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The World Through a Monocle: The New Yorker at Midcentury

Mary F. Corey

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Today *The New Yorker* is one of a number of general-interest magazines published for a sophisticated audience, but in the post-World War II era the magazine occupied a truly significant niche of cultural authority. A self-selected community of 250,000 readers, who wanted to know how to look and sound cosmopolitan, found in its pages information about night spots and polo teams. They became conversant with English movies, Italian Communism, French wine, the bombing of the Bikini Atoll, prêt-à-porter, and Caribbean vacations. A well-known critic lamented that "certain groups have come to communicate almost exclusively in references to the [magazine's] sacred writings." *The World through a Monocle* is a study of these "sacred writings."

Mary Corey mines the magazine's editorial voice, journalism, fiction, advertisements, cartoons, and poetry to unearth the preoccupations, values, and conflicts of its readers, editors, and contributors. She delineates the effort to fuse liberal ideals with aspirations to high social status, finds the magazine's blind spots with regard to women and racial and ethnic stereotyping, and explores its abiding concern with elite consumption coupled with a contempt for mass production and popular advertising. Balancing the consumption of goods with a social conscience which prized goodness, the magazine managed to provide readers with what seemed like a coherent and comprehensive value system in an incoherent world.

Viewing the world through a monocle, those who created *The New Yorker* and those who believed in it cultivated a uniquely powerful cultural institution serving an influential segment of the population. Corey's work illuminates this extraordinary enterprise in our social history.

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