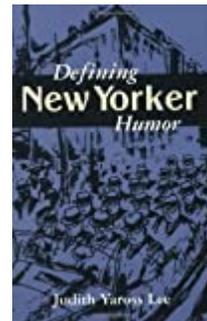


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Judith Yaross Lee.** *Defining "New Yorker" Humor.* Jackson, Miss: University Press of Mississippi, 2000. x + 427 pp. \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57806-198-3.



**Reviewed by** Frank Oglesbee (Eastern Illinois University )

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Having grown up in a household where there was always "The New Yorker," and always having it in my own, I can hardly claim to be a disinterested observer where one of my favorite periodicals is concerned. I can claim to be impressed with Lee's painstaking research and account of that overlooked period of the magazine's early years, 1925-30. While she is interested in correcting the image of its founder, Harold Ross, as a lucky bumbler, she is more interested in detailing the development of one of the first niche periodicals aimed at the new college-educated audience.

She lists three myths of "The New Yorker:" (1) an eccentric editorial leader, (2) a disorganized and unreliable staff, & (3) unexpected success rewarding creative chaos in the absence of an editorial plan" [7] and carefully demolishes them, drawing on the magazine's files and careful examination of the first five years' issues. Lee divides the book into eight topical chapters. The first examines "The New Yorker" in the contexts on societal changes and of other humor magazines. The other seven chapters examines types of humor: merging verbal and visual in such features as "Talk of the Town;" encouraging the cartoons; reducing the size of, or eliminating, the captions; developing the magazine's overall approach to comic stories ("tales of neurotic little men driven insane by jumbo women and modern life, 6); variations on irony;

and comic verse. In so doing, she describes the contributions of numerous artists and writers, some virtually unmentioned in such books as those by Thurber and Gill. Sometimes the detail slows the reading down, but it picks up when she synthesizes the results. "The New Yorker was the first modern city magazine to target the affluent, educated audience lately described as DINKS: dual income, no kids (11). "The New Yorker adopted wholesale three key trends of modernism cited by Ortega: treating art as play, taking an ironic stance, and rejecting transcendent purpose" (58).

While clearly pointing out the importance to the magazine of E. B. White, Frank Sullivan, and Corey Ford – for three – Lee also rebuts the notion the magazine was a bastion of misogyny, as she points out the importance of numerous women contributors – Dorothy Parker was far from the only one. She further notes how Ross, White, Thurber, et al, worked to replace the nineteenth century comic tale, with its rustic wits and exaggerated incidents, with urban-based tales (especially New York urban), local dialects, and "interior and dramatic monologues revealing the speaker's character" (247).

However, she does not give the magazine credit for every new turn in humor, pointing out that it did not originate one-line caption cartoons, or "the comic pose of the Sufferer" (258). And, in explaining the magazine's

use of comic poetry, she also notes its use of more serious verse, exemplified by V. Valerie Gates' "Unknown Soldier" (360).

Besides her text, Lee uses several illustrations from the magazine (and explains Ross' deliberate avoidance of photographs), and adds a chronological appendix of significant events in the magazine's life, a table of abbrevi-

ations, annotations for each chapter, a list of works cited and an index. Twenty dollars well spent.

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