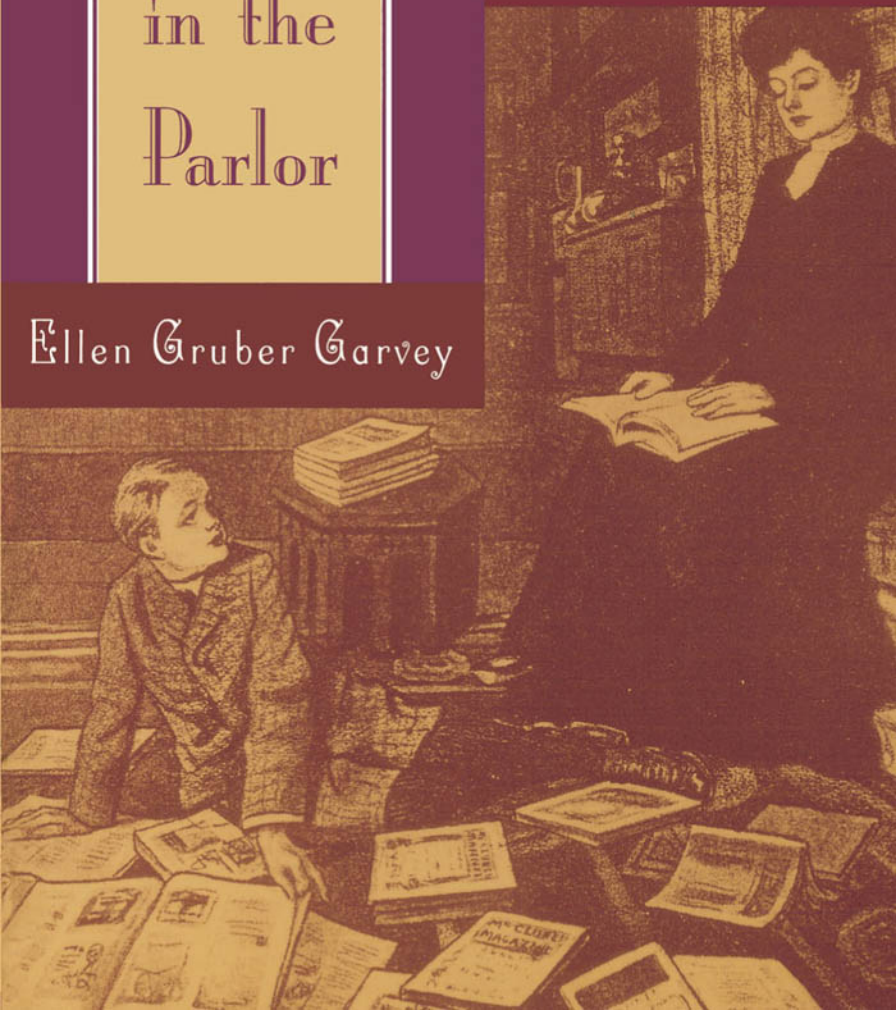


# The Adman in the Parlor

Ellen Gruber Garvey

MAGAZINES  
AND THE  
GENDERING OF  
CONSUMER  
CULTURE,  
1880s TO 1910s



## **The Adman in the Parlor**

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Magazines and the Gendering of  
Consumer Culture, 1880s to 1910s

ELLEN GRUBER GARVEY

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**For Janet  
and in memory of my parents,  
Robert Garvey and Miriam Gruber Garvey**

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## **The Adman in the Parlor**

Each month the magazines appear;  
    Their clever covers may be seen  
Upon the stands twelve times a year,—  
    And weekly papers in between.  
    They tell about things Phillipine,  
Or war 'tween capital and wages;  
    But on those things I am not keen,  
I like the advertising pages.

...

I like to read of gorgeous gear,  
    Of latest brands of Breakfastine;  
Of Peerless Household Near-Veneer,  
    Of magic stuff to scour and clean,  
    Of Boneless Beef and Bakeless Bean,  
Of bargains for all sects and ages;  
    From steamboats to a soup-tureen,  
I like the advertising pages.

Carolyn Wells, "A Ballade of Advertisements,"  
*Profitable Advertising*, December 1904, p. 766

# Introduction

*Magazine: 1. A place where goods are laid up; a storehouse or repository for goods and merchandise. . . . 5. a. Used in the titles of books, with the sense (fig. from 1 . . .): a storehouse of information on a specified subject or for a particular class of persons b. A periodical publication containing articles by various writers; chiefly a periodical publication intended for general rather than learned or professional readers, and consisting of a miscellany of critical and descriptive articles, essays, works of fiction, etc.*

Oxford English Dictionary

*A successful magazine is exactly like a successful store: it must keep its wares constantly fresh and varied to attract the eye and hold the patronage of its customers.*

Edward Bok, editor, *Ladies' Home Journal*<sup>1</sup>

**T**he older definition of magazine—a repository for goods and merchandise—from which the meaning of a periodical containing a miscellany of articles derives, survives in French and other languages. The *grand magasin* of the nineteenth century was that new and exciting institution, the department store, where goods were arrayed in visually exciting, sensual displays within architecturally novel buildings and where new plate glass windows brought the displays onto the street, creating new habits of looking. Especially for middle-class urban women, shopping became a new form of entertainment: a shopper could easily spend an entire day in the department store, moving from its concert hall, to its ladies' parlor to write letters and meet friends, to its art gallery, to its various goods for sale.<sup>2</sup>

The *grand magasin* reframed the task of shopping as a luxurious and eminently pleasurable pursuit. Similarly, the magazine joined in one package, or booklet, the commercial world of goods and sales with the world of private

musings and romantic fantasy. This book examines how stories work within the magazine, in which, as in the department store, all elements participate in selling.<sup>3</sup> Rather than providing a comprehensive overview of the magazines and advertising of this period, this book analyzes points of interaction between fiction and advertising to learn both about fiction and about advertising's place in the culture. Magazines are texts embedded within the world of commerce and the world of their readers. Read this way, magazines no longer appear to be the site of a war between commerce and culture, in which literary or editorial interests are separate from and in conflict with advertising and commerce. Rather, we discover that advertising and fiction acted on one another in complex and unexpected ways. The advertising-supported magazine as an institution has buttressed the interests of advertisers and the commercial discourse as a whole, and constructed the reader—especially the female reader—as a consumer. Even as advertisements became touchstones of modernity and its fragmentations, ads came to seem natural and ordinary to readers at the end of the nineteenth century. The larger question this book asks is, how did this happen?

Frank Munsey, editor and publisher of one of the first new magazines oriented to the middle class in the 1890s, asserted that “fiction . . . is responsible for enormous circulations, and without fiction the general advertiser would find the magazine proposition quite a different matter and decidedly uninteresting from a business standpoint.” The editors of the advertising trade journal *Profitable Advertising* concurred: “Magazines are undoubtedly read chiefly for the stories, and it is therefore evident that the storywriter is one of the advertiser’s most valuable assistants.”<sup>4</sup> Stories, like the department store’s musical concerts, were part of what drew readers to the magazines, making them potential buyers. But advertisers also depended on stories to create a climate in which their ads would persuade readers to become buyers. Ads, as the most overt representatives of the magazine’s commercial basis, had a complicated and varied relationship to its stories. Ads provided glimpses of life that were excluded from stories, and opportunities for pleasure and play more accessible than those that stories offered; at times ads also depended on stories to accustom the reader to their techniques and concerns. Any insistence on an editorial/advertising split distorts the experience of actual magazine readers, who took in a magazine as a whole.<sup>5</sup> Some 1890s commentators claimed that readers specifically sought out the advertising, and found as much value in it as in the editorial matter. When we read them together, we find advertisers learning from fiction writers, while fiction writers define themselves both within and against advertising. The reader is invited to move between the two.

Magazine ads, initially isolated in their own discrete sections at the front and back of each issue of middle class and elite magazines, were brought into text columns in a very few magazines in the 1890s; it was not until the late 1910s that significant numbers of magazines mixed ads among articles and stories throughout, ultimately creating the magazine form we are familiar with today, with stories chopped up to continue on nonconsecutive pages. Just as in the late-nineteenth-century department store, where a shopper might shift

focus from one display to another or see them all simultaneously while pursuing his or her own business, in magazines that did mix ads in with the reading matter, a magazine reader began to find that “concentration on any one thing is segmented, and distraction is a natural and pleasing element. . . . Concentration or attention [gives] way to a moment-by-moment multiple focus.”<sup>6</sup>

Even before most magazine layouts fragmented narrative and information by breaking up stories to “tail” onto the advertising pages, the magazine drew the attention of readers to the ads, inviting them to shift continually among the pages, using the “moment-by-moment multiple focus” they were already familiar with as department store shoppers. By joining many activities in a single bound unit, the magazine invited the reader to interrupt reading a story about a marriage proposal to consider how she would look in an attractive jacket or how useful her husband would find a mail-order course on law, or to envision her children contented and healthy from eating Quaker oatmeal.

This fragmented or multiple focus in both two- and three-dimensional space was elicited in many venues besides the magazine and department store in the 1890s—mail-order catalogs, fairs, expositions, the new museums, and even children’s scrapbooks were a few examples. All were metonyms of one another; all swapped techniques for display and organization among themselves; and each helped naturalize one another for their viewers or readers.<sup>7</sup>

Fiction and advertising within the magazines were similarly enmeshed. It has become a critical commonplace that there is no pure sphere of literature from which fiction emerges, untouched by the commercial nexus within which it is published and within which its writers live and work; instead, fiction constantly if uneasily reflects on its place within commerce. But relatively little attention has been given to other elements in this reciprocating relationship. Advertising, too, reacts to the fiction around it—fiction that has prepared both readers and writers to imaginatively enter into scenarios made attractive and familiar by advertising.

## **The Chapters in Brief**

Readers’ interaction with advertising has never been a passive process of absorbing advertising messages. Chapter 1, “Readers Read Advertising into Their Lives: The Trade Card Scrapbook,” examines ways that one largely female group of readers actively played with advertising, by looking at traces of that play in 1880s scrapbooks of advertising materials. Through this interaction, these readers were constructed, and constructed themselves, as consumers.

Middle-class girls and adolescents made scrapbooks of trade cards, a colorful and attractive advertising medium for nationally distributed products of the 1880s. These were forerunners of the explosion of the widespread magazine advertising for such goods in the 1890s, and were largely displaced by it. As they compiled their books, the girls learned to be responsive to advertising and to become consumers in the new arena of mass-produced, nationally distributed products. The scrapbooks both record this learning process and show



the compilers at work creating meaning from their arrangements. Compilers practiced applying “taste” to create unique assemblages out of mass-produced objects and learned to express themselves through such play.

The collector-compilers of trade card scrapbooks typically mixed the trade cards, with varying degrees of differentiation, with calling cards, reward of merit cards, holiday greeting cards, and Sunday school proverb and psalm cards. The formal similarities between commodity advertising and religious cards sanctioned advertising. They made it all the easier for the girls to enthusiastically integrate the commercial world with the social, school, and religious worlds. Manipulating ads also offered possibilities of transgressive play, using materials not valued or closely supervised by adults. As these children learned to fantasize in the language of advertising, the consumer arena seemed to offer itself as a sphere of free play and pleasure.

Beyond issuing trade cards, advertisers initially did little to actively encourage this play with advertising. By the 1890s, however, as magazines became economically dependent on advertising rather than on sales of copies or subscriptions, magazine publishers, acting in the interests of advertisers, developed an institutional interest in focusing the attention of readers on advertising. Chapter 2, “Training the Reader’s Attention: Advertising Contests,” looks at one strategy magazines pursued both to assure advertisers that their ads were being read and to demonstrate to readers that ads were entertaining, informative, and worth reading. Through the contests, magazines helped advertisers as a group by structuring readers’ imaginative interaction with advertising in the interests of constructing them as consumers.

Because ads ran in the back of most magazines, separated from the material for which readers presumably bought the magazine, advertisers might assume that readers skipped over their ads. Magazines presented the contests to potential advertisers as an incentive to advertise, a warranty that their ads would be read, and often as an index of how well they were read.

Contests encouraged readers to see the ads as an important part of the magazine, and even to feel obligated to read them. Readers of children’s magazines in particular often joined clubs and through other activities asserted their membership in a community of magazine readers. They were encouraged to transfer that sense of participation in the community of the magazine to loyalty to advertisers, and to help support, and thereby create, the magazine through their actions as consumers.

Just as the formal similarities between trade cards and religious cards helped to legitimize the pleasures of playing with advertising, contests, too, appropriated familiar pastimes and adapted them to commercial purposes, inviting readers to apply the old forms to new material. Advertising contests encouraged readers to bring advertising materials into their lives and to incorporate brand names and advertising slogans into their conversation and writing. Advertising figures became their companions, and advertising, perhaps as much as the magazine’s fiction, became a reliable source of friendly, attractive characters.

As advertising increasingly entered daily life, writers and commentators grappled with the meaning of the new advertising discourse. Chapter 3, “The

Commercial Spirit Has Entered In: Speech, Fiction, and Advertising,” tracks the more diffuse movement of advertising into national culture. Brand names and ad slogans were useful as a common frame of reference in an increasingly heterogeneous country. As the national distribution and advertising of goods by brand name shaped a national vocabulary, the cultural shorthand they created enabled people across the United States to understand a reference to a brand of soap or a joke about an advertising slogan. Allusions to articles in even the most intimate use within the individual and private world of the home took on a new kind of public accessibility.

While some commentators were critical of what they saw as the invasion of advertising into unsullied space, others cited what they saw as the benefits of advertising to people at large, separate from any use advertising might have for the product’s potential consumer. These views tended to divide along class lines: commentators were more likely to disapprove of advertising or references to it that appeared in elite sites and situations than of advertising or advertising references in nonelite settings.

One arguably elite setting in which advertising references began to appear was fiction. Often such references were satiric, but in a popular novel of 1888, Amelie Rives’s *The Quick or the Dead?*, brand-name references are more central. Rives’s novel embodied questions about the individuality of people and relationships, and the duplicability and replaceability of relationships, in part through references to brand-named items associated with characters. I argue that the novel attempted to reconcile the idea of individuality and irreplaceability with the system of mass production in which all duplicated articles are equally authentic.

Beyond the specifics of brand names, magazine fiction found other ways to demonstrate the multiple desires and social meanings embodied in the purchase of a product. Chapter 4, “Reframing the Bicycle: Magazines and Scorching Women,” takes up the question of how advertising and fiction interacted in relation to a single commodity. When the safety bicycle in the 1890s made bicycling accessible to women, wheelwomen found themselves riding through contested terrain. The new mobility that bicycles offered was both attractive to feminists and the target of attack by conservative forces. Both defense and attack took medicalized form, with pro-bicyclers asserting that bicycling would strengthen women’s bodies for motherhood, and anti-bicyclers claiming that riding would not only masculinize women, but would ruin their sexual health by promoting masturbation. Bicycles were attacked as a danger both to women’s sexual purity and to their gender definition.

The discourse of consumption constituted by the fiction, articles, and advertising within the advertising-dependent middle-class magazine of the 1890s subsumed both feminist and conservative views in the interest of sales. Bicycles were often advertised in the middle-class magazines of the period, constituting 10 percent of national advertising in the 1890s. Individual manufacturers took the masturbation threat literally and addressed it by promoting the sale of crotchless “hygienic” saddles, but could not counter the real threat for which female bicycle masturbation was a metaphor: women on the loose,

mobile and independent. Doing what individual advertisers could not do for themselves, magazines acted in the interests of advertisers in the aggregate and published numerous bicycling stories that recontained the threat posed by the bicycle's offer of freedom. A counterpressure, however, made itself felt in works published in non-ad dependent magazines, where the potential subversiveness of women's bicycling was celebrated rather than recontained or muted.

But a woman didn't buy a bicycle every day. Chapter 5, "Rewriting Mrs. Consumer: Class, Gender and Consumption," looks at a larger pattern of changes in women's relationship to commodities and their purchase and finds advertising, stories, and the institution of the magazine itself addressing and constructing women readers as consumers.

As advertisers increasingly defined women as their target audience, advertising-dependent magazines presented their women readers with fiction that encouraged them in their role as consumers. This encouragement took different forms depending on the class of women addressed. Magazines addressed to cash-poor women presented ways to earn money to buy advertised goods and helped to justify their purchase, while suggesting that such consumption could be consistent with their values of thrift and moral responsibility. Magazines addressed to middle-class women, on the other hand, discouraged autonomous work for married women and encouraged them to seek fulfillment in shopping and the emotional caretaking of their families. These magazines valorized the apparent power available to women as shoppers through courtship stories that were allegories of shopping, and which featured women choosing wisely between offered choices.

Middle-class married women were steered further away from earning opportunities as writers by the magazines' firmer espousal of professionalism. While some women's magazines had allowed readers to make less formal forays into the literary market, the newer magazines reduced such opportunities.

Chapter 6, "Men Who Advertise: Ad Readers and Ad Writers" explores the status of the ad reader—increasingly presumed to be female—and the ad writer, presumed male. While women were being positioned as advertising readers, "good writing" of both ads and fiction in the middle-class magazine was being defined as writing for men and often by men: concise writing for the busy businessman. Advertisers and the magazines that acted for them expressed their ambivalence about both addressing women and publishing them. Women were to be advertising readers and consumers, not writers.

When commentators discussed whether ads were valuable to readers, their conclusions were mixed. But when they discussed whether ads had value for women, their writings were far less equivocal. Women were said to seek education and entertainment from the ads, turning to the advertising pages first, in preference to the reading matter, and hanging onto every word of the advertiser, grateful to be entertained. Ad trade journals published their own versions of the courtship-shopping stories, in which admen used their skills to woo a mate.

## Background: The Changing Magazine

The big change in magazine economics has usually been pinned to 1893, the year that three monthlies—Munsey's, McClure's, and the *Cosmopolitan*—dropped their prices to ten cents, shifted the basis of their enterprise from sales to advertising, and began to achieve circulations in the hundreds of thousands.<sup>8</sup> However, ten-cent and even five-cent monthlies that depended on advertising for their revenues and had circulations of half a million to one million had existed before this. Many in this earlier group, called mail-order monthlies, such as the *People's Literary Companion*, *Ladies' World*, *Comfort*, and *Youth's Companion*, were addressed to a poorer, more rural readership. They were about the size of a tabloid newspaper and had ads mixed on the page with stories and other material. Others, such as the *Ladies' Home Journal*, which grew out of this group and aligned itself with the new middle-class ten-cent magazines, saw their audience as a genteel one. But the three new ten-cent middle-class monthlies of the 1890s, at about seven by ten inches, with ads restricted to the front and back pages, more closely resembled the form of a third group: the older elite magazines such as *Harper's*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *The Century*.<sup>9</sup> And yet, as Richard Ohmann has documented, the new ten-cent magazines were different in content and audience from the older elite magazines; as they achieved such large circulations, they necessarily reached readers who had not previously subscribed to magazines.<sup>10</sup> Aside from the mail-order magazines, in 1885 there had been only four general monthlies in the United States with a circulation of 100,000 or more; their combined circulation was 600,000. By 1905 twenty general monthlies had such circulations, and they shared an aggregate circulation of over 5.5 million.<sup>11</sup>

Price was an important reason that ten-cent magazines reached readers who hadn't subscribed to the "quality class" or elite publications *Harper's*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *The Century* at thirty-five cents a copy/four dollars a year, or *Scribner's* at twenty-five cents a copy.<sup>12</sup> But the new middle-class ten-cent magazines took advantage of new technologies and economies of scale to offer more illustrations and livelier layouts than the elite magazines. Their interest in commerce and industry extended beyond the advertising pages into editorial selections as well. It had been the job of Gilded Age quality class editors "to sift, scrutinize, and select literary manuscripts, always watching over established boundaries of taste and propriety."<sup>13</sup> These genteel editors did not actively plan the magazine but expected unsolicited manuscripts to drop in over the transom to the "Editor's Study," or "Editor's Easy Chair," as column titles in two of the elite magazines named the editor's workplace. (An 1892 advertising trade journal satirized this tendency to dozy passivity, referring to the "Editor's Spare Room," "Editor's Folding Bed," and "Editor's Easy Socks."<sup>14</sup>) In the new magazines of the 1890s, however, editors moved from a supine to an upright posture; the new editors actively solicited and commissioned articles and stories, and shaped the magazine. Frank Munsey, for example, editor and publisher of *Munsey's*, who prided himself on his wide-awake entrepreneurship, wrote his

column from the "Editor's Desk." Often these editorial solicitations were inspired by the needs of the advertisers.

The new readership cultivated by the middle-class ten-cent magazines, if only because of its size, was a less homogeneous group than the mainly Northeastern elite readers of the "quality class" publications. To some, the appearance of this new readership signaled the end of an era, and prompted changes in the old-line magazines as well. Looking back, L. Frank Tooker, an editor at *The Century*, complained of the instability of this new readership:

There was the problem of a new group of readers so numerous that it gave tremendous weight to the sort of thing that it was eager to devour. Yet to label the reading of this body was difficult; it was catholic, but erratic. . . .

Hosts of new magazines had arisen to make greater the problem—syndicated magazines; muck-raking magazines; art magazines; the magazine of special interests, like the tired business man and the woman who wanted her home to be beautiful. . . . And most of these were cheap, and could be thrown aside after hasty reading, like a newspaper. And with all this mad clutter, we were being left behind. . . . We stood as one among many, distinguished only, with a few others, by our dignity.<sup>15</sup>

Less querulous magazinists saw new opportunities in the new magazine readership. Brander Matthews was a prolific contributor to magazines of all types whose opportunities to publish expanded with the new, often higher-paying magazines. His 1893 "Story of a Story," provides an allegory of the reach of the new magazines. It follows the adventures of an inspirational story as it circulates from its dying author to the editor of the *Metropolis* (evidently based on the *Cosmopolitan*, where Matthews had been a staff contributor since 1890).<sup>16</sup> The *Metropolis* editor sees the story as something to help "balance the mid-summer fiction"; from him it goes to a well-heeled buyer who reads it on a train to the country, where his discussion of it with the woman he loves gives him an opening to propose. Next, the story goes to an elderly war widow who is reminded by it of her youth; then to a bigamous blacksmith on a western Indian reservation, who tells the visiting engineers who have brought it that it has "done [him] good to read" (they promise to tell the editor of the magazine, the cousin of one of the engineers); and finally to the son of the illiterate scrubwoman who retrieves the magazine from the railroad car she's cleaning. The already virtuous lad finds it "a splendid story!" and, infused with the desire to model himself on the hero, goes to work in a lawyer's office where "he developed true manliness, energy, character, and ability" and becomes first a lawyer and then an honest assembly representative.<sup>17</sup>

The theory of the circulation of magazines embodied in Matthews's story proposed not only that lasting effects could spring from the seemingly ephemeral magazine but also that these periodicals had a life extending well beyond their month on the newsstands. In Matthews's story, the *Metropolis* reaches both elite readers (such as the well-heeled train passenger) who might have read the "quality class" publications, and typical mail-order monthly readers such as the Western blacksmith and the scrubwoman's son. But as

Matthews's version of the new magazine spreads out through the class ranks and from the metropolis into the West, it disseminates middle-class values and even a reforming spirit.<sup>18</sup> Its editor, after all, is cousin to an engineer, the prototypical forward-thinking managerial man.

The most crucial distinction between the new ten-cent magazine and the older elite magazines, and the distinction on which the other differences rest, was the reliance of the new magazines on advertising rather than sales, with advertising rates pegged to circulation figures. With this change, publishers made a definitive shift—from selling magazines directly to readers to selling their readership to advertisers. Yet even as editors and publishers reoriented their obligations and accountability from readers to advertisers, it became more important to create magazines that appealed to readers, since a larger readership made magazines more attractive to advertisers. The lower prices brought in that larger readership, principally composed, Ohmann suggests, of the new professional managerial class of the city and suburbs: a group that still excluded rural and working-class readers.<sup>19</sup> Although both the new middle-class ten-cent magazines and the cheap mail-order magazines, addressed to a poorer, often rural audience, depended on advertising rather than sales, their different readerships, along with their respective spending power, shaped distinctive ways of promoting the interests of the advertisers as a whole. One result of this was a substantial contrast in their treatment of women's work.

Important differences persisted between the old "quality class" magazines, the new ten-cent magazines, and the mail-order magazines beyond the 1890s. But since the "quality class" publications became increasingly interested in attracting advertising, differences in this respect diminished. This book will focus less on the differences between the groups of magazines than on the ways in which advertising came to shape magazines—the ways in which advertising-dependent magazines acted in the interests of advertisers in the aggregate, and the ways in which magazines as a group constructed the reader as consumer.

Advertising was not just a highly visible element of the new magazine but something akin to its bindery stitching as well. The fact that many different companies advertised in the magazines would suggest that no individual or class of advertisers could exercise any great power or control over the magazines. In a well-publicized move in 1893, Cyrus Curtis and Edward Bok of the *Ladies' Home Journal* had excluded advertising for patent medicines and financial schemes from their magazine without incurring disaster.<sup>20</sup> By putting a literal warranty on the products advertised in their pages, they actually made their ad space more desirable.<sup>21</sup> Other magazines boasted of their freedom from advertising influence. Beyond these anecdotal and self-promoting moments, however, which reassured readers of the reliability of both editorial and advertising matter, magazines came to act in the interests of advertisers in the aggregate, and advertising came to shape magazines.

Sometimes it is possible to document advertising's shaping of magazines in direct terms. Mark Sullivan, an editor at *Collier's*, and earlier at the *Ladies' Home Journal*, recalled in his memoirs a request from Charles William Eliot, the president

of Harvard, for help in excluding automobiles from Maine's Mount Desert Island. Sullivan told him the project was doomed: "Newspapers and periodicals could not help him; the economic basis upon which they existed was advertising, and at that time about half of all advertising was of automobiles and accessories."<sup>22</sup> More recently, Gloria Steinem, introducing the first advertising-free issue of *Ms. magazine*, revealed much about the pressures women's magazines are under to "supply what the ad world euphemistically describes as 'supportive editorial atmosphere' or 'complementary copy,'" requirements codified in the advertising insertion orders. Such orders stipulate placement of a company's ads adjacent to related editorial matter, meaning that the magazine must therefore either carry editorial matter on fashions or home furnishings or lose clothing and furnishings advertisers. Advertisers' insistence on publishing product-related copy is overwhelming. According to one "beauty writer," magazines keep advertisers based on how many editorial clippings mentioning the product they produce per month.<sup>23</sup>

Editors of such 1890s ten-cent monthlies as *Munsey's* might not have been disturbed by Sullivan's or Steinem's accounts. They asserted in editorials that they saw no conflict between editorial and advertising interests, not because business interests would be kept separate from editorial matters, but because advertising itself would be valuable to the reader, and because the reader and advertiser had interests in common.

Advertising became increasingly important to magazines that were not part of the flowering of the ten-cent magazine as well. Though some kept a high cover price and never achieved the high circulations of the ten-cent magazines, many sought other ways to demonstrate their value to the advertisers. *St. Nicholas*, at twenty-five cents a copy, had a far smaller circulation at the beginning of the twentieth century than several other children's magazines, but offered advertisers entree into more affluent households. As more magazines competed for advertisers, *St. Nicholas* was one of the magazines that identified its task as the creation of a congenial environment for ads. Along with *Ladies' World* and *Good Housekeeping*, it took up this task overtly, by establishing contests that directed the readers' attention to their advertisements. These magazines thus provided advertisers with what amounted to an early version of survey results that reassured advertisers their ads were being read, while they encouraged readers to see ads as a source of pleasure and play.

*Munsey's*, notable as the first of the middle-class magazines to drop its price to a dime, articulated its mission as bringing fiction and ad writing closer to one another, thereby training readers through its fiction to appreciate the directness and succinctness of advertising writing. Frank Munsey's editorials explicitly framed his preferences in fiction in terms of terseness, action, and force—and then praised advertisements for embodying these virtues:

The modern advertisement is a thing of art, a poem, a sledge hammer, an argument—a whole volume compressed into a sentence. Some of the cleverest writing—the most painstaking, subtle work turned out by literary men today—can be found in the advertising pages of a first rate magazine. Every word is measured, examined under a magnifying glass, to see just how big it is, just how much meaning it has, and how many kinds of meaning it has.<sup>24</sup>

The virtue of brevity and compression here is its efficiency: conveying more in less time, like the labor-saving devices advertised in the back of the magazine for wide-awake readers.

## Progressive Advertising

Other editors and publishers went ahead and created a congenial environment for ads without overtly identifying that as a task for themselves. Advertising and magazine professionals developed new ways to discuss and think about advertising. Defining oneself as an advertising professional claimed distance from the earlier model of advertising embodied in medicine shows, the entertaining hyperbole of P. T. Barnum, and other shady if amusing frauds of what one writer calls “the advertising game.”<sup>25</sup> The new advertising agencies and copywriters attempted to align advertising with modernity. They suggested that advertising was valuable not only because it would increase business but also because it would gain the advertiser respect. It would be a sign that the advertiser was up to date and, in a favorite term of the period, *progressive*. The political reformers who came to be labeled progressive shared with business the ideals of efficiency, the exaltation of “scientific” approaches, and respect for experts. But the term as it appeared in business discourse did not register political alignments. Rather it described business practices in tune with what was cast as progress. The word *progressive* was part of the title of at least five trade magazines of the 1890s, from *Progressive Bee-Keeper* to *Progressive Printer*. And it was specifically linked with the new emphasis on advertising as a respectable, anything-but-fraudulent activity.<sup>26</sup>

The ten-cent advertising-supported magazine fulfilled the increasing need of manufacturers of nationally distributed brand-name goods for media in which they could advertise nationally. Such manufacturers in the 1880s had put colorful advertising trade cards into the hands of thousands, but nationally circulated magazines were clearly a more efficient tool. The national advertisers that flocked to these magazines sometimes touted new commodities like bicycles, snapshot cameras, and typewriters, or new forms of familiar goods, like centrally processed and nationally distributed grains. Others promoted goods like scouring soaps and crackers, no longer sold in bulk, but given a trade-marked identity and sold nationwide.<sup>27</sup>

Advertising trade writing used the term “progressive” to flatter businessmen who envisioned national markets for their goods, and retailers who embraced new modes of display and cooperated with the manufacturers of nationally distributed goods to sell their products. The term was used circularly: progressive businessmen advertised, therefore one could recognize a progressive businessman by his advertising. The term identified as well such newer business practices as selling magazines below the cost of production and finding the profit elsewhere in the transaction. Editors of the new magazines expressed their sense of economic alignment with business and advertising through the word “progressive,” asserting that advertising educated readers and



improved their lives. As the editors saw it, advertisers, readers, and editors were all on the same side. As Bok put it, "The making of a modern magazine is a business proposition; the editor is there to make it pay. He can do this only if he is of service to his readers, and that depends on his ability to obtain a class of material essentially the best of its kind."<sup>28</sup> In this case, the material that was the best of its kind included fiction. Advertisers depended on stories not only to make the magazines attractive to readers but also to create a climate in which their ads would succeed in persuading readers to become buyers. Editors therefore had reason to prefer stories that neither detracted from the premises of advertising nor undercut the tone of the ads, but rather created fictional worlds as much as possible continuous with the concerns of the ads.

The conventions of what was characterized by readers and editors of the time as "realist" fiction naturalized, or accustomed readers to expect in fiction, a universe of domestic minutiae, a densely described fictional middle-class world of finely calibrated, socially significant detail, in which objects through metonymy or synecdoche stand in for their owners. In these stories, possessions are inventoried, and purchases and desired purchases are laid out to create a fictional reality or tell the reader of the characters' longings. In William Dean Howells's *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, a novel much concerned with the magazine business and serialized in *Harper's Weekly*, the March family practices possession-reading skills as they search for a New York apartment. They judge the character of each prospective landlord or sublessor by "reading" his or her possessions as they survey the rooms.

Late-twentieth-century critics have drawn a tighter circle around the field of realism, chiefly treating such writers as Howells, Dreiser, Wharton, and James as its proponents, and pointing to their close description of social relations as characteristic of this realism, or, more recently, discussing realism as a "strategy for imagining and managing the threats of social change."<sup>29</sup> So the Marches both read and reflect on the act of possession reading as they perform it at the home of Basil March's new employer, the nouveau riche magazine patron. What if the possessions don't actually reflect the possessor's taste?

The drawing room . . . was delicately decorated in white and gold, and furnished in a sort of extravagant good taste; there was nothing to object to the satin furniture, the pale soft rich carpet, the pictures, and the bronze and china bric-a-brac, except that their costliness was too evident; everything in the room meant money too plainly, and too much of it. The Marches recognized this in . . . hoarse whispers . . . ; they conjectured from what they had heard of the Dryfooses that this tasteful luxury in no wise expressed their civilization. "Though when you come to think of that," said March, "I don't know that [their landlady's] gimcrackery expresses ours."<sup>30</sup>

But this more complex and critical approach of Howells, James, and Wharton appeared chiefly in the more elite magazines. Stories in the ten-cent magazines more often celebrated the sense that the reader inhabited the same world as the characters and would be pleased to recognize references to its novelties and familiar characteristics. Advertisements depended precisely on the posses-