experiences in *Woman* in the 1930s, meant that the boundaries between advertising, editorial and fiction became harder to sustain. This provided, I suggest, a context in which escapist fantasies could be mapped onto the information and ideas gained from editorial and vice versa, enlarging the scope of women's imaginative lives and creating a sense that more, rather than less, was possible.

Historians studying the lives of working-class girls in the 1930s have demonstrated how their aspirations were shaped by questions of respectability, fear of poverty and, crucially a wish to escape the hardship and domestic burden of their mothers' lives (Alexander, 2000). Mothers were a significant presence in women's memories of magazine reading. For some, such as Kathleen Ash, whose father was a Stevedore and whose family lived in Rotherhithe, London, magazine reading represented a form of rebellion against a mother who complained: 'You've always got your bloody nose in a book!' Kathleen's love of reading was partly driven by a wish to differentiate her life from her mother's, who was always, 'too busy for magazines and books.' Lillian Huff expressed similar sentiments, claiming that her mother would 'only look at the pictures.' She stressed the value of reading text; 'You learn something from reading' she said. Others experienced reading as a contested activity that foregrounded the struggle, physical and symbolic, over appropriate forms of female behaviour and identity. Lena Lowdell, the daughter of a Sheffield collier, described her mother's tactics:

...if you were reading a book [magazine] and you got up... when you got back the book would have gone. She thought you were wasting your time. You should be polishing. She never had idle hands... even if you were reading the newspaper



she'd hide it... Which was wrong, I mean reading you learn a lot with reading.
(Lena Lowdell)

Many resorted to clandestine reading. Dorothy Barton's father worked on the docks and her family lived in Charlton, South London. Her mother took Red Letter, and someone else in the house took Titbits. Dorothy looked at these although she was 'not supposed to.' When she was older her mother had Woman's Weekly and Woman's Own as her 'little treat every week,' which Dorothy read 'unobserved.'

Such memories suggest how the split between girlish dreams and parental expectations was materialised in, and played out through, vastly different attitudes to reading. Whereas parents, whose views were formed by the immediate experiences of work, family and neighbourhood, regarded it as wasted time, for their daughters it offered a form of privacy, at least for a time, and opened up an entirely different world of information, interests and ideas. Encouraging women to imagine new lifestyles and modes of behaviour magazine-induced dreams, nevertheless, largely centred on romantic love, marriage and domesticity. The ideals of modern domestic life so vividly portrayed in magazines encouraged Lena and her husband to pay £15 down and 13s and 1d a month for their own house, despite strong opposition from parents who had always lived in rented accommodation and viewed a mortgage as an unnecessary risk. When she married in 1936 and left her parents' terraced house in Rotherhithe, Kathleen moved to the South London suburb of Charlton. Magazines, with their tips and suggestions about how to brighten up curtains, add a touch of colour with flowers, or treat the family with a really special cake, substituted for her close network of relatives and friends. Old ties, however, remained strong. Distrusting her local clinic and scornful of the mothercraft pages in magazines, Kathleen returned to live with her mother for a time after the birth of her first child.

For others magazines offered the possibility of shared rather than hidden pleasures and mutual interests expressed across the generations and with friends. This was particularly true of the Woman readers, many of whom like Joyce Haynes read their mother's magazines; Joyce began reading the publication in 1939 as a girl of 16. Eunice Davies,



who was employed as a shorthand typist from 1933 until she married in 1940, cut out pictures of Royalty and film stars, discussing them and the bright colourful dress patterns with her friends. Portraying herself as, 'young and full of fun' in those days, she remembered identifying closely with *Woman* which she described as, 'light and bright' with a 'young outlook.' With its exciting pages of film and fashion news, some of which were reproduced in full colour, the magazine provided escape from a hide-bound, hum drum world, a necessary antidote to the 'strict discipline' of home life where her father 'ruled the roost' and an office in which, as Eunice vividly put it, 'we could hear the clock tick.' The escapist pleasures that she and her friends found in *Woman* suggest the potency of a visual culture of consumer desire. The need to maintain respectability and avoid any hint of excess, nevertheless, remained important. Over sixty years on Eunice was keen to assure me that she respected conventions; 'I kept to the rules,' she said. Whereas, those who battled to read magazines were acutely aware of the subversive aspects, particularly of romantic fiction, *Woman* readers such as Joyce Haynes and Marjorie Denut took a more prosaic viewpoint. Considering the magazine's fiction to be of a very different order to the sentimentalism of old-fashioned papers such as *Home Chat*, they also stressed the publication's respectable, normative values. Joyce described its appeal as a combination of: 'good sensible articles' and fiction that 'transported me from my everyday world,' but showed 'down to earth characters' and 'homely types.' The teacher, Marjorie Denut, who considered *Woman*, 'light, bright and youthful,' even emphasised its conservative values, particularly when compared to her mother who she described as, 'before her time and rather unconventional, the opposite of magazine advice.' A professional woman in business, Anna Parkhurst's mother actively disapproved of her daughter's magazine reading, not because it exposed her to shockingly new ideas, but because she considered it commonplace and mundane; Anna read *Woman*, *Woman's Own* and film magazines. *Woman's* distinctive blend of novelty which, nevertheless, didn't go too far, is perhaps best summed up by Margaret Coup who, described its appeal as being 'about and for ordinary readers' while, simultaneously offering, 'a further outlook' at a time when, 'radio and cinema visits were the only other sources of ideas and news.' The paradoxical nature of the *Woman* mix, with its attention to readers' need for new ideas, glamour and escape, and the more prosaic realities of their everyday lives, corresponds to the repertoire of 'realistic escape' that emerged in women's



descriptions of magazine reading. This fit between the tone, emphasis and imaginative scope of a magazine and its audience's reading practice, perhaps more than any other factor, may account for the publication's future success.

Citing pleasure and relaxation as her main motivations for reading, the teacher Marjorie Denut rejected the term escape. In her view she, 'had nothing to escape from.' Readers' escapist fantasies were driven by social, emotional and psychological conditions that were particular to individuals. Patterns, nevertheless, emerge. Reading magazines, particularly those with a high degree of romantic fiction, represented a form of generational rebellion for working-class women like Kathleen Ash. With their colourful pages of adverts for labour-saving appliances, features on film stars and fashion styles, the new domestic weeklies, in contrast, signalled a respectable and predominantly visual culture of feminine modernity in which women from a variety of social backgrounds participated, as education, employment and marriage became more significant determinants of magazine reading than class. The shift to a shared culture of consumption, however, was not without its tensions, and the 'repertoire of realistic escape' suggests how readers juggled private pleasures with domestic responsibilities, personal aspirations with family duties. Involving complex and sometimes contradictory responses, the multifarious nature of this process is reproduced in the multifaceted nature of magazines, which include image, text, editorial, advertising and fiction. The phrase, 'they opened up a whole new world' conveys both the possibilities and the limitations of magazine-based feminine modernity. Women's narratives about magazines and the concept of 'magazine as memory text,' however, reveal magazine reading and the processes of identification it involves as an active, creative and on-going process as women interact with, negotiate and interpret these texts, individually and together.

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