

Film Review: A Fond Gaze at Magazines' Golden Era

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Smiling Through the Apocalypse: *Esquire* in the 60s. Tom Hayes. 2014. 1 hour 39 minutes. \$14.92 DVD.

Over winter break, I visit my home state of Colorado. I drive up and down Interstate 25, grabbing lunch with my brother or a sandwich and beer with my father-in-law. Our conversations revolve mostly around pop music and late-20th-century history and politics. If the Broncos are doing well late in the season, that's a topic of conversation, too.

But since they aren't, we dive into election-year politics. As I bemoan the lack of civility, the seeming inability of people on opposite sides to talk, and the problems facing the press, my father-in-law reminds me that the 1960s were dark as well, maybe darker.

We sit there mulling the 1960s. For me, that decade is history, not lived experience. Instead, I reflect on the men and women who vicariously transported me into that era through journalism: Gay Talese, John Sack, David Halberstam, Hannah Arendt, and Tom Wolfe. Some of these were the kings and queens of *Esquire*, perhaps the high point of 1960s-era magazine writing.

Sitting astraddle of *Esquire* was a man named Harold T.P. Hayes, and the cadre of editors and writers he assembled produced some of the greatest think pieces of the era, such as Norman Mailer's "Superman Comes to the Supermarket" and, of course, Gay Talese's "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold," assigned to nearly all journalism students from 1966 to the modern era. Hayes oversaw still-talked-about magazine covers, such as "The Passion of Muhammad Ali," in which the draft-defying boxing great was styled as St. Sebastian, and the one of Lt. William Calley, the only man prosecuted for the My Lai massacre, portrayed smiling amid stone-faced Vietnamese youngsters.

If you haven't considered Hayes's legacy, a 2014 film asks you to do so. *Smiling Through the Apocalypse: Esquire in the 60s* was directed by Tom Hayes, Harold Hayes's son, whose life begins more or less when his father is ascendant at the magazine. The film starts before Harold Hayes is named editor and focuses mainly on the years between 1963 and 1973, when he resigns. Meant as a son's ode to his father, it features more than 40 interviews, including some fleeting anecdotes that reveal less of Hayes's leadership than intended.

There is an extended rift on Hayes's distrust of Gloria Steinem, whom he met socially in the early 1960s. Steinem occasionally wrote for *Esquire*, bylining pieces such as "The Moral Disarmament of Betty Coed" in 1962. But by the late 1960s, Steinem was firmly in the orbit of Clay Felker, who had left *Esquire* and founded *New York*, making it

into an essential reading for its long-form journalism and coverage of New York culture. In 1971, *Esquire* published a takedown piece on Steinem, criticizing her for using her attractiveness to achieve political power. The article hastened the founding of *Ms.*, which soon debuted within the pages of *New York*.

The rivalry between Hayes and Felker is also something of a theme. The two worked together at *Esquire*, and Hayes was chosen as editor over Felker. It is Felker who has the more burnished reputation for recognizing and shepherding writers to greatness. That may be why some of the editors and writers interviewed in the film defend Hayes's legacy in the terms they do. "Everyone, to my knowledge, adored him," says Becky Bartlett, a coordinating editor at *Esquire* at the time. "He ruled by loving us and not by scaring us." Adds Gay Talese: "I never found an editor again I would work with like I did with him."

The younger Hayes made the film in time to interview some of the journalists who contributed to *Esquire's* greatest years but who have since died, such as Nora Ephron. He achieves his purpose. The film helps bring his father out of relative obscurity, and conveys the warmth of this North Carolinian transplanted to New York. We are reminded that even after leaving magazine journalism, Harold Hayes had an impact as a television host and the author of the books *The Last Place on Earth* and *The Dark Romance of Dian Fossey*, which became the basis for the film *Gorillas in the Mist*.

Smiling Through the Apocalypse is also useful in explaining to journalism students that leading a publication is more than line-editing. The film spends time on the cultivation of talent that all good editors must do. It also makes any journalist want to read or reread many of the pieces mentioned—or at least thumb through the art direction provided by George Lois and a staff that included Robert Benton and Jean-Paul Goude.

Where the film excels is in explaining the vitality and cultural impact of magazines in the 1960s and '70s. Hayes's 10 years as editor of *Esquire* represent a golden era. Talese fondly recalls magazine writers as "stars," whose bylines were something like box-office draws. Writing, art, and photography all served to make magazines forces talked about in the way in which Twitter feeds are discussed now.

Indeed, nothing can make you snap back to the present like Twitter. I realize I'm still listening to my father-in-law's mini-lecture on the depths of national despair in the 1960s. If Harold T.P. Hayes could smile through it, maybe today's journalists can, too.