
PRESS & TELEVISION

A Class Act

"A Friend Writes" by Louis Menand, in *The New Republic* (Feb. 26, 1990), 1220 19th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Ask any long-time reader of the *New Yorker* which articles he likes best and there is a good chance that he will delightfully confess (whether it is true or not) that he does not *read* the thing, he just looks at the cartoons.

That, says Menand, a professor of English at Queens College, is typical of the *New Yorker* style itself: self-effacing and unpretentious on the surface, sometimes a bit snobbish underneath. For 40 years, that conjunction of reader and editorial sensibility was unique in American journalism.

Not that the *New Yorker* is about to perish. But the magazine has clearly lost its unique niche. It was decades ahead of its time when Harold Ross founded it in 1925 as a magazine "targeted"—although he did not use the word—at educated upper-middle-class professionals. Before long, the *New Yorker* developed its patented style, a style that reflected and shaped the tastes of two generations of readers.

Menand observes that the magazine's "punctilio about correct punctuation and usage" was both democratic and elitist: "The rules apply to everybody. On the other hand, knowing what's correct is one of the signs of a superior education."

The *New Yorker* short story, with its characteristic pathos and moral befuddlement, "expressed with great precision the inner life of a certain kind of midcentury American: well-off but insecure, well-educated but without culture, enlightened enough to know how morally dark the world is in which he moves, but without a clue about how to live beyond it."

Above all, the magazine was (and is) understated. Its covers, alone in the magazine world, told readers nothing of what

was within; the contents were free of blurbs, "pull-quotes," and fancy illustrations. For much of its history, the magazine lacked even a table of contents.

All of this appealed greatly to the affluent professionals of an earlier age who had been taught to disdain crass commercialism (even though many of them owed their very livelihood to this commercial culture's need for attorneys, advertising executives, and the like). And this audience appealed enormously to a certain class of advertiser. So the *New Yorker* was a phenomenal success: In 1965, it sold 6,092 pages of advertising, beating its nearest competitor (*Business Week*) by nearly 1,300 pages. But that was one of its last good years. Today, the magazine is reported to be marginally profitable.

What happened? By the late 1960s, competitors had caught on to the *New Yorker's* commercial formula: targeting. And the magazine lost many upper-crust readers when the passions of the era forced it to assume a definite political identity—a form of liberal "anti-politics," Menand says. More than anything, however, "the *New Yorker* audience, once a homogeneous, rooted social entity, had started to splinter."

Today, Menand says, the upper middle class is much less clubby than it used to be. And, unlike their parents, young stockbrokers and lawyers sense no real separation between commerce and culture—in fact, they frequently "delight in the commercialism of upscale pleasures." Which leads Menand to suggest that there is still an audience for the *New Yorker*, but one whose tastes the magazine will have to try to educate rather than reflect.

Learning by Doing

"Vietnam Generation Goes Centrist" by Clifford Krauss, in *Gannet Center Journal* (Fall 1989), 2950 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10027.

Ten years after graduating from Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, Clifford Krauss returned to tell a new

generation of students about his experiences as a *Wall Street Journal* correspondent in Central America. He was surprised

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