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Book review of Inside the Hollywood Fan Magazine: A History of Star Makers, Fabricators, and Gossip Mongers

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The Early Days of Celebrity Ink

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Inside the Hollywood Fan Magazine: A History of Star Makers, Fabricators, and Gossip Mongers. Anthony Slide. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010. 281 pp. \$40 hardback.

Anthony Slide writes about the film industry as a long-time insider. He brings to this book his broad knowledge of the field, many industry contacts, and a wealth of juicy anecdotes on stars and star-makers.

Born in England in 1944, Slide has spent his adult life tending the legacy of Hollywood as a film archivist and author of books, including biographies of obscure moviemakers, a history of the Vitagraph Company, a history of film preservation itself, and, in 1986, *Great Pretenders: A History of Female and Male Impersonation in the Performing Arts*. He is an appraiser of entertainment memorabilia and a specialist on silent movies, particular those by female directors.

With his 75th book, *Inside the Hollywood Fan Magazine*, Slide chronicles two parallel casts of characters: the movie makers whose shining faces filled the pages of this once-thriving genre, and the workers who wrote what were for many readers merely extended captions, together with the editors and publishers. *Inside the Hollywood Fan Magazine* is well-organized and fairly slim at 281 pages but sufficiently exhaustive in delineating the rise and fall of individual titles and the industry as a whole. Slide follows the genre from its beginnings in the silent film era through its golden age (the 1920s through the '40s) and ends with its dissolution into the larger ocean of celebrity ink represented by *People*, supermarket tabloids, and television magazines such as *Entertainment Tonight*.

The book's strength is that it does not get sidetracked by discussions of celebrity culture in America. It knows what it is about—the fan magazine industry itself, what can be found on the pages of these magazines, and what can be learned about the people who made them. The appendices alone are priceless, listing dozens of U.S. and U.K. fan magazines and fan club journals. (Slide's own collection is now at Bowling Green University.)

Scott Fosdick worked as a drama critic and/or entertainment editor for ten years in Chicago, New Jersey, and Baltimore before earning his doctorate at Northwestern. His articles have appeared in a variety of newspapers and magazines, including American Theatre, Stagebill, and The Sunday New York Times. His research focuses on the history of arts journalism. Fosdick is the graduate coordinator at the School of Journalism & Mass Communications at San José State University.

This book will be an important resource for cultural historians who strive to see the world in a grain of southern California sand and for social historians who wonder at the celluloid obsessions of Middle America.

It will be up to them to plumb the deeper meanings of this fan magazine phenomenon, because it is here that Slide falls seriously short, either out of modesty or because he is too much of a fan himself to achieve critical distance.

Slide never fully confronts the big question posed by the phenomenal success of this niche: Why? Why did so many of us devour these magazines, pass idle time with them, collect them, put scissors and paste to them, give up our imaginations to them? *That* we did, and *which ones* we consumed most avidly, Slide chronicles admirably. But why?

“We are a curious people,” Eleanor Roosevelt wrote in apology for the intrusiveness of fans. We could leave it at that, were we not also curious about our curiosity. Two other recent books go deeper into the reasons behind our obsessions. Chris Hedges’ *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle* (Nation Books, 2009) is a sobering jeremiad against the giving up of our intellects to popular culture. In *Fame: What the Classics Tell Us About Our Cult of Celebrity* (Picador, 2010), Tom Payne finds primitive ritual in the celebrity press’ routine of building up stars only to tear them down, a purging of society’s baser impulses. By directing our idolatrous envy at a select few, we spare each other, Payne argues. Neither Hedges nor Payne focus on fan magazines, but they are good companions to Slide, providing needed theoretical context.

I expect Slide might accuse Hedges and Payne of reaching too far, reading too much into our harmless diversions. Perhaps he would be right. More likely, though, Slide is a bit too close to his subject and assumes that his readers are also fans. And then there is this: Although his book is full of footnotes, too often Slide suggests sources without actually citing them. More than once he writes words like, “It has been claimed...” without naming the claimer. This smells like someone who has been immersed in his topic so long and has such a rich personal history of engagement with others on this genre he loves that he cannot remember nor footnote the origin of important ideas about the fan magazine. And so his great strength, his deeply felt knowledge of his topic, becomes a drawback.

This is perhaps the pitfall of any analysis of celebrity culture. Who but a fan would *want* to gaze long and hard at this dazzling firmament? The problem in this field lies not in our stars but in ourselves.