

Research into 20th-century women's magazines

Confession Magazines



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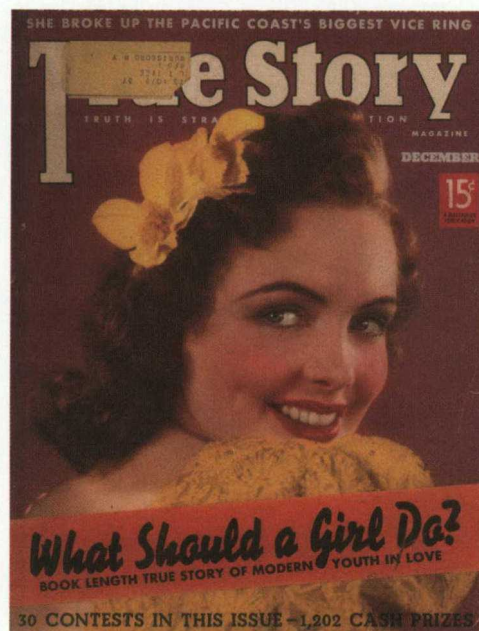
Polish true-confessions magazines are bolder than other women's journals at covering sensitive issues. The confessional formula makes it easier to cross discourse boundaries

"We've finally found a magazine where we can read about other women's lives, about how they deal with their problems." "It's not about showing off [...] how to be a good cook and how to dress nicely; it's about helping readers cope with everyday problems in a modern society." These two statements are separated by almost forty years - the first originating from a reader of the contemporary Polish magazine *Cienie i blaski* ["Shadows and Lights"], the latter from the editor of Britain's *True Magazine* in the early 1960s - yet they share a faith in the power of the written word. This is not about literary narrative or even advisory articles in the strict sense, but about "real-life stories": first-person confessional narratives talking about the difficulties, great misfortunes, and everyday toils faced by ordinary people. They constitute a separate genre of lower-shelf women's magazines, known as confession magazines. In Poland, such publications are described interchangeably as the "confession press," reflecting the Anglophone notion of "confession magazines" that touch on everyday problems of ordinary people, or alternatively as the "press of the heart," invoking the *press du coeur* concept popular throughout France, the Mediterranean and South America, largely saturated with sentimental and romantic notions.

Presse du coeur

The world's first confession magazine, *True Story*, was created in the US in 1919 by Bernarr

Macfadden, an eccentric millionaire publisher, fan of physical culture and healthy nutrition, sympathizer with Italian fascism, and a typical self-made man. Touching stories told in an intimate, confessional style, with a dose of sentimentality that exceeded the boundaries of both common sense and good taste, quickly brought the magazine enormous success; soon other journals copying the *True Story* format sprung up throughout Western Europe (in Poland, the first fortnightly confessional magazine *Z Życia Wzięte* ["Taken from Real Life"] finally arrived in 1995). They immediately gained wide circles of readers and aroused vehement aversion from self-proclaimed authorities of good taste and common sense. In France, communists and the Catholic Church joined forces to speak out against the country's own brand of romance magazines. In 1954, during a teleconference organized by Union Rationaliste, the magazines were branded a "blasphemy against the canons of reason" and Roland Barthes decried the magazine *Nous Deux* as more obscene than the works of Marquis de Sade. In the US, confession magazines were attacked by Polish-émigré writer Jerzy Kosiński, who accused them of promoting passive attitudes and unrealistic vi-



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The first confession magazine *True Story* was created in the US in 1919



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The weekly *Przyjaciółka*, published by *Czytelnik* since 1948, discusses everyday lives...

sions of love. Accusations of depravity, blurring boundaries between reality and fantasy, and a narcotic effect on their readers were widespread whenever and wherever such magazines were published.

Education and propaganda

But despite facing such disdain, contempt and even open hostility, from their earliest days confession magazines have been used as education and propaganda tools. Their potential was quickly appreciated, and it was noted that readers use them to look for “knowledge about life” and to air difficult, embarrassing problems that cannot be discussed elsewhere. The confessional formula allowed the writers to transcend the prevailing prohibitions on discourse, while the authority bestowed on the

narrator through her personal experience carried more weight. As a result, in the 1930s a paradoxical alliance was forged in the US (with the UK following suit not long after). Previously accused of promoting depravity, confessional tales became a tool for the National Florence Crittenton Mission, an organization associated with the Salvation Army, which offered support to unwed mothers. *True Story* started publishing stories suggesting who to turn to, where to go, who to confess the “trouble” to, how to redeem the guilt. The campaign was an enormous success, and was followed by propaganda for the war effort during the Second World War.

Social mission

After the war, confession magazines cautiously addressed various social problems, al-

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by instructional tales published in the women's magazine *Przyjaciółka* ["Best Friend"]. Stories in its "Joys and Sorrows" column provided advice on how to deal with an alcoholic husband, what to do if children did badly at school, or how to resolve a bad atmosphere at work; they gave addresses of public and social institutions providing assistance in difficult situations, offered cautious advice on delicate issues such as divorce, and taught readers to stand up for their rights in their family lives. In 1955 they became an element of *Przyjaciółka's* social campaign for the introduction of compulsory alimony. Stories of the difficulties faced by abandoned women and children, together with fragments of letters to the editor, were included in an open letter to the Minister of Justice and the Prosecutor General. In the 1950s, real-life stories served as an ideological tool for *Przyjaciółka's* editorial team; they were used to justify the communist authorities' decisions and present the new regime as benevolent. For instance, 1951 saw the publication of an entire series of tales explaining the rules of exchanging money and proclaiming the new advantages which were to be felt by working class families (availability of better food, radios, cinema tickets, and so on). Over time, the topics of these Polish woman's-journal stories became closer to the Western European standard. Subjects such as unwed mothers, division of roles in the family, and even sexual education of young people started appearing around the mid-1960s. Until late 1980s, the tales enjoyed huge popularity, and – just like their Western equivalents – they aimed to "reconcile readers with their own lives".

...and in its heyday reached a circulation of 3 million

though melodramatic themes enjoyed greater popularity. A return to the original formula of real-life stories as instructive and formative texts came about in Britain in the early 1960s, thanks to Patricia Lamburn, editor of *True Magazine*. She suggested a departure from romantic topics in favor of stories about "problems of everyday life" faced by ordinary women. She strongly supported "life counseling" and promoted her social mission by travelling round the British Isles, talking to housewives, and staying in close contact with social workers. These reformed real-life stories started touching on subjects such as religious and sexual differences, racism, domestic violence, and sexual discrimination. For young, working class women they were frequently the only source of information about sex and contraception.

Best friend in communist Poland

There were no bona fide confession magazines published in communist Poland; however, the real-life story function was performed

Struggles of capitalism

Fully-fledged true-confessions magazines did not appear in Poland until the publishing market became free following the collapse of communism. In 1995, the Wrocław-based company Phoenix Press Media started publishing the above-mentioned fortnightly magazine *Z Życia Wzięte*, which was soon joined by *Sukcesy i Porażki* ["Successes and Failures"] and the monthlies *Kalejdoskop Losów* ["Kaleidoscope of Fate"] and *Na ścieżkach życia* ["On the Paths of Life"].

Currently there are over a dozen such independent titles and supplements, and the market is not yet saturated. Real-life stories are extremely popular in Poland,

and although their influence is significantly lower than in the “pre-television” era, they are maintained in an instructive style. Kept in a first-person narrative of intimate confession, they tell tales of difficulties of everyday existence, suggest ways out of daily oppression, and provide advice on how to discuss delicate or controversial issues. The way they transmit this information is twofold: firstly, the narrators’ experiences offer a model to the readers for how they can solve their own problems, and secondly – the texts are often accompanied by comments from specialists such as doctors, lawyers, and social workers.

Information imparted by such real-life stories is a peculiar mixture. It faces modern realities, although – being deeply entrenched in common thinking – at the same time it remains true to traditional visions of the world rooted in popular religious ideas and common stereotypes. It is normative, suggesting how readers should make morally-sound choices, while at the same time justifying their mistakes. In essence what it imparts is not so much “knowledge about life” per se as an understanding of how to cope with or reconcile moral principles with the challenges of daily life. This allows confession magazines to be bolder than other women’s magazines at touching on sensitive issues such as abortion. Real-life stories present it in a way that removes the burden of responsibility from the narrators; necessity justifies them going against commonly-held moral and social principles. Extreme financial difficulties, unemployment, and a lack of prospects may all be cited to rationalize the decision to have an abortion, although the act itself is depicted as morally bad. However, the narrators are not punished, and their choice is presented as a tragic necessity. A similar scheme is present in Polish discourse about in vitro fertilization (IVF). Again, the medical procedure so strongly condemned by the Church is depicted as a deviation from the norm, going against hard-set rules, and the need to resort to it is a source of the narrators’ moral suffering. However, the power of the desire to have children is presented as sufficient justification.

Didactics in the background

First and foremost, contemporary real-life stories are intended as instructive and formative narratives, and their lack of literary

value is not a problem per se. In Poland, like elsewhere, they continue to use a confidential tone to tell tales of difficult lives, suggest where to look for support, indicate ways out of oppressive situations, and provide advice on how to deal with painful or embarrassing problems that are usually kept private. Polish confession magazines frequently deal with sensitive issues such as abortion, IVF, and homosexuality. They address difficult subjects and show readers how to talk about them or how to deal with painful or even traumatic experiences. The confessional formula sanctions the information with authority of experience, to convince readers that even if there is no ideal solution to the difficulties they face, they are at least equipped to cope with them. ■

Further reading:

- Stańczak-Wiślicz K. (2005). Przez historię życia codziennego do historii kobiet. O współczesnej polskiej historiografii kobiecej. [Through the History of Daily Life to the History of Women: On Modern Polish Women’s Historiography]. *Kultura i Społeczeństwo* 2, pp. 135-150.
- Barthes R. (1990). *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*. Penguin Books: London.



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During the communist era, the lifestyle magazine *Kobieta i Życie* [“Woman and Life”] served as a popular guide for women