Cosmopolitan’s Improbable History

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Who would have thought that the magazine responsible for America’s first nude male centerfold in 1972 was once prudish enough to stop the publication of a Tolstoy novel about premature sex and out-of-wedlock pregnancy? In The Improbable First Century of Cosmopolitan Magazine, James Landers follows the 125-year-old publication through milestones such as the muckraking era, the Great Depression, and the women’s liberation movement. Cosmopolitan’s modern face, Landers argues, is the vision of a bestselling sex book author who wanted to reach women interested in topics beyond child rearing and the kitchen.

But this is only the magazine’s most recent incarnation. Founded in 1886 as a family literary publication by Paul Schlicht, an opportunistic businessman motivated by the dot-com-like magazine mania of the Gilded Age, Cosmopolitan quickly spiraled into financial trouble. Bought in 1888 by Joseph Hallock, publisher of Christianity at Work, the magazine changed hands again later that year to become possession of John Brisben Walker, an entrepreneur with newspaper experience. The era that followed, Landers writes, reflected Walker’s quickly changing interests—family traditionalism (as in the example of the Tolstoy novel killed in 1899), Marxist influences, obsession with science, and finally a change of heart in support of industrial elites. As an avid geek and prophetic thinker, Walker advocated proposals for safe air travel, sponsored a horseless carriage competition, and even started a free university—an effort ending in shambles. His excitement about new inventions drew his attention away from Cosmopolitan, which spiraled into another crisis and welcomed a new owner in 1905: William Randolph Hearst.

The change remained hushed up for years, as Hearst used Cosmopolitan to gain a national audience and further his political ambitions through exposés about his opponents. It was a 1906 Cosmopolitan story, “The Treason of the Senate,” that irked then-president Theodore Roosevelt to refer to a Christian fable about a man with a rake who kept looking down at the muck despite being offered a celestial crown. The term “muckraker” was coined, Landers writes, starting a short-lived era of watchdog journalism until the public lost interest.

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Cosmo changed with the times, leaving behind muckraking and becoming a predominantly fiction publication in 1911. Thanks to a talented editor, the magazine boasted some of the highest quality fiction during the Jazz Age, along with famous people’s bylines for coverage of the issues of the day. Amelia Earhart, the magazine’s aviation editor since 1928, wrote about her adventures and praised air travel’s safety. Cosmo also paid Italy’s dictator, Benito Mussolini, to write articles opposing birth control and describing women as naturally full of “willing submission to the power and strength of the male.”

Landers describes yet another gradual downward spiral for Cosmo after the circulation booms of World War II. Hearst died in 1951, but the Hearst Corporation kept control, transforming Cosmo into a general women’s publication in the late 1950s, susceptible to competition from specialized magazines. Mediocrity ruled until 1965, when Helen Gurley Brown, author of the bestseller Sex and the Single Girl, took over and began to transform Cosmo into a popular yet oft-ridiculed magazine. Her vision was well-defined: Serve career women in their 20s and 30s by writing openly on topics such as sex and personal relationships, including premarital and extramarital affairs. Landers describes Gurley Brown’s purposes as “quasi-feminist.” While refuting double standards of sexuality, Cosmo still focused on catching a man, in opposition to the feminist emphasis on independence. Lax journalistic standards garnered criticism during Gurley Brown’s tenure. The magazine concocted a story about a call girl in 1968, published single-source articles or identified sources by pseudonyms, strived to please advertisers, and accepted free travel from profiled celebrities and airlines without disclosing arrangements to readers.

In the end, Landers’ book is not only a history of Cosmopolitan but also a chronicle of American society reflected on the magazine’s pages. The very meaning of “cosmopolitan” seems to have evolved from the 19th century, when Cosmo featured a globe on its cover and analyzed the pitfalls of British colonialism, to the 2000s, when Gurley Brown ensured that its international editions spotlight both career articles and models showing “some of their boobs.” Because of its meticulous coverage of details and facts, Landers’ book offers a rich reference and food for thought to both scholars and students.