

Book Review: Why We Love “Trash”

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Reading Celebrity Gossip Magazines. Andrea McDonnell (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2014). 162 pp. \$22.95 paper.

Photo editors at today’s celebrity gossip magazines comb through upwards of 90,000 photos a day in search of the perfect cover shot: Kate Middleton showing the slightest hint of a baby bump or Britney Spears behind the wheel with an unbuckled baby on her lap. Photo editors are trained to look for images that could spark speculation, or “editorialization,” as it is known inside the industry. “The smallest details of a photograph—a new ring on an actress’s left hand, a slight bunching in the midsection of her sweater, a warm glance between co-stars—could all be transformed into a story line,” notes Andrea McDonnell, the author of *Reading Celebrity Gossip Magazines*.

Through interviews with editors, writers, and photo editors, McDonnell takes us on a fascinating trip inside the world of celebrity gossip weeklies—a distinctive new genre, she believes, dominated by five titles launched or radically revamped since 2000: *Us Weekly*, *Life & Style*, *InTouch*, *Star*, and *OK!* The publications share a chatty style, evocative content, and common visual aesthetic, including flashy color palettes, noisy spreads replete with arrows, bubbles and boxes, and big photos that pop on their glossy pages. “We can have amazing reporting about Angelina,” says former *Us Weekly* staffer Lauren Schutte. But “she hasn’t left the house in a month and the last time she did she wore black. Then we’re not going to run that story.”

The magazines run virtually identical departments: *Us Weekly*’s “Who Wore It Best?” is *OK!*’s “Who Wore it Better?”; *InTouch*’s “Fashion Trauma” is *Life & Styles*’s “Oops, What Were They Thinking?” And they cover common themes, particularly intense scrutiny of celebrities’ bodies and relationships. “Although many of the genre’s competitors (*People*, *Entertainment Weekly*, various fashion magazines) do report on the professional lives of famous women and on the entertainment industry itself, celebrity gossip magazines rarely feature stories about matters in public life,” writes McDonnell. Instead, they concentrate on the personal—on break-ups and weddings, cellulite, plastic surgery, and the ever-present “bump patrol.” (“Bagel or Baby?” muses the headline beside the photo of a celeb with an ever-so-slightly protruding tummy, in McDonnell’s favorite example.)

Carol T. Fletcher is an associate professor at Hofstra University. She has more than 20 years of experience in the magazine industry, working for such publications as Discover and Time. Her work has appeared in The New York Times, Newsday, and JAMA, as well as numerous general interest, science, and women's magazines.

Celebrity gossip magazines, for the most part, have enjoyed striking success at a time when other magazines have struggled to survive. *Us Weekly*, named *Advertising Age’s* 2004 Magazine of the Year, today enjoys advertising revenues of about \$400 million annually and a circulation that hovers around two million.

What intrigues McDonnell is the enormous appeal of these so-called “trashy” magazines, so seemingly inconsequential that, she discovered, even their own publishing houses don’t archive back issues. The typical *Us* reader is an employed woman with a median household income of \$68,880 and at least some college education. Why do millions of educated women find guilty pleasure in magazines that relentlessly police the female body and propagate demeaning stereotypes of women? Why is it so much fun—yes, fun—to read about yet another celeb transformed by pregnancy from anorexic party girl to earth mother extraordinaire?

McDonnell, an assistant professor of communication and media studies at Emmanuel College, attempts to answer this question through textual analysis and reader focus groups. She discovers that readers, far from passively accepting the modern morality tales in celebrity magazines, are in turns outraged, amused, sympathetic, and dismissive of their stories. This may come as little surprise to magazine scholars... or to a multitude of readers who would never actually buy such “trash” but can’t resist indulging in it at the nail salon or staff lounge. One 2010 report found that “every issue of *Us Weekly* purchased was read by an average of seven people,” McDonnell notes.

It is precisely the shared experience of reading celebrity gossip magazines, McDonnell argues, that makes them so appealing—and valuable—to the 18- to 34-year-old women who are their target demographic. The magazines show twenty-something celebrities grappling with the same decisions and emotions that many of their readers face: whether to get married, when to have a baby, and how to make fulfilling life choices while negotiating social expectations about femininity. Celebrity tales provide a launch pad for readers to discuss such issues with friends, colleagues, and a vast implied community of fellow readers. Should Rihanna go back to an abusive Chris Brown? What’s with all this plastic surgery, Heidi? And really, Angelina, another child?

Says McDonnell: “Readers enjoy talking back to the fairy tale.”

Editors of celebrity gossip magazines consciously encourage such backtalk. Rob DeMarco, a former photo editor at *Life & Style*, says the magazine runs positive stories about celebrity children in expensive clothing, expecting the reader will be outraged. “[W]e’re saying, “Here she is with all her stuff.” But we want the readers to think, “Oh, what a spoiled brat she is.” And so we let the readers draw their own conclusions, which gets them involved in it to a certain extent.”

The magazines also encourage reader engagement through polls, ongoing departments in which celebrities directly address readers (“25 Things You Don’t Know

about Me”), and referring to stars only by their first names, suggesting that Jen, Kendra, and Nene are our friends (and leaving over-50 readers like myself clueless as to who the articles are about). Above all, celebrity gossip magazines traffic in “truthiness,” proffering up a steady supply of stories in which facts may be checked, but insinuation runs amok. In doing so, McDonnell argues, the magazines encourage playful discussion, providing a nonthreatening space for their readers “to consider, talk over, and come to terms with...the anxieties and difficulties facing women today.”