



Yours in Sisterhood: Ms. Magazine and the Promise of Popular Feminism

By Amy Erdman Farrell

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In the winter of 1972, the first issue of Ms. magazine hit the newsstands. For some activists in the women's movement, the birth of this new publication heralded feminism's coming of age; for others, it signaled the capitulation of the women's movement to crass commercialism. But whatever its critical reception, Ms. quickly gained national success, selling out its first issue in only eight days and becoming a popular icon of the women's movement almost immediately. Amy Erdman Farrell traces the history of Ms. from its pathbreaking origins in 1972 to its final commercial issue in 1989. Drawing on interviews with former editors, archival materials, and the text of Ms. itself, she examines the magazine's efforts to forge an oppositional politics within the context of commercial culture. While its status as a feminist and mass media magazine gave Ms. the power to move in circles unavailable to smaller, more radical feminist periodicals, it also created competing and conflicting pressures, says Farrell. She examines the complicated decisions made by the Ms. staff as they negotiated the multiple--frequently incompatible--demands of advertisers, readers, and the various and changing constituencies of the feminist movement. An engrossing and objective account, *Yours in Sisterhood* illuminates the significant yet difficult connections between commercial culture and social movements. It reveals a complex, often contradictory magazine that was a major force in the contemporary feminist movement.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

There have been a number of books recently on the history of Ms. magazine. But unlike most of the others, Farrell's has a strong critical approach, a point of view and a sharp focus. Farrell doesn't simply run down a list of accomplishments, but examines whether or not the magazine kept its promise of bringing feminism to the masses. After a chronological account of the magazine's history, Farrell concludes with a lively section focused on readers' letters. As Farrell points out, these stand as the strongest proof that readers saw Ms. as something more than the usual magazine, and her analysis of what was published and what was not skillfully dissects that relationship. Sometimes accusatory ("I don't believe you, Ms. Magazine. In sisterhood?????") and sometimes laudatory, the letters are consistently engaged. Many readers were concerned with advertising, which was debated from the magazine's inception until its present-day incarnation as a subscription-only publication free of ads. Farrell reports that more than 100 readers sent an ad (for a Lady Bic Shaver) from Ms. itself to the magazine's "No Comment" section, which features sexist media portrayals. Farrell, a professor of American studies and women's studies, has plenty of interesting information and even opinions often lost in her academic jargon ("scholars have paid little attention to the role of popular culture in forming a collective oppositional consciousness"). It's too bad that a book examining the dissemination of "popular feminism" couldn't have a more accessible style.

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From Library Journal

Ms. magazine celebrated its 25th birthday in 1997 and has now been the subject of two books. Mary Thom's *Inside Ms.* (LJ 7/97) is a history of the magazine from an insider's point of view; Farrell (American studies/women's studies, Dickinson Coll.) approaches Ms. from an academic perspective, exploring the contradictions of its being a mass-market women's magazine with an explicitly feminist agenda. Ms. staff attempted to balance the demands of advertisers with the expectations of feminists, often to the dissatisfaction of both. In particular, advertising demands forced editors to focus on change at the individual level rather than advocating sweeping social reform. Farrell looks at Ms. in its social and economic context, using both primary and secondary sources to good advantage. This readable, scholarly book complements Thom's and belongs in all academic libraries as well as public libraries with women's studies collections. ?Judy Solberg, George Washington Univ., Takoma Park, MD

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From [Booklist](#)

It was a brave experiment: a feminist magazine, designed to provide an open forum for women, positioned on newsstands around the country next to more traditional women's magazines. For 17 years (1972-89), *Ms.* struggled in the commercial marketplace. (Since 1990, it has been supported by higher subscription rates, rather than by advertising.) Farrell traces *Ms.*' history as a commercial publication and the key tensions it faced: a "precarious union of feminism and capitalism"; a complex relationship with its readers; and the need to "accommodate two strands of feminism, one emphasizing individual liberty, the other . . . shared sisterhood." Basing her study on interviews with *Ms.* staffers, archival collections of *Ms.*' editorial files, and both published and unpublished letters from readers, Farrell examines the magazine's goals, victories, and inadequacies. In the end, Farrell concludes that, although the economics of the marketplace and the desire for a "truly participatory, democratic, pluralistic feminist movement are mutually exclusive," women need more "hybrids like *Ms.*" to challenge popular culture's gender stereotypes. *Mary Carroll*

Users Review

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Jean Fuller:

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