

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

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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

Preface

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.

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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.

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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.

Introduction

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

Introduction

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.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION xxix

ADVERTISING I

<i>Madame Rowley's Toilet Mask</i> / 1887	4
"Mother, Here She Is" <i>Pompeian Massage Cream</i> / 1912	5
Of All the Make-ups on Earth, Only One Is Called Next to Nature <i>Next to Nature, Yardley</i> / 1973	7

PRINT MEDIA

What Sort of Man Reads Playboy? <i>Playboy</i> / 1969	8
"I Wish There Were 70 Minutes in Every Hour . . ." <i>Playboy</i> / 1977	9
"Roger Reads Esquire" <i>Esquire</i> / 1972	10
Ever Get the Feeling when They're Talking about "Women" They're not Talking about You? <i>Essence</i> / 1973	11
Should You Ever Lie? <i>Cosmopolitan</i> / 1976	12
"The Soaps Are Like Big Macs . . ." <i>Time</i> / 1976	13
Scoop McClain? <i>Knight-Ridder Newspapers</i> / 1977	14

WOMEN

Her Habit of Measuring Time in Terms of Dollars <i>Ford</i> / 1924	15
Nagging Wives <i>Postum</i> / 1926	16
A Woman's Instinct Tells Her <i>Mum</i> / 1926	17
How To Bring Up a Young Daughter <i>Swan Soap</i> / 1942	18
Her Secret Can Be Yours <i>Listerine</i> / 1942	19
Should a Gentleman Offer a Tiparillo to a Lab Technician? <i>Tiparillo</i> / 1968	20
When She Gave in to Practicality, She Didn't Give Up Her Individuality <i>AMC Pacer</i> / 1978	21
". . . Guess Who's the New Marketing V.P.?" <i>Chase</i> / 1979	22

Contents

ANXIETIES

- Often a Bridesmaid but Never a Bride *Listerine* / 1923 23
- Your Five Miles of Pores *Fairy Soap* / 1923 24
- Turned Down Again—Perhaps It's Comedones *Pompeian Massage Cream* / 1923 25
- Leave Home *Chamberlayne Junior College* / 1968 26
- After I Realized My Skinny Mini Was Skinnier than I Was,
I lost 75 pounds *Frigidaire* / 1972 27
- Don't Walk when You Can Ride *American Medical Association* / 1972 28

SELF-IMPROVEMENT

- Again She Orders—"A Chicken Salad, Please" *The Book of Etiquette* / 1921 29
- How Joe's Body Brought Him Fame Instead of Shame *Charles Atlas* / 1944 30
- These Are the Books that Hitler Burned *Great Books* / 1966 31
- "How I Slimmed Down to Almost Nothing" *Parker Pens* / 1968 32
- The End of the Skinny Body! *Joe Weider* / 1973 33
- Who Ever Said the Man Who Discovers a Cure for Cancer Is Going To Be White,
or Even a Man? *The United Negro College Fund* / 1979 34

TRANSPORTATION

- "Most Automobiles Are Like Most Men" *Overland* / 1921 35
- First Time Up! *Ford Motor Company* / 1928 36
- They'll Know You've Arrived when You Drive Up in an Edsel *Edsel* / 1958 37
- "At 60 Miles an Hour the Loudest Noise in This New Rolls-Royce
Comes from the Electric Clock" *Rolls-Royce* / 1958 38
- Which Man Would You Vote for? *Volkswagen* / 1972 39
- City Boy *Kawasaki* / 1976 40
- Dodge Is into Pickups like America's into Jeans *Dodge Trucks* / 1977 41
- "I Thought Seeing Italy Would Teach Me More about My Father" *Pan Am* / 1978 42

NATURE AND TECHNOLOGY

- The "Pony's" Last Ride *Gulf Refining Company* / 1935 43
- It's Practically Your Own Island *Golden Rock Resort* / 1976 44
- The Urban Windmills *Neiman-Marcus* / 1977 45
- Why Elephants Can't Live on Peanuts *Mobil Corporation* / 1979 46
- What Do You See when You Look at a Tree? *Boise Cascade Corporation* / 1979 47
- Without Chemicals, Life Itself Would Be Impossible *Monsanto* / 1979 48

EATING AND DRINKING

- Stanley Jones *Postum* / 1942 49
- How Would You Put a Glass of Ballantine Ale into Words? *Ballantine Ale* / 1952 50

Contents

“You’re Some Tomato . . .” *Wolfschmidt’s Vodka* / 1961 52

“You Sweet California Doll . . .” *Wolfschmidt’s Vodka* / 1961 52

Why Husbands Leave Home *Schrafft’s* / 1966 53

You’ve Got a Lot To Live. Pepsi’s Got a Lot To Give. *Pepsi-Cola* / 1971 54

Go Forth Now and Cook amongst the Americans *Benihana of Tokyo* / 1973 55

America *Coca-Cola* / 1975 56

Do Your Dinnertimin’ at McDonald’s *McDonald’s* / 1976 57

With My Cooking, the Army that Travels on Its Stomach Is Facing
a Pretty Bumpy Road *McCormick/Schilling* / 1976 58

SMOKING

“We Smash ‘Em Hard” *White Owl* / 1918 59

There *Is* a Doctor in the House *Camel* / 1946 60

You’ve Come a Long Way, Baby *Virginia Slims* / 1978 61

A Word to Smokers / A Word to Nonsmokers *The Tobacco Institute* / 1979 62

FASHIONS

Gingiss Formalwear Acknowledges a New Fact of Life *Gingiss* / 1972 64

What to Wear on Sunday when You Won’t Be Home till Monday *Happy Legs* / 1974 65

This Smuggler Coat Does Everything but Stop Bullets *Smuggler Coat* / 1973 66

Born To Run *Adidas* / 1977 68

In Our Family Business There’s Three Things You Don’t Mind
Spending Your Money on *Timberland* / 1978 69

MARIANNE MOORE	Correspondence with the Ford Motor Company / 1955	70
DAVID OGILVY	How To Write Potent Copy / 1963	75
MARSHALL MCLUHAN	Keeping Upset with the Joneses / 1964	80
DANIEL J. BOORSTIN	The Rhetoric of Democracy / 1974	84
RON HOLLAND	Why I Wrote This Ad This Way / 1979	92

PRESS 97

WALT WHITMAN	The Death Penalty 102 <i>Brooklyn Eagle</i> , January 13, 1858	
STAFF CORRESPONDENT	Important. Assassination of President Lincoln 104 <i>New York Herald</i> , April 15, 1865	
ERNEST LAURENCE THAYER	Casey at the Bat 107 <i>San Francisco Examiner</i> , June 3, 1888	
THEODORE DREISER	Burned to Death 109 <i>St. Louis Globe-Democrat</i> , January 22, 1893	
STEPHEN CRANE	Stephen Crane’s Own Story [He Tells How the <i>Commodore</i> Was Wrecked and How He Escaped] 116 <i>New York Press</i> , January 7, 1897	

Contents

STAFF CORRESPONDENT	Flying Machine Soars 3 Miles in Teeth of High Wind [First Account of the Wright Brothers' Success] 123 <i>Norfolk Virginian-Pilot</i> , December 18, 1903
JACK LAIT	Dillinger "Gets His" 126 <i>International News Service</i> , July 23, 1934
ORSON WELLES	The War of the Worlds [An Excerpt from the Radio Broadcast] 130 October 31, 1938
GEORGE M. MAHAWINNEY	An Invasion from the Planet Mars 133 <i>Philadelphia Inquirer</i> , November 1, 1938
DOROTHY THOMPSON	Mr. Welles and Mass Delusion 136 <i>New York Herald Tribune</i> , November 2, 1938
LANGSTON HUGHES	Family Tree 138 <i>Chicago Defender</i> , ca. 1942
WILLIAM L. LAURENCE	Atomic Bombing of Nagasaki Told by Flight Member 141 <i>The New York Times</i> , September 9, 1945
TOM WICKER	Kennedy Is Killed by Sniper as He Rides in Car in Dallas 146 <i>The New York Times</i> , November 23, 1963
TOM WICKER	The Assassination 154 <i>Times Talk</i> , December 1963
HARRY GOLDEN	The Individual 159 <i>Carolina Israelite</i> , ca. 1967
✈ THOMAS O'TOOLE	"The Eagle has Landed": Two Men Walk on the Moon 160 <i>Washington Post</i> , July 24, 1969
VIVIAN GORNICK	The Next Great Moment in History Is Theirs [An Introduction to the Women's Liberation Movement] 168 <i>Village Voice</i> , November 27, 1969
<i>Press-Gazette</i> STAFF	The Living Lombardi Legend 180 <i>Green Bay Press-Gazette</i> , September 3, 1970
MIKE ROYKO	How To Kick a Machine 182 <i>Chicago Daily News</i> , November 15, 1971

WOODCHUCKS IN DEATH AND LIFE

JOSEPH FARKAS	One Small Life 183 <i>The New York Times</i> , September 16, 1972
HENRY DAVID THOREAU	From <i>The Journals of Henry David Thoreau</i> / 1852 185
LETTERS	And What Would Henry Thoreau Have Thought? 187 <i>The New York Times</i> , September 1972

HUMAN-INTEREST STORIES

<i>The New York Times</i> STAFF	Smuggling of Drugs in False Legs Laid to Two Colombians 189 <i>The New York Times</i> , April 4, 1973
UNITED PRESS	
INTERNATIONAL STAFF	Woman Says Husband Divided House Literally 190 August 4, 1976
SETH S. KING	G.S.A. Challenged for Removing Plaque Honoring 1874 Cannibal 190 <i>The New York Times</i> , August 10, 1977

Contents

LES LEDBETTER	Jilted California Accountant Sues His Date for \$38 in Expenses 192 <i>The New York Times</i> , July 26, 1978
DENNIS FARNEY	Trying To Restore a Sea of Grass 193 <i>The Wall Street Journal</i> , June 6, 1975
ART BUCHWALD	Unreality of TV 195 Ca. 1977
<i>National Enquirer</i> STAFF	“Roots”: Top Psychiatrists Explain Why It Was Most Popular TV Program of All Time 197 <i>National Enquirer</i> , February 22, 1977
MARISE MCDERMOTT	Three Legs and a Hooey—City Kid Learns Ropes 200 <i>San Angelo Standard-Times</i> , November 13, 1978

ON THE DEATH PENALTY

AN EDITORIAL	Death Penalty Is Right 203 <i>Miami Herald</i> , May 23, 1979
AN EDITORIAL	Who Gets the Chair? 204 <i>The New York Times</i> , May 23, 1979
AN EDITORIAL	The Supreme Penalty 205 <i>Atlanta Constitution</i> , May 24, 1979
AN EDITORIAL	With Blood on Its Hands 206 <i>Milwaukee Journal</i> , May 26, 1979
HORACE G. DAVIS, JR.	Execution Scene Stark; Death Is Undramatic 207 <i>Atlanta Constitution</i> , May 26, 1979
✈ BOB DART	Witness Says Spenkelink Looked Scared 209 <i>Atlanta Constitution</i> , May 26, 1979
RUSSELL BAKER	Jogging 212 <i>The New York Times Sunday Magazine</i> , June 18, 1978
✕ G. B. TRUDEAU	Doonesbury [An Interview with the Author of <i>Jogger Agonistes</i>] 214 Ca. 1978
WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY, JR.	Justifying Inactivity? 216 <i>Manchester New Hampshire Courier Leader</i> , May 24, 1979

MAGAZINES 219

JACK LONDON	The Story of an Eyewitness [An Account of the San Francisco Earthquake] 223 <i>Collier's Weekly</i> , May 1906
WILLIAM HARD	De Kid Wot Works at Night 227 <i>Everybody's Magazine</i> , January 1908
HUGH HEFNER	First Editorial Statement 235 <i>Playboy</i> , December 1953
RALPH ELLISON	Living with Music 235 <i>High Fidelity</i> , December 1955
JOHN UPDIKE	Ex-Basketball Player 242 <i>The New Yorker</i> , July 6, 1957

Contents

JOHN UPDIKE	Energy: A Villanelle	243
	<i>The New Yorker</i> , June 4, 1979	
GAY TALESE	The Bridge	243
	<i>Esquire</i> , December 1964	
PAULINE KAEI	Movies on Television	249
	<i>The New Yorker</i> , June 3, 1967	
ELLEN WILLIS	Women and the Myth of Consumerism	257
	<i>Ramparts</i> , June 1970	
WOODY ALLEN	A Look at Organized Crime	262
	<i>The New Yorker</i> , August 15, 1970	
<i>Time</i> STAFF	Death of a Maverick Mafioso [On the Shooting of Joey Gallo]	265
	<i>Time</i> , April 1972	
LEW DIETZ	The Myth of the Boss Bear	267
	<i>True</i> , May 1973	
VERONICA GENG	The Blue Jeans Craze	273
	<i>Cosmopolitan</i> , May 1973	
JAMES DICKEY	Delights of the Edge	280
	<i>Mademoiselle</i> , June 1974	
JAMES DICKEY	For the Death of Vince Lombardi	283
	<i>Esquire</i> , September 1971	
NORA EPHRON	The Boston Photographs	285
	<i>Esquire</i> , November 1975	
DOROTHY GLOSTER	Sadie's Song	289
	<i>Essence</i> , December 1975	
DONNA ALLEGRA	A Prayer for My Soul	296
	<i>Essence</i> , September 1978	
ANNIE DILLARD	Death of a Moth	298
	<i>Harper's</i> , May 1976	
N. SCOTT MOMADAY	A First American Views His Land	300
	<i>National Geographic</i> , July 1976	
ERIC HOFFER	What America Means to Me	307
	<i>Reader's Digest</i> , September 1976	
MAUREEN ORTH	All Shook Up [On the Death of Elvis Presley]	309
	<i>Newsweek</i> , August 29, 1977	
JAY COCKS	Last Stop on the Mystery Train—An American Legend: Elvis Presley 1935–1977	312
	<i>Time</i> , August 29, 1977	
JOSEPH MORGENSTERN	'We Get You to Places You Can't Get to'	316
	<i>Horizon</i> , December 1977	
FRAN LEBOWITZ	Clothes with Pictures and/or Writing on Them: Yes, Another Complaint	321
	Ca. 1977	
<i>U.S. News and World Report</i> STAFF	Why It's Called the 'Me' Generation	322
	<i>U.S. News and World Report</i> , March 27, 1978	
PETER CARLSON	Food for Thought	326
	<i>Newsweek</i> , May 29, 1978	
WILLIAM SEVERINI KOWINSKI	The Malling of America	327
	<i>New Times</i> , May 1, 1978	