

among women working in the Lowell textile mills.

Despite these omissions—again, due primarily to lack of space—this is an excellent collection of contemporary editorials that provides readers a good sampling of the actual writings of the era.

Not only will historians find this and other books in the *Debating Historical Issues* series useful, but high school teachers and college faculty will also find the books an excellent resource to enhance critical thinking about historical issues.

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■ **Backstory: Inside the Business of News.** Ken Auletta. New York, NY: The Penguin Press, 2003. 316 pp. \$24.95 pbk. Media critic Ken Auletta's latest book, *Backstory: Inside the Business of News*, carries a title that promises more than the content delivers. The author's well-deserved reputation for access throughout the world of media and his smooth writing style carry the book forward. But in the end, you've read most of it somewhere else before.

Both the strength and the weakness of the book is that it reprints several of Auletta's "Annals of Communication" columns from *The New Yorker*. One column is Auletta's well-known examination of The Tribune Co. published six years ago in the *American Journalism Review's* series on the "State of the American Newspaper." Only one of the book's eleven columns is original to this book. It constitutes the fourth chapter on New York's wildly atypical tabloid wars. Ironically, including this one new column simply adds to a limitation of *Backstory*.

As the title of *The New Yorker* magazine might imply, more than half of the *Backstory* pages dwell on New York City-based journalism, and more than a third of the total book is on the *New York Times* alone. With one exception, if you're expecting an examination of the causes behind the problems that quality journalism faces today,

you will instead encounter symptoms, anecdotes, and personality profiles.

That one exception is Auletta's ten-page introduction. Provocative, insightful, and well-written, the introduction is a masterfully brief overview of modern journalism's problems, the reasons behind them, and the consequences that result. If Penguin Press ever creates a pamphlet from the short introduction, it should be required reading for all journalism students. For the rest of the book, however, you must set aside the strong sense of déjà vu from having already either read the original columns, some as much as eleven years ago, or the many hallmark excerpts from them that have appeared elsewhere.

Auletta's skills of magazine writing, analysis, and perspective are what have made him so well known. He has eight other books to his credit, including four bestsellers. But Auletta's writing relies on some narrative journalism devices that many journalists and journalism educators are finding increasingly disturbing in light of recent abuses. For example, Auletta frequently uses anonymous sources—such as, "he has told people he trusts"—and he often includes quotes as recalled by others and reconstructs some events to which he was not witness.

Anonymous quotes and other leaps of faith in reporting are raising a heightened sense of discomfort in the aftermath of Stephen Glass, Jayson Blair, and Jack Kelley, to name a few of the latest. Each of the reprinted columns is concluded with a postscript bringing the reader up to date on what has happened since original publication. Still, much of the main work remains quite dated, especially the decade-old discussion of journalists' speaking fees. Other columns seem irrelevant, such as those on a reporter who retired more than thirty years ago and the Clinton-Dole presidential race of 1996.

Knowing the strong body of Auletta's work in interviewing media titans from Bill Gates and John Malone to Ted Turner and Rupert Murdoch, a reader will be left wishing for a far more comprehensive view of

media business and certainly for more insights from outside New York City, as the subtitle *Inside the Business of News* seems to promise. Auletta has written prescient and revealing books that explore and explain major developments in the print and broadcast media, and how a bottom-line-driven Wall Street rules over almost all of them.

But he's just coasting in *Backstory*.

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■ ***Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers.*** Alissa Quart. New York: Basic Books, 2003. 247 pp. \$14.95 hbk.

Unlike the products she discusses in her book, Alissa Quart should have a warning label at the beginning of *Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers*. The warning could read: "Parents: be afraid. Be very afraid." Or perhaps, "Abandon hope all ye who enter here."

Quart's book is a detailed treatise on how children are viewed by Madison Avenue, the Internet, the broadcast media, and many conglomerates as mere conduits for a fast buck. And if their psyches, their physical health, and their futures are compromised in the process, so be it. The most frightening theme of the book is that adults and parents are complicit in the whole process.

Branded is, in the current vernacular, a good read. It goes quickly with its short sentences, its brief true-life stories, and its use of first person; and it is so shocking in parts that it has the guilty appeal of a train wreck. But the appeal of *Branded* cuts both ways. The author, who writes for numerous popular magazines including *Salon*, *The Nation*, and others, relies heavily on anonymous "sources" who serve as subjects of anecdotes. This, along with some tantalizing tidbits of the author's own life, makes the book more of an anecdotal account than a serious treatment of the problem of advertising geared at teenagers. But that is not to say it is not credible. Even without

specific identities to accompany the horror stories, most readers will be cynical enough to believe that clothing companies hire what are euphemistically called "trendspotters" to urge classmates to buy certain brands and subtly ridicule those who don't; that a close-knit online network of starving teenage girls competes to see who is the most anorexic; and that companies are willing to go to any lengths for the attention and dollars of "twens"—the 9-to-12 age group.

Quart takes on the marketing of "body branding," or plastic surgery, aimed at increasingly younger girls. (Breast augmentation is number-one, although facial surgery, including lip plumping, is also hot.) Teen boys do not escape unharmed. The use of sports supplements and drugs to "pump them up" is skyrocketing. Branding also discusses the extravagant expansion of parties, bat mitzvahs, and the like, where more is always better. Parents can easily spend \$50,000 or more for one event to ensure their children are seen as hip and moneyed.

Quart's point is, presumably, that marketing toward children is insidious and infiltrates all parts of their lives. But chapters about teen films, the pressure of getting into a prestigious college, and even the problem of pedophiles lurking on the Internet may be off the point a bit. In the chapter "Cinema of the In Crowd," she notes that recent films such as *Legally Blonde*, *Clueless*, and others focus relentlessly on members of the wealthy "in crowd," reinforcing teens' beliefs that material objects ensure popularity. But are not these films a reflection of the culture Quart describes in the book rather than an influence on it? Films aimed at teen audiences have always attempted to portray the cultural scene at the time they were made. This chapter does not add evidence to Quart's points.

Ditto with "Logo U," which describes the desperate efforts of teenagers to gain acceptance into the "right" colleges through elaborate packaging of themselves. She describes how these students spend vast amounts of money for SAT tutors and

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