

Waiting for The New Yorker

While the magazine certainly provided some readers with a symbolic city, others saw it as a bastion against the forces of cultural decline.

Mary Corey

The New Yorker was as much a part of our class conditioning as clean fingernails, college, a checking account and good intentions. For better or worse, it probably created our sense of humor.

John Leonard

The New Yorker magazine first drew me to the world of literature and fine writing. To this day and through all its recent transformations, it has continued to play a large role in my literary reading experiences. It is surely the most frequent single source of the entries in my Commonplace Book. I can't be entirely sure when I first started reading *The New Yorker*. Perhaps I was in high school or even younger. But I do recall there was always a copy around the house and I know that once I started reading the magazine, I never stopped. This is a tale told by most dedicated readers, including its current editor, David Remnick, who, upon assuming the post, remarked, "I was raised on this magazine."

What could the magazine have possibly meant to me as a young boy growing up in Los Angeles in the '40s and '50s? I know my mother read it from cover to cover each week, and surely I must have wondered what drew her to those pages with such devotion. No doubt I picked up a copy from time to time, glanced at the articles, and maybe read one of two, perhaps at her suggestion. And then as my education broadened in junior high and then high school, I remember reading sections of the magazine in earnest.

It became my Literature 101: a course that has lasted for years, indeed, to this day. And it introduced me to the cultural life of this country, at least as reflected in the goings on in New York. I became aware of the people who were profiled in the magazine, the heroes

of high culture: the books they wrote and films they made or appeared in. I was taken away to worlds I never knew existed by the two or three short stories that were published then in each issue, and by those remarkable letters from foreign cities. What better introduction to Paris than those memorable Letters from Paris by Janet Flanner?

There was even a column on horse racing by Audax Minor, the pen name of George Ryall, which I read with considerable interest since it was not uncommon for my father to take us on the weekend to the thoroughbred races at Hollywood Park or Santa Anita. Imagine that—a column on thoroughbred horse racing in this most hi-brow of magazines.

Eventually, it went the way of *The Long-Winded Lady*, Berton Roueche's *Annals of Medicine*, and the other little quirks that characterized the magazine, such as the placement of the author's name at the end rather than the beginning of a piece and the absence of a Table of Contents, all of which brought a little mystery to the reading experience. Should I peek at the author's name before I read the story? Should I thumb through the entire issue to learn what's in it? Who could have written this Talk of the Town piece, a question, like the first two, that is no longer required?

More than anything, I think the magazine communicated to me in those early days a standard of discourse and analysis that seemed to be worth emulating. It gave me a model to follow preparing the lectures for my classes and judging the work of others. I wanted to write as clearly and as thoughtfully and occasionally as humorously as the writers did on the pages of *The New Yorker*, and I expected others to do the same. I knew I had a long way to go, but *The New Yorker* pointed the way for me. In that respect, nothing has changed in the ensuing years.

In May of 2000, the magazine held a festival in New York to celebrate its 75th anniversary. Many of its well-known authors read from their work, some lectured, and others participated in panel discussions or gave interviews. The *New Yorker* Festival was such a success that it has been repeated every year since. Think of it, the writers of a weekly magazine holding forth about their work during three full days of readings, lectures, and discussions. Outside academic society meetings, I can think of nothing else

- Preferred Customer 11/6/05 10:05 PM
Deleted: A
- Preferred Customer 11/6/05 10:05 PM
Deleted: F
- Preferred Customer 11/6/05 10:07 PM
Deleted: -

like it in this country, surely not by any other magazine or periodical. When I went to the Festival the following year, I was surprised by the large crowds at most of the events and the fact that, while most were from New York City, a goodly number had come from distant locations. I had traveled across the country from Oregon; one woman I met had come all the way from Honolulu.

What led me and so many others to travel so far, at some expense, to attend this Festival? More than anything, I think we came to make contact with a few of its talented contributors and to connect in some vague fashion with the community of readers and writers who recognize the unique and special value of the magazine. Many of its most notable contributors were present the year I attended. On Fiction Night, which opened the Festival, I had to choose between Anne Beattie and Richard Ford, or Michael Cunningham and Deborah Eisenberg, or Nick Hornby and Zadie Smith, or Lorrie Moore and Julian Barnes, and other pairs no less notable. The choice was impossible. The seminars and presentations on each of the following two days were no less impressive.

David Remnick's interview of Woody Allen was far and away the most popular event of the Festival the year I attended. A huge room in the New York Public Library was used for the session. Woody ambled in, and the crowd roared. Remnick, who seemed to be everywhere at the Festival, reported that the session sold out the day tickets went on sale. Woody admitted he was not a scholar, saying he is just Woody. Everyone loved his modest, unassuming, and fun-loving self-deprecation. He was a natural at it and good at poking fun at much of modern life, without annoying anyone. He loves to write, hates leaving his apartment, and doesn't care what people say about his work; he just needs to do it. Otherwise, he would collapse. Woody offered an interesting view of greatness: you do what you do, you do what you do best, and if others like it or think it's great, then that's fine. And if they don't, that's fine too. But you always have to do what you like to do and what you do naturally. Talent is a gift, not something you can try to attain. You can work at perfecting it, but first it has to be there.

Preferred Customer 11/6/05 10:09 PM

Deleted: M

Preferred Customer 11/6/05 10:21 PM

Deleted: ;

Preferred Customer 11/6/05 10:20 PM

Deleted: s

Preferred Customer 11/6/05 10:22 PM

Deleted: says

Preferred Customer 11/6/05 10:22 PM

Deleted: s

Preferred Customer 11/6/05 10:23 PM

Deleted: and e

Preferred Customer 11/6/05 10:24 PM

Deleted: s

Preferred Customer 11/6/05 10:24 PM

Deleted: 's

Preferred Customer 11/6/05 10:24 PM

Deleted: ,

Preferred Customer 11/6/05 10:25 PM

Deleted: has

Preferred Customer 11/6/05 10:25 PM

Deleted: Y

The arrival of *The New Yorker* is one of the main events of my week. It bothers me when it isn't delivered on time, and if it doesn't arrive the next day or so, I will go out to buy a copy at the newsstand. Of course, it usually drifts in the day after that. But I'd rather not run the risk that it won't, or, as happens now and then, that it will be delivered by mistake to someone else.

With the exception of the recently introduced double issues, the magazine has been published every week for the past eighty-three years. Frankly, I find this rather astonishing. Putting together a magazine of this quality *week after week* for as many years as that (with no reason to believe it will be any different in the years ahead) seems something of a miracle to me.

You have to stand before the bound volumes of the magazine on the shelves of any major library to really appreciate why I say this. When I found myself doing this the other day, I was dumbfounded by the row upon row of back issues of the magazine. Then, as I began my search for the Talk of the Town piece I wanted to cite, I realized I was going through one issue after another, as though it was the latest. Hours later, I found the piece I was seeking, although it would have taken but a moment had I had not been so caught up in thumbing through the old issues page by page.

Everything was still there. The advertisements for fashionable clothes and exotic places, the hilarious cartoons, the profiles of people-you-always-wanted-to-meet. The essays were longer then, but no less serious, and once they captured your interest, they took forever to finish. The same was true of the Profiles, the Letters posted from European capitals or those unforgettable Pauline Kael film reviews, none of which seemed the least bit dated on rereading.

There were more short stories then and who would not want to re-read those that moved you the first time around; Cheever's "The Country Husband," Salinger's "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," William Maxwell's "What He Was Like", or Munro's, "The Jack Randa

Hotel." Here still is classic literature about memorable people and situations that continue to bring pleasure and personal insights that you had not recognized before.

I can clearly recall the first time I read some of those stories and how I was affected by the experience. To cite an instance, I will never forget the first time I read "The Jack Randa Hotel," Munro's comedic tale of a fractured marriage and runaway husband. It was late in the afternoon, the day was warm, and I was in Italy, on the rooftop terrace of the hotel in Florence where I was staying. It was a *perfect moment*. I read her story slowly, very slowly, as I knew the moment would not last long or be repeated soon, if ever, again.

Like other longtime readers, I go through each issue in a fairly regular fashion. I turn at once to the Table of Contents, also a recent addition, to learn who the writers are and on what subject they have written. Then I proceed, page by page, through the entire issue for the first time, reviewing the Talk of the Town, the cartoons, the poems, occasional side-bars, and the ads, especially the little ones which appear in column format toward the end of the issue. After a suitable period of restraint, I commence reading a fair amount of each issue.

With few exceptions, I have been doing this every week for more than fifty years.

Recently I have begun to wonder about the cumulative impact of this experience. How has this steady diet of reading *The New Yorker* influenced the life I lead or the work I do? Granted, this is a difficult question; I'm not sure it can ever be answered. Yet, in a way, isn't it the kind of question we might ask of any aesthetic or intellectual experience? How do the films we see, the books we read, or the theatrical events we attend influence us? These questions have always been difficult to answer.

But a lifelong experience of reading *The New Yorker* is not very different from those experiences and must surely leave an imprint upon its readers. Without any systematic research, there are two approaches one can take in trying to identify the nature of this influence. One can either imagine what a regular reader's life would be like without the magazine or, alternatively, recount in a concrete way how the magazine has shaped the

actions they take and beliefs they hold. The first approach would yield a fairly speculative account; in fact, it would probably lead to several. So instead, I will adopt the second by considering my own experience, since *The New Yorker* continues to have a prominent place in my life.

As I begin to think about this matter, I realize that I read the magazine much the way I read most written materials. I make comments in the margins, copy notable passages, and duplicate articles that I want to save. An article has more than once motivated me to read more on a topic, undertake a research project, or turned my interests in a new direction. I often talk about the articles with friends and students. Some, like John Hersey's *Hiroshima* or Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and, more recently, Malcolm Gladwell's work on the *Tipping Point*, have spurred me to action and debate. I will often cite a *New Yorker* essay in the writing I do, and, from time to time, refer to them in the lectures I give.

In my social psychology class, to cite one instance, I often lecture about the effects of violence in the media. The students are always interested in the research on this issue, even if it is inconclusive. In preparing the lecture, I look over the material in my file each year to incorporate the latest studies and review those that I have found the most instructive. In doing so, I always re-read Pauline Kael's masterly review of "Bonnie and Clyde" that appeared in the October 21, 1967.

My first thought, of course, is that no one writes movie reviews with that kind of brilliance any more. But I don't speak about that with the students. Instead, I discuss her analysis of the role of violence in the film, and show how it anticipated future research findings on the impact of media violence. Kael wrote:

Such people [those who want to place legal restraints on movie violence] see "Bonnie and Clyde" as a danger to public morality; they think an audience goes to a play or a movie and takes the actions in it as examples for imitation. They look at the world and blame the movies. But if women who are angry with their husbands take it out on the kids, I don't think we

can blame "Medea" for it; if, as has been said, we are a nation of mother-lovers, I don't think we can place the blame on "Oedipus Rex."

The movies may set styles in dress or love-making, they may advertise cars or beverages, but art is not examples for imitation... people don't "buy" what they see in a movie quite so simply; Louis B. Mayer did not turn us into a nation of Andy Hardys, and if, in a film, we see a frightened man want only to take the life of another, it does not encourage us to do the same, any more than seeing an ivory hunter shoot an elephant makes us want to shoot one. It may, on the contrary, so sensitize us that we get a pang in the gut if we accidentally step on a moth."

There is always a lively discussion after I read these passages, each of which makes an important point about the purported effects of exposure to film violence. This, in turns, gives me a chance to discuss current research on her claims. Kael's analysis brings our discussion of media violence into contact with the actual film-going experience of individuals who are thought to be influenced one way or another by violent films. This contrasts with the artificial nature of most laboratory studies in this area. Regrettably, because they support the views of those who wish to regulate the media, they are the ones most frequently cited in public policy discussions of this issue.

Every now and then, after mulling over a *New Yorker* piece, I will want to look further into a topic it has considered. That was certainly true in the case of Meghan Daum's article, "Virtual Love", that appeared in the August 25, 1997, issue, almost thirty years after Kael's review. Daum's essay, which the magazine placed in its "Brave New World Department", vividly recounts the reactions of a young woman to a romance that had originated on the Internet. It was not a happy experience, although when it began, Daum was instantly caught up in the "exhilaration" of digital courtship. She wrote:

But, curiously, the Internet felt anything but dehumanizing. My interaction with PFSlider seemed more authentic than much of what I

experienced in the daylight realm of living beings. I was certainly putting more energy into the relationship than I had put into many others."

Her essay led me to wonder about the features of electronic communication that might make it so easy to form online relationships, and whether these relationships differed from those established in the usual ways. I began by investigating the prevalence and durability of cyber-relationships. Daum reports that:

...at least seven people confessed to me the vagaries of their own E-mail affairs...This topic arose, unprompted, in the course of normal conversation. ...we all shook our heads in bewilderment as we told our tales...These were normal people, writers and lawyers and scientists. They were all smart, attractive, and more than a little sheepish about admitting just how deeply they had been sucked in. Mostly, it was the courtship ritual that had seduced us. E-mail had become an electronic epistle, a yearned-for rule book. It allowed us to do what was necessary to experience love.

At the time, nothing was known about the frequency of cyber-romances. To find out, I surveyed over 1000 students with Internet accounts at a nearby university and was surprised to learn that 36% of those who responded indicated they had formed a close friendship with another individual in an online setting. 22% described it as a close romantic relationship. Even more surprising was the finding that, like Daum, the students did not characterize their on-line relationships as shallow or distant. Quite to the contrary, they claimed to have formed genuinely close friendships that were every bit as satisfying as those established in traditional ways. In fact, in some instances, they had led to marriage.

Most of the week I do research or devote myself to teaching. In either case, the subject matter almost always has something to do with psychology, primarily social or environmental. I am drawn by the relevance of these areas to everyday life. At times the

research does capture my interest; occasionally it will even surprise me; but most of the time it does neither. Above all, it never fulfills a longing I seem to have for something of artistic or literary merit or something that emotionally gives me pause.

More often than not, *The New Yorker* comes to my rescue. There I find the culture that is absent from my ordinary world, and ideas that often seem truer than the ones I encounter in psychology. When I see the magazine in the mailbox, I must confess to being more than a little bit grateful that it has once again come my way. I welcome it like a close friend who stops by for a visit each week. *The New Yorker*, as former editor William Shawn put it, seems like "...an oasis...in a period in which so much of life is debased and corrupted."¹ Yes, that is it precisely, even truer now than it was when he said it.

I know my *New Yorker* is not everyone's *New Yorker*. But in reading the magazine each week, I have come to feel part of the community of other readers who value polished writing and serious commentary. The symbolic nature of this community makes it no less real. In *The World Through a Monocle*,² Mary Corey captured this bond quite well: "Some felt a profound kinship with the magazine because it spoke for them, giving a public voice to their own private intelligences. It says "what I think and feel," a Washington, D.C. woman wrote, "as I should like to have said it."

In a sense, *The New Yorker* has become my "Third Place"--a term coined by Ray Oldenberg to refer to those informal gathering places in the community that an individual is drawn to each day outside of their home and workplace. French cafes, English pubs and Italian piazzas are such places. I do not have a Third Place that I am drawn to at the end of the day. Indeed, I do not believe there are many such gathering places in this country.

However, through *The New Yorker*, I find a group of like-minded regulars who have come together for informal discussion and thoughtful banter and where someone can always be

¹ Cited in an unpublished paper, *We're Not Making For Automobiles! Writing, Reading and Professional Identity at the New Yorker*, presented by Trysh Travis at the Modern Language Association Meeting, 1996.

² Mary F. Corey, *The World Through a Monocle: The New Yorker at Midcentury*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.

counted on for good story or an idea worth considering. I go in solitude and while I can't converse with them, later, in other settings, I can speak with others about the "discussion" that I have overheard at *The New Yorker*.

This is the kind of special relationship that is said to develop between *The New Yorker* and its readers, and the way in which the magazine has sustained and educated me during all the years that I have been a reader. One of the respondents to Ben Yagoda's³ recent survey of dedicated *New Yorker* readers recalled an experience she had while serving as a nurse during World War II in a remote section of northern Italy. She reported being asked by a wounded soldier, "If you could have anything right now, what would it be?" In an instant she replied, "An issue of *The New Yorker* magazine," whereupon the two--wounded soldier and American nurse, in that far off time and place--began reminiscing about their favorite *New Yorker* cartoons and writers. Deserted island, northern Italian hospital: I can't imagine responding any differently.

³ Ben Yagoda, *About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made*. New York: Scribner, 2000