

Book Review: Masculinity and men's lifestyle magazines

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Book reviews

Bethan Benwell (ed.), *Masculinity and Men's Lifestyle Magazines*. Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell/The Sociological Review, 2003. vii + 271 pp. (inc. index). ISBN 0–4051–1464–9 (pbk) £16.99

This excellent collection of articles appears at first to have a narrowly precise focus, but in fact it comprises a many-sided examination of current thinking in the area of masculinity studies. While the emphasis is mostly on British magazines, there is a fine historical survey of the development of related American magazines by Bill Osgerby as well as an intriguing comparative analysis of Japanese publications by Keiko Tanaka.

The collection is edited and, after a preface by Jonathan Rutherford, introduced by Bethan Benwell, who covers the main issues in superlative fashion in her lengthy introduction. After this, we are taken through the conflicting but related UK phenomena of the 'New Man' and the 'New Lad' by Rosalind Gill, a sage deliberation upon the shifting and uncertain links between these two labels and the meanings that have accreted around them. Ben Crewe considers class and editorial identity, concentrating in depth on the crucial case of the inception and reception of the British magazine *Loaded*; Nick Stevenson, Peter Jackson and Kate Brooks discuss power and the information society, while Tim Edwards digs into the rhetoric of sex, booze and cigarettes to see how knowing or playful the motto might be. Bethan Benwell returns to give a more language-based analysis of some of the ambiguities in the discursive constructions of masculinity, followed by a case study of the representation of the male sex worker in *Maxim* by Yolande Taylor and Jane Sunderland. Finally, Belinda Wheaton explores sport magazines and Paul Baker gets to grips with a corpus-based examination of personal ads in the *Gay News/Gay Times*. Not one of these articles is weak and any one of them offers numerous observations on masculinity that clarify the terms of the debate without simplifying the many conundra that exist in this crucial area of contemporary social analysis (one should not expect any psychoanalytically-inflected explanations here, as the methodology is broadly ethnographic, as well as Foucauldian in its perception of subjectivities as produced and power as diffuse). Notwithstanding Bill Osgerby's fascinating reminder that masculinities have been in a state of ebullition and redefinition for



much longer than the period covered by the remainder of the book – the last 20 to 30 years of the 20th century, particularly the 1990s – the articles perceive British laddism as central to the development not simply of British masculinities but also those further afield. Underpinning the present-day fluid state of masculinities are changes in the ways of identifying through work as blue-collar industries in the West mutate or go offshore, and a relentless intensification of the ways in which we construct ourselves through consumption and the performance of that consumption. Lifestyle magazines both articulate the stresses and fractures of this experience as they attempt to arbitrate it.

The magazine that is most referred to is the British *Loaded*, which swaggered onto the scene in 1994. Benwell begins her introduction with the *Loaded* phenomenon and in some way the publication has to be faced up to by all commentators on recent British masculinities. In general the magazine is highlighted for swerving radically away from what had appeared to be the versions of masculinity influenced by feminism that were prevalent in most magazines beforehand, and for adopting a knowing irony towards its staging of aggressive laddishness. Little invested in such locations as work or fatherhood, the apparently retrograde brew of the hedonism, sexism and whiteness of laddism clearly intrigues the writers in the book and they maintain a level-headed attitude towards the subject that never deteriorates into scornful or patronising dismissal. After all, as Benwell points out, what we are seeing is ‘a masculinity that is more incoherent and accidental than existing accounts tend to assume’ (p. 19).

Lifestyle magazines, then, call forth a much more wide-ranging enquiry into contemporary performances of masculinity in Britain and selected other nations. After all, not only are magazines necessarily part of a continuum that touches on as many flows within a culture as one cares to include, they are part of a display of masculinity in print that is constantly leaking from newspapers and other forms of the media into magazines and vice versa. Although *Loaded* appeared in 1994, it clearly did not create laddishness; rather, it ironically repackaged it upmarket (in glossiness and price) from its lurking-places in such publications as the ludicrously-named weekly ‘newspaper’ *Sunday Sport* (which began in the 1980s and which has even less sport than a regular newspaper, but a proudly-proclaimed ‘nipple count’ approaching 100 in each issue), not to mention the well-known tabloids. Nonetheless, as a point of focus, lifestyle magazines (including such titles as *FHM*, *Men’s Health* or *Maxim*) serve the analysis of masculinities in performance extremely well, despite the fact that at present their future looks less commercially rosy than it did in the recent past.

However, whether the magazines scrutinized are selling less well is certainly not indicative of the lessened relevance of this book, for as Rosalind Gill points out, ‘Producing knowledge about men is big business’ (p. 35), and all of the articles situate their arguments in terms of this wider



context. Moreover, as a formerly unmarked category, like whiteness, representing itself as simply the norm from which all other categories deviated, the explosion of masculinity into self-consciousness is clearly a phenomenon that is here to stay, and the tensions between being unmarked and marked are expertly delineated throughout this volume. There is no simple explanation given for the construction and circulation of the meanings of masculinities, so the book does not belong to the superseded tradition in which men occupied a monolithic controlling apparatus. Indeed, the articles underline the role that magazines play in (mostly white) men's desire to manage a social context in which they feel more controlled than controlling by a disorienting brew of economic, gender and multicultural factors.

Among the numerous stress points in the processes highlighted by the authors is the fact that men's magazines 'have always been for men but rarely about men, other than male celebrities' (p. 133), as Tim Edwards says. The tension between constructing heterosexual masculinity and viewing images of men is often referred to, so that while women's magazines are full of images of women, men's magazines need to negotiate representations of the male body more nervously. In the light of such stresspoints, the article on Japanese men's magazines subtitled 'Young Men Who Don't Want to Get Hurt', which deals with very different constructions of gender and related magazine protocols, reminds us that there is a world of fascinating comparative research still waiting to be done. For anyone who wants models of how to investigate and write on contemporary masculinities, this book provides a superb example.

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John Marriott, *The Other Empire: Metropolis, India and Progress in the Colonial Imagination*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003. xi + 241 (inc. index). ISBN 0-7190-6018-4 (hbk), £47.40

This work deals with the interesting theme of observation of India by the British authors who demonstrated their understanding of India and England during the 19th century. The British observers imaginatively constructed cultural connections between the British and the Indians. It is this imagination and its analysis that forms the chief core of the book. The author has studied travel and evangelical accounts giving descriptions of the Indian poor population and comparison is made with the poor population in England. Their narratives identify similarities between representations of metropolitan poor and colonial poor subjects.

The most novel feature of this book, when compared with works of a similar nature, is the discussion regarding the Indian poor who were