

Curiosities No 22

Women's Magazines 1950s Style!

From the Garton Archive

by Ruth Codd

Edited by Peter Harrod

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Editor's Preface

From time to time I have transcribed or made reference to articles from the *Original Contributions* sections of the Lincoln Christ's Hospital Girls' High School (LHS) and Lincoln School magazines. The following delightful article by Ruth Codd of the Upper Sixth Form was printed in the Summer 1957 edition of the LHS magazine.

Our records in the Garton Archive show that **Ruth Sumpter Codd** was born in January 1940 and lived at 309 Burton Road in Lincoln. She attended Mount Street School before being admitted to LHS in September 1951. This was not the first occasion that Ruth's work had been published in the LHS magazines. She showed her linguistic talents and versatility by writing poems on *Twilight in the Country* and *Lincolnshire Place Names* while in the Lower Fourth Form, and in the Upper Fourth an amusing and somewhat cynical poem called *The Struggle* about the difficulties she faced in writing an Original Contribution for the magazines!

It is clear that Ruth was a highly able and talented pupil and she left LHS in 1959 for a place at Newnham College, Cambridge where she read Modern Languages and graduated in 1962 with First Class Honours.

Women's Magazines

If a woman wants to know how best to commit a murder, she must refer herself to her women's magazine. If she wants to know how best to prepare an apple pie she must turn to the same magazine. If she wants to be persuaded that she is beautiful,

that the new Paris fashions will suit her figure, or that she is suffering from some odd disease or unnatural mental outlook, then she must flip through the glossy pages of the same magazine. Everything she wants is there in some form or other. Within its covers she finds that almost her whole life is planned for her: this is what her children must wear; this is what she must talk about at her cocktail party; this is how she must appear when she gets up in the morning; these are the colours she must exhibit when she reclines on the Riviera beaches; these are the tastiest and most economical meals that she must serve up to her adoring husband; in a word this is what she must always do and this is what she must never do, if she wishes to be like the thousands of other women who read and believe these magazines – and of course she does wish to be like them.

As well as providing all this very interesting information, the magazine also presents life 'as it really is': this is, it says, how a frustrated child behaves; this, of course, is how a benign old gentleman behaves; and this, most interesting of all, is how everybody behaves when he or she is in love. A woman can read all this, revelling in all the improbabilities of these stories and of her own imagination, and wish that such excitement and adventure would come to her as it does to so many others. This, for her, is the real life, the life that matters.

Real? Of course it is not real; it is in fact a very false picture: most of the substance of these magazines is given a fantastic degree of importance, and because this is so, all the petty faults in a woman's character are brought to the surface and indulged. Because she is told that she is really rather beautiful and only needs this cream or that powder to make her perfect, a woman can hardly help but become vain. If she is encouraged to buy the latest fashion oddity or to make extraordinary dishes that will be the most delightful she has ever tasted – with the added attraction of an unpronounceable foreign name- she cannot help but be extravagant. The stories in the magazines or the articles about eccentric or mentally unusual people will encourage her to be jealous and suspicious of her husband or friends and will make her worried or distracted over imagined abnormalities in her children or the long-suffering husband. Under the influence of these magazines a woman will become more and more absorbed in her appearance, in the latest fashions, in the cultivation of unusual flowers or in an impracticable tour of Central Africa or Greenland, instead of concentrating on her children's good health, on providing nourishing food for them and her husband, on the care of their clothes and on something useful for her own spare time and amusement.

But should our amusements be confined to the improvement of our minds? And should our minds be fixed for ever on matters of the greatest importance? Surely not! We need complete relaxation sometimes, and by seeking this in the light trifles of these women's magazines we can afterwards return to other work and finer reading, which we can better appreciate by contrast.

So let us have our little pleasures! Let us keep the enjoyment of imagining ourselves wearing those lovely dresses, trying out those exciting perfumes and lotions, or making brave attempts at 'Rock buns à la Russe'. And above all let us enjoy those thrilling detective tales and throbbing love stories. We do get a kick out of reading them – and we do not take them seriously, you know!

Ruth Codd, VI₂

Editor's Comment

I must admit that I drooled over this beautifully crafted article when I first read it and have admired it more with every subsequent reading. It is such a mature piece of writing which captured my interest from the 'call to attention' opening statement and sustained it throughout the piece. She showed an impressive understanding of the difference between reality, fantasy, and wish-fulfilment and the article contains a balance of irony, self-mockery, and mature insights for one so young. A tribute is also due to the quality of English teaching at LHS at that time, and she may well have received some quite legitimate adult help with the text of course.

I then wondered what might have inspired her to write the article. Perhaps it embodies an adolescent swipe or two at the readiness of gullible adults to be subject to the prey of publishers and advertisers, and it is possible that she might also be having a concealed broadside at her headmistress, Miss Cleave who, after all, routinely spent time in her Speech Day reports expressing her disapproval of some of the distractions of her young charges. Occasional Paper No 28 from the Garton Archive, *Miss I V Cleave in her Own Words*, provides incontrovertible evidence. For example, she would ask the co-operation of parents in forming their daughters' taste in reading, citing a staple diet of comics and paperback books of the 'Dead-eyed Dick' variety. I feel sure that she would also have been critical of her girls reading

women's magazines which would probably not have been included among the 'really worthwhile books' that she was advocating.

However, to be fair to Miss Cleve, she was not averse to asking the Sixth Form girls for their views on what they thought were the strengths and weaknesses of the School (Spring 1954 edition). She told her audience that the girls wrote frankly, and she was grateful for their honesty. However, the results of her probing seemed to reveal little more than the fact that the girls had conflicting views on every subject! On another occasion Miss Cleave informed the parents that their offspring could not pursue an advanced course of study and still expect to have free evenings. "Too many interests tire and distract," she sermonised! Mental work demanded freshness, vigour, concentration, and a good night's sleep with a nine-thirty bedtime! There was no mention of women's magazines but I am making the inference that digesting their 'throbbing' contents would not have satisfied Miss Cleave's definition of 'really worthwhile mental study'!