Second Edition

Donald McQuade and Robert Atwan

POPULAR WRITING IN AMERICA

The Interaction of Style and Audience

Advertising | Newspapers | Magazines

Best Sellers | Classics

POPULAR WRITING IN AMERICA

THE INTERACTION OF STYLE AND AUDIENCE

SECOND EDITION

Donald McQuade

Queens College
of the City of New York

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PREFACE

For this second edition of *Popular Writing in America,* we retained the organization and principles of the first edition but made a number of changes that we trust will enhance the book's overall flexibility and usefulness. We have revised the contents considerably. In choosing new reading material, we were guided by a two-fold commitment: 1) to locate *short,* effective representations of each form of popular writing, and 2) to select writing particularly appropriate to the experiences and interests of today's college students. Though the book's historical dimensions have been maintained, its emphasis is now contemporary.

Our choices were also guided by a principle of interconnectedness that we believe is one of the most important features of the book: virtually every selection in *Popular Writing in America* is connected either thematically or stylistically with one or more of the other selections. In addition, the range of thematic interconnections has been expanded and now includes such topics as capital punishment, the American hero, consumerism, and popular entertainment. But perhaps the principal—and most noticeable—change is the inclusion of poetry. We think the generous sampling of poems extends the book's adaptability for the classroom and allows teachers and students the opportunity to explore an even greater diversity of popular and classical writing than did the earlier edition.

We want to remind readers again that selections are not meant to serve only as models for student compositions. The selections are intended in part to stimulate discussion about writing and to help students become more analytically familiar with the diversity of styles and strategies that develop within a contemporary system of communications almost wholly dependent upon corporate enterprise, mass audiences, interlocking media industries, and vast outlays of money. Few acts of writing—and surely student compositions are no exception—exist completely outside of competitive, socio-economic considerations. We assume that the more conscious students are of the public and commercial pressures behind a piece of writing (pressures that can be felt *in* the writing, whether an ad, article, news item or best seller), the more sensitive they will become to whatever institutional styles or "voices" they may inadvertently be underwriting in their own compositions. In order to make this particular interaction of style and audience dramatically visible to students, we have added a considerable number of selections dealing with the ways in which mass-media artists and artifacts determine the shape of our consumer culture.

In general, most of the changes we have made for this new edition—the inclusion of more ads and articles about advertising; more human interest journalism; a

greater range of short magazine articles; more best-selling nonfiction; and more accessible modern classics—represent our considered responses to the many instructors throughout the country who have used *Popular Writing in America* and have generously suggested specific ways they thought the book could be improved. We hope that our decisions have resulted in a stronger, more practical book—one that will be welcomed by those who have worked with the book before as well as by those who are trying it for the first time.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful for the many helpful suggestions sent to us over the past few years by instructors who have used *Popular Writing in America*. We have included as many of their recommendations as possible. In particular, we would like to thank: Gail Bounds, Addison Bross, Douglas Butturff, Lyman L. Fink, Jr., Christine Freeman, R. S. Hootman, Lee A. Jacobus, D. G. Kehl, Henry Knepler, Andrea Lundsford, Helen Naugle, Matthew O'Brien, Lori Rath, Harold Schechter, Nancy Sommers, Victor H. Thompson, and Barbara H. Traister. In addition, we appreciate the special assistance of Trudy Baltz, John Clifford, Kent Ekberg, Kate Hirsh, Kay Kier, John McDermott, Paul O'Connell, Sharon Shaloo, and Harvey Wiener.

We would like to acknowledge once again all those who helped us structure our original text and whose influence is still very much felt in this new edition: Paul Bertram, Thomas R. Edwards, Bruce Forer, Christopher Gay, Mark Gibbons, Ron Holland, Daniel F. Howard, Betsy B. Kaufman, Robert E. Lynch, Robert Lyons, C. F. Main, George Mandelbaum, Max and Barbara Maxwell, Kevin McQuade, Frank Moorman, Richard Poirier, Douglas Roehm, Sandra Schor, Gary Tate, Thomas Van Laan, William Vesterman, and Elissa Weaver. John Leypoldt of the Princeton University Library was extremely helpful in producing many of the illustrations.

We continue to value the thoughtful assistance of our editor, John Wright, and the help of the professional staff at Oxford University Press, especially Dale Demy, Ellie Fuchs, Jean Shapiro, and Gerald Mentor. We deeply appreciate the excellent revision of the Teacher's Manual—now a more detailed teaching resource—prepared by our friend and colleague, Christopher Motley. Another friend, Richard Mikita, has given generously of his time and intelligence, and his critical judgment in many ways helped determine the course of this revision. As usual, we owe far too much to Helene Atwan and Susanne McQuade.

New York
October 1979

D. McQ.
R. A.

INTRODUCTION

This book grew out of our commitment to the notion—one that still might seem peculiar to many people—that *any* form of writing can be made the subject of rewarding critical attention. And because we are most interested in the written products of American culture that are continually shaping the ways we think, talk, and feel, our editorial effort has been to include as great a variety of American themes and prose styles as could be managed within a single text. Along with some traditional selections from such classic American writers as Thoreau, Twain, Crane, and Faulkner, we have brought together an assortment of material from best sellers, popular magazines, newspapers, and advertisements. One critical principle informs our selections: we want to illustrate through historical sequences, thematic cross references, and divergent creative intentions precisely how the most widely read forms of American writing interact with each other and with their audiences to produce that intricate network of artistic and commercial collaboration known as "popular culture."

Popular Writing in America is divided into five parts. The opening section consists of some of the most successful copywriting in the history of American advertising. We have arranged the ads in clusters dealing with similar products (automobiles, cosmetics, clothing, etc.) over a number of decades both to provide a brief historical perspective on the language and rhetorical strategies of advertising and to invite speculation on changes in American culture as they are reflected in the ways our society is talked to in its advertisements. In addition, to demonstrate some of the ways advertising is thought about both inside and outside the industry, we have also included essays on the art of copywriting by two leading practitioners, a well known critique of advertising techniques and their relationship to media, and a series of delightful letters showing a prominent American poet exercising her imagination and vocabulary in an attempt to invent a suitable name for a new automobile.

The examples of newspaper writing we include in the next chapter (Press) range from different styles of headlines through the compressed prose of teletype releases to extended forms of news coverage. Events of such historical magnitude as the Lincoln and Kennedy assassinations and the use of the atom bomb on Japan are interspersed among some of the usual kinds of news stories, feature articles, interviews, and editorials that comprise the substance of the daily American newspaper. Since we want to emphasize in this chapter the stylistic and structural consequences of writing performed under emergency conditions and against competitive deadlines—"Journalism is literature in a hurry," according to Matthew Arnold—we have weighted our selections in favor of the kinds of violence and tragedies that have inspired reporters, made history, and sold newspapers.

Introduction

Magazines are eclectic by necessity. Represented are a variety of topics from some of the most popular "big" and "little" magazines published in America since the middle of the nineteenth century. With very few exceptions, an article or poem from a particular magazine is intended to be at least fairly typical of the kind of material and tonal quality found in that magazine around the time the article appeared. Our selections in this chapter are limited to nonfiction because a good deal of the fiction in Best Sellers and Classics was originally published in magazines. Consequently, an important periodical like *Scribner's* is not represented by an article in this section but by the short stories of Stephen Crane and Ernest Hemingway that appear in Classics.

The material reprinted in "Best Sellers" affords the reader the opportunity to examine some of the most commercially successful prose in American publishing history. It is, for the most part, writing that the academic community has seldom paid serious attention to—selections from best sellers are rarely made available in textbooks or anthologies. Yet, because of their massive audiences and their frequent interactions with other forms of media, best sellers deserve to be attended to by readers interested in examining the relationship between their own verbal experiences and those of a literate public. Passages such as Tarzan's rescue of Jane in *Tarzan of the Apes* or the shooting of Don Corleone from *The Godfather* were selected not as specimens of mediocre writing—mediocre, that is, *because* they are from best sellers—but as examples of writing that has had enormous impact on the American reading public.

The success of many of the best selling books represented in this section depended, to a great extent, on their public's previous acceptance of similar subjects and verbal strategies in advertisements, newspapers, and magazine articles. To cite but one example, the phenomenal attention Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* received was due, in large measure, to the extensive news coverage given to the felonies and frolics of underworld characters. Popular fiction, in turn, affects other forms of media, as can be seen from the account of the murder of Joey Gallo in *Time* magazine, where the report of a ritualist gangland shooting self-consciously trades on the rendition of a similar event in *The Godfather*. Throughout the book, connections such as this one are signaled in headnotes and discussion questions in order to map out a network of thematic and stylistic interrelations.

Though our emphasis in Classics is on short fiction and poetry, we also include essays, excerpts from autobiographies, and other selected nonfiction from some of America's major authors. We have taken the liberty of designating the work of such contemporary writers as John Updike, Norman Mailer, Flannery O'Connor, and Joyce Carol Oates as "classic" because we feel that the quality of their performances and their critical alertness to the present condition of our language entitle them to be viewed in the same historical perspective as Thoreau, Twain, Crane, and Faulkner. *Classic* is a term we adopt for the sake of convenience; it is not intended to suggest writing that is antiquated, writing that is easily dissociated from popular culture because it sounds serious and elevated, but writing that has, so far, stayed around because it has stayed alive. We want to show from our selections that "classic" authors have not remained socially and intellectually superior to the various ordinary languages of popular culture but have tried to come to terms with those languages by appropriating them, occasionally discarding them, often shaping or extending them so that their writing can reflect the complex interplay between what we call literature and what we recognize as the accents of the life around us.

It might be argued that this type of book is unnecessary since the abundance of ads, newspapers, magazines, and best sellers makes them so available as "texts" that there is really no need to collect samples of them in a separate volume. If our "texts" had been chosen indiscriminately, simply to document different types of writing, that might be the case. But, quite clearly, one way the book can be used is to illustrate a verbal progression from the readily accessible language and strategies of advertising to the more obviously complicated styles of expression that characterize outstanding prose. The risk of this procedure, however, is that it may prove too schematic, may even encourage readers to regard the ads, some of the journalism and magazine articles, and most of the best sellers as blatantly inferior forms of writing, "straw men" set up to be discarded all too easily in favor of the durable excellence of the "great works." It should be noted, therefore, that our categories and sequence were not specially designed to endorse already entrenched hierarchies by setting up fairly obvious gradations in the quality of several particular types of prose and poetry, but were intended to illustrate how various kinds of writing shaped by quite different commercial purposes and intended audiences interact with and modify each other to produce what we can reasonably call a common culture.

It might also be argued that Classics have no place in an anthology devoted to popular writing. Classics are among the finest holdings of an educated minority; popular writing belongs to something as repugnant as "mass culture." That is one way to look at it. Another, and one that this book is premised on, is that Classics are among the best things we have to share with each other, and they ought to be encountered in all their challenging complexity as opportunities to enliven and, if need be, toughen the questions we ask of all the other modes of expression we participate in daily. That is why we have included an excerpt from Norman Mailer's *Of a Fire on the Moon* in Classics. Throughout his comprehensive report on the Apollo expedition, Mailer is critically aware of the ways his own prose interrelates with a variety of other, mainly competing verbal efforts. Mailer's original contract to write about the Apollo XI astronauts was with *Life*, a popular magazine. But Mailer is no ordinary reporter, and for him the moonshot was no ordinary assignment. As a writer, Mailer is so attuned to his own participation in any form of media that it was only natural his coverage of the moon landing would inform us as much about the special tasks of modern journalism as it would tell us about one of the great episodes in American history. As it stands, *Of a Fire on the Moon* is a fascinating social document incorporating the many voices of technology, science, and broadcasting that converged at that particular moment in our culture to produce the moon spectacle. Such responsiveness to the shaping influences of our verbal environment is what we want the word "classic" to suggest.

A word about the introduction to each section. A full survey outlining the history of the various forms of printed media that make up our categories would not have been practical. Also, we wanted to avoid introducing such essentially futile, if not paralyzing, questions as "Is the news truly objective?" and "Is advertising an abuse of language?" Instead, we have tried in each introduction to strike an agreeable balance between saying something general about the type of material in that section and something specific about the verbal qualities of a particular passage. Of course, no single excerpt can typify all the writing in a chapter. Yet, we have chosen to examine closely, though not at great length, those passages that we feel will conveniently clarify the relations between the distinctive features of an

individual style and the kind of reader that style seems directed to. We thought that by providing models of the analytic procedure we want to encourage we would, in fact, be offering something of a consistent critical approach to what might seem a bewildering assortment of material.

Any act of composition presupposes an audience. To read a "text" attentively is to discover something specific about the characteristics of the people it is intended to appeal to—their interests and the ways of talking they can respond to most readily. Once we ask the question "Whom is this ad or magazine article addressed to?" we invite statements about the traits of large groups of people. Questions like this one can be best approached not from a reader's preconceived idea of what certain groups of people in America are supposed to be like but from his responsiveness to the specific ways in which a society is talked to in print. Our responses to popular writing will be the more attuned to the culture we live in the more our terms can encompass the aesthetic significance of a particular work and the bearings that significance has on our shared social experiences. In the model analysis we provide in each of our introductions, especially in the one to "Best Sellers," we try to show that it is only when we make an effort to measure the responses of the audience implicit in a specific passage—an audience, it should be noted, that very often *literally* appears in the work as spectators, witnesses, advertising models, etc.—against the quality of our own participation that we can assess more comprehensively the interactions between the various styles and audiences within a single society.

Popular forms of writing pose special challenges to traditional analytical methods. Popular writing is often, or so it would seem, so opaquely simple and ordinary that a standard critical vocabulary might come across as too labored or too imposing for the occasion. Yet, finding an appropriate tone has always been a problem even for traditional literary criticism. It would *sound* wrong to talk about Ernest Hemingway in the highly idiosyncratic critical language of Henry James' "Prefaces" or to take the same psychological approach in a discussion of Allen Ginsberg that we would take for Emily Dickinson. Writers exist for us, unless we know them in other, more personal ways, essentially in the specific qualities of their tone and idiom. This should always be our starting point. If, for example, we try to adopt a standard analytical procedure (e.g., searching for symbols) to discuss *Tarzan of the Apes,* and our method becomes too irritatingly cumbersome, that can be an occasion for testing the critical language we are working with and for re-examining the quality of our literary responses rather than concluding that Tarzan was not worth talking about in the first place.

It should be apparent from our model of analysis in each introduction that we have made an effort to avoid using a language that relies too heavily on the terminology of traditional literary criticism, a terminology that has, for the most part, evolved from allegiances and inveterate responses to only the most highly regarded forms of literature. We certainly do not mean to disqualify any of the standard critical approaches, as we trust our Rhetorical Table of Contents will amply indicate, but we want instead to encourage a lively reciprocity between the academically certified terms of serious literary criticism and the ordinary languages of our popular culture. What we hope will come out of such transactions is a resilient critical language applicable to all forms of public discourse. If we cannot adjust our critical vocabularies and find interesting ways to talk about Tarzan, or advertising, or a newspaper item, then it is doubtful we have found the most spirited ways to approach even the best things in our culture.

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