
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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to find himself treated like a right-wing "troglodyte." One student at the nation's leading school of journalism even wanted to know why he thought it was so bad that Nicaragua's Sandinista government had shut down the nation's leading newspaper, *La Prensa!*

It is only somewhat reassuring that Krauss admits that "10 years ago I might have been one of them myself." Yet how a self-described "left-liberal" journalist went to Central America "to help stop the next Vietnam" and came home a skeptical centrist is an interesting tale. Actually, says Krauss, his is the story of a whole "Vietnam generation" of foreign correspondents in Central America.

During the first few years of Sandinista rule in Nicaragua, when he worked for United Press International, Krauss concedes, "I reported what I wanted to see and discounted the repression." He says that he was right to stress that Nicaragua was not becoming a Stalinist state, but he missed "the most fundamental event of the

1979-81 period: the consolidation of a Leninist political and military machine."

Krauss says that his ideological blinders began to come off during three weeks he spent with leftist guerrillas in El Salvador in 1982. His hosts refused to dispute the Communist Party line that the Solidarity movement in Poland was merely a tool of American imperialists; in an otherwise pleasant Salvadoran village run according to the principles of agrarian socialism, he was disturbed to see a "personality cult" organized around a guerrilla leader. But the real turning point for his generation, Krauss says, was the U.S. invasion of Grenada in 1983. He was surprised to find himself unwilling to condemn it automatically, and was "happy to see the downfall of the Stalinists around Bernard Coard."

Now that his generation has left Central America, Krauss says, it will be "interesting" to see what the next crop of "idealistic" youngsters has to say—and, one might add, how many years it takes them to complete their own on-the-job education.

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Philosophy for Consenting Adults

"Private Irony and Public Decency: Richard Rorty's New Pragmatism" by Thomas McCarthy, in *Critical Inquiry* (Winter 1990), Univ. of Chicago, 202 Wieboldt Hall, 1050 E. 59th St., Chicago, Ill. 60637.

"Philosophy should be kept as separate from politics as should religion," the philosopher Richard Rorty declared in 1985. That would have been an unremarkable statement had it been made by one of the analytic thinkers who have dominated Anglo-American philosophy since World War II. But Rorty, who teaches at the University of Virginia, is perhaps the foremost critic of that highly esoteric school of thought, a self-proclaimed "neo-pragmatist," and the pre-eminent heir to the politically engaged pragmatic philosophers William James and John Dewey. And like them, he writes with enough panache to make his case in popular magazines. In short, says McCarthy, a philosopher at Northwestern, Rorty has "all the makings

of a new American philosopher-hero." Why he has not become one is McCarthy's subject.

Until the late 1970s, Rorty was a highly respected member of the philosophy establishment. But then he published *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), attacking analytic philosophy's pursuit of rarefied "logical analysis of language" and its excessive reliance on models of knowledge borrowed from the sciences. Rorty favors, in McCarthy's words, "a turn to social practice to bring us . . . back to earth—that is back to the concrete forms of life in which our working notions of 'reason,' 'truth,' 'objectivity,' 'knowledge,' and the like are embodied." Rorty also joins with Jacques Derrida, Michel Fou-