

**new roles for women  
and the feminine mystique  
popular fiction of the 1940s**

maureen honey

The popular image of women workers during World War II is that they entered the labor force out of a patriotic desire to help win the war and that they voluntarily left their jobs for homemaking when they were no longer needed. As scholars have researched the war period, however, it has become clear that this image is almost completely false. In actuality, war work was a step up the occupational ladder for women, most of the new entrants to the labor force had prewar work experience, and most workers in war production wanted to keep their jobs.<sup>1</sup> The question I am addressing in this study is why American cultural values failed to reflect these realities and to take a more egalitarian direction as a result of the need for women in male occupations. Some researchers, in analyzing this problem, have indicated the important role propaganda played in falsifying the meaning of women's war work and in maintaining traditional beliefs within a context of radical changes in women's roles.<sup>2</sup> As enlightening as their work has been, no one has as yet indicated the larger lessons that can be learned about popular culture and attitudes toward women from examining the participation of fiction writers in the mobilization program. The campaign to mobilize women through popular fiction provides a model of how artists can attempt to consciously shape cultural values by embedding ideological goals into long-standing entertainment formulas. In this case, writers wove a wide range of propaganda goals into their stories, some of which conflicted with the interests of female readers, without losing a sense of what their audience wanted to hear. We can gain

from this case study, then, a clearer idea of how popular culture can misrepresent important aspects of its audience's experiences and needs yet maintain its appeal, as well as gain insight into the failure of the war to more fundamentally alter cultural assumptions about women and work.

I have focused on two major formulas with wide appeal for women: middle-class romances and working-class confession stories as they appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* and *True Story*, periodicals which published stories representative of all wartime women's magazine fiction. The *Post* was a best-selling magazine during the period with a circulation of over 3 million and was the most typical of middle-class family slicks. *True Story* was the leading confession magazine, selling over 2 million copies per issue and is representative of magazines aimed at working-class women.<sup>3</sup> I chose magazines with differing class perspectives in order to gain insight into the belief patterns of and influences on both middle-class and working-class women, as well as to determine whether special messages were aimed at a working-class audience, the group which furnished most of the workers for defense plants. To ensure a fair sampling, I read the lead story from each issue of the *Saturday Evening Post* and *True Story* from January, 1941 to March, 1946. To add depth to the sample, I read an additional 133 stories from the *Post* and 66 from *True Story* which seemed to concern war workers.

### the "womanpower" campaign

The campaign to recruit women into the labor force occurred through the Office of War Information (OWI), an elaborate bureaucracy set up in the summer of 1942 which was staffed with journalists, advertising executives and managers from the radio and film industries. While some people within OWI objected to overt propagandizing, they were overruled by advertisers and other media personnel who took charge soon after OWI was established. This move resulted in the use of everything from bubble gum cards to soap operas as propaganda for the war effort. It is important to recognize that the media were never forced into cooperating with the government to publicize home front campaigns. Indeed, they initiated efforts to establish contacts with war agencies in order to disseminate information Washington wanted spread. The magazine industry was no exception as publishers and editors pressured government officials to give them accurate information about the war front while telling them what needed to be done at home. In the spring of 1942, a representative was sent to New York from the Office of Facts and Figures, predecessor to OWI, in order to get some idea of how magazine editors felt about the proposed establishment of a magazine division. She found that they all favored the plan and believed it "long overdue." Because most could not afford to send correspondents to Washington, they suggested that someone regularly meet with them in New York and that they be sent "a regular memo as to themes the government wants stressed." This request resulted in a monthly brochure, the *Magazine War Guide*, which was published from

July, 1942 through April, 1945 and reached 400-600 magazines with a combined circulation of over 140 million.

Editors desired government direction to ensure that the war economy ran smoothly and to survive its dislocations. Publishers early on complained to OWI about what they perceived to be discriminatory policies toward magazines followed by the War Production Board and the War Manpower Commission. They felt they were not being given high enough priority in allotments of paper, regulations regarding labor power and access to transportation networks. They were particularly apprehensive about the possibility that some magazines might be banned by war agencies because they were considered superfluous to the business of a war economy. Representatives of the industry therefore relied on OWI to argue for the importance of magazines in shaping public opinion and welcomed any opportunity to put themselves at its service. As a result of the spring meetings with editors, the Magazine Bureau was established with the reorganization of government information offices in June, 1942.

The head of the Bureau, a former journalist named Dorothy Ducas, communicated regularly with the War Manpower Commission as well as the military in order to receive guidance on how the recruitment of women should be handled. In addition, she arranged meetings between editors, publishers and government officials to acquaint them with wartime policies while keeping them informed on publicity needs through correspondence, regular meetings with her staff and circulation of the *Guide*. From its beginnings, the Magazine Bureau made special efforts to involve fiction writers in OWI campaigns. In fact its central argument in the ultimately successful appeal to enlarge the staff was that magazines were ideal vehicles for shaping public opinion because they published fiction which could subtly generate desirable attitudes. Ducas made a point of contacting fiction writers, asking them to write stories which would make war work sound attractive to women readers while making a special request to the Bureau's Magazine Advisory Committee that editors publish fiction designed to weaken prejudice against working women.

Generating propanganda stories was made easier by the organization of formula writers in January, 1942 by mystery writer Rex Stout, an effort to put their talents at the service of the government. The Writers' War Board (WWB) consisted of a couple dozen popular writers who corresponded extensively with OWI, organized committees for treating special subjects and funneled Washington requests to 4,000 writers. The Board saw itself as an important tool for shaping public opinion, a perspective clearly evident in its first annual report: "Members of the Board are of different political views, but are united in the belief that the Board should furnish whole-hearted support of any measures which the government considers necessary to a speedy and complete victory over the Axis." (WWB First Annual Report, December 9, 1942) As writer Robert Landry later said: "I think we broke through a lot of taboos, did many things the government wanted done and could not itself do. . . . The government was slow; we were fast. . . . World War II was strangely unemotional and

needed a Writers' War Board to stir things up." Another writer of popular fiction, Clifton Fadiman, agreed, characterizing the Board as "an arm of the government."<sup>4</sup> Stout's group worked so closely with OWI that it was frequently mistaken for a government agency and, indeed, it received subsidies from both OWI and the Office of Civil Defense.

All indications are that the magazine industry took OWI requests seriously and, despite some opposition from writers and editors, saw no ethical problem with shaping articles, fiction and advertising to government determined ends.<sup>5</sup> OWI records show, for instance, that editors found the *Magazine War Guide* useful in determining thematic directions. They also demonstrate that the Bureau was pleased with the results of its own surveys which concluded that magazines were publishing stories in line with OWI campaigns. My research indicates that these surveys underestimated the amount of fiction which followed government guidelines, an understandable oversight given the small size of the staff. The *Post* and *True Story* played major roles in OWI's recruitment campaign and are representative of the activities of the magazine industry during this period. The *Post* was a member of the Magazine Advisory Committee to the Magazine Bureau, while Ducas boasted of having had "a great deal of success" in persuading confessions editors to support labor recruitment, mentioning the pleasant relationship she had established with *True Story* in particular. Further evidence that these magazines participated in the propaganda campaign is that the *Post* maintained links to the Writers' War Board, since it had long employed the services of many writers who joined the Board, including WWB organizer Rex Stout. While it is difficult to establish direct links between the WWB and a magazine like *True Story* because confessions writers are anonymous, the Board established confessions committees as part of its propaganda effort and distributed the special OWI supplement for confession magazines to its writers.

### the image of war workers in popular fiction

In days of peace, the really attractive numbers were to be found at senior proms, night clubs, beaches and even, occasionally, garden parties. War changed all that. The beautiful things are now discovered often wearing khaki or coveralls, driving recon cars at airfields, fitting gaskets in a war plant or piloting a packed bus on a downtown street.

("Parting is a Pain in the Neck" Robert Carson, 3/25/44, *Saturday Evening Post*)

The image of war workers which OWI wished the media to create resulted in part from the government's lack of commitment to permanently ending discriminatory hiring practices in high wage industries. While government and industry planners expressed concern over work conditions, equal wages, fair hours and adequate living quarters for women, it is obvious that they saw women's role as temporary and gave precedence to male workers. A key report produced by the War production Board's

Labor Division clearly indicates this perspective: “There is little doubt that women will be required to leave their jobs at the end of the war to permit the return of men to their jobs as they are released from the armed forces.”<sup>6</sup> What is significant about government and industry plans to meet the labor shortage is that they evidence no concern for the fate of women workers once peace was won. For example, in a study conducted by the National Industrial Conference Board, interviews with personnel men in war plants revealed that: “No consideration was given to the long-range social or economic desirability or implications of increased employment of women.”<sup>7</sup>

OWI did not ask writers to mislead the public about the ways in which women’s interests would not be served by this policy. Rather, the short-term orientation of government planners reinforced traditional views about the meaning of wage work in women’s lives; in short, that women did not have to earn a living and that their real role was in the home. This larger cultural assumption fed into another major aspect of wartime propaganda which ultimately undermined working women’s interests: the campaign to instill a sense of patriotic self-sacrifice in the population and to discourage individualistic attitudes. This approach grew out of a fear that civilians would fail to understand the connection between their daily lives, which in peacetime carried no larger social implication, and victory overseas. OWI tried to temporarily suppress the materialistic self-interest and ambition normally engendered by American ideals of individual freedom and prosperity in order to garner collective cooperation in home front campaigns. The war worker, as one of the most visible manifestations of wartime changes, became a powerful symbol of this collective spirit—national purpose, civilian dedication and home front support for soldiers. The British had recommended such an image in their advice to American policymakers searching for a way to recruit female workers: “While fixing the ‘will to win’ spirit, . . . that spirit must be translated into a sense of individual responsibility. The obvious baits of high wages or the security of the job were not used in our own propaganda. Wisely, the campaign was kept clear of the material appeal which is much less effective than that of service to the country in wartime.”<sup>8</sup>

Suggestions from the *Magazine War Guide* clearly follow the British approach, asking that writers encourage “war-mindedness” in civilians by identifying home front stoicism with soldier welfare: “Occasional articles showing the way in which typical American families have adjusted to the toughening-up process would be helpful. But chiefly we call it to your attention as the basic philosophy for stories dealing with present-day American life.” (*MWG*, December/January, 1943) Later, the *Guide* clarified the approach it wanted fiction writers to take to the portrayal of home front dislocations: “Fiction stories which are written *war-mindedly*, even when dealing with non-war subjects, stories that accept the changed standards of living that war creates as part of the ‘color’ and ‘background’ of the stories, are particularly valuable, as many magazines have already proved.” (*MWG*, March/April, 1943) Because writers were simul-

taneously asked to recruit women into war production, war worker heroines became the chief representatives of these proper home front attitudes, a perspective which blurred any focus on women's inalienable right to participate equally in the work world. At the same time, writers maintained the central element of popular romances: the winning of a stable loving attractive man. They were able to both create the kind of heroine OWI was looking for—a selfless tough-minded patriot—and keep the privatized fantasy of romantic love as the source of meaning in women's lives through featuring men who fell in love, not with beauty, but with patriotic fervor.

A story produced by the Writers' War Board illustrates this interweaving of personal concerns and the propaganda goal of gaining disciplined support for government programs. The *Post's* "Don't Talk About Love" (Phil Strong, 4/29/44) appeared as part of the spring "Women in the War" campaign in 1944. It features a college student, Hepzi Bradford, who, when her mother dies, leaves school to help her father with the family farm. This story line resulted from the many pleas made by the Magazine Bureau for magazines to recruit agricultural laborers. Hepzi also learns to shoot an anti-aircraft gun as part of her plane spotting duties for the Office of Civil Defense and serves voluntarily as the town's fire warden. In addition, she is a qualified Red Cross worker and sells war bonds in her spare time. She and her good friend Evelyn Leslie, who is also a plane spotter and volunteer war worker, are admired by two war heroes who fall in love with them. Contrasting with these hard working, patriotic characters is Evelyn's widowed mother who is selfish, lazy and interested mainly in finding a husband. Mrs. Leslie has no idea how to use ration points, plants a Victory Garden only because she wants to win a prize and pressures Evelyn not to join the WACs. The patriotic characters are clearly portrayed as more attractive people than the rather silly and pitiable slacker.

In order to generate "war-mindedness" in readers of stories specifically concerning recruitment of women workers, OWI suggested plots which featured heroines motivated by men to enter the labor force: "The rich girl who has never lacked anything finds herself denied luxuries, is resentful and proclaims it, is shown the error of her ways by the handsome young soldier from the other side of the tracks, with whom of course she falls in love." (Supplement for Love Story & Western Love Magazines, September, 1942) The *Post* published several stories which followed this theme. They featured a wealthy young woman who resents the sacrifices required of her in wartime until she realizes that men dislike her attitude. The heroine of "Lady Bountiful" (Robert Carson, 3/6/43) is typical of this characterization. She comes from a wealthy family, is selfish, immature and has a poor attitude toward wartime conditions: "War was an insidious presence. It was picking off the boys right and left. Pretty soon life would be exclusively devoted to the weaker sex." She offends the soldiers at a USO dance by making inappropriately cynical wisecracks about patriotism and by wearing flashy clothes; but eventually, chastened by her lack of

success with men, she takes an unglamorous clerical job at an Army base. By the end of the story, she has gained humility, compassion, “war-mindedness” and a sweetheart.

These stories followed OWI recommendations that writers show non-patriotic behavior as leading to romantic failure. “The girl might almost lose the boy because of her flippant, or perhaps resentful, attitude toward home front campaigns.” (Supplement for *Love Story & Western Love Magazines*, October, 1942) The following romance is typical of the way heroines who failed to put their country’s interest first found themselves ignored by soldiers. “My Own Money” (Gertrude Schweitzer, 5/6/44) concerns an aircraft worker, seventeen-year-old Candy Sherwin, who is earning high wages and enjoying the authority her salary brings her in the family. She feels like “somebody new and important.” However, the story makes clear that her new status is going to her head and that Candy does not have the proper attitude towards her role in the war effort. This message is conveyed when Candy squanders her money on a glamorous evening gown to impress her boyfriend with her new-found sense of adulthood while he visits her on leave. To her chagrin, the boyfriend ignores her until Mrs. Sherwin informs him that Candy’s sophisticated appearance belies the tough work she is doing:

“She works terribly hard, eight and ten hours every day. She’s got a real important job, making parts for airplanes, and it takes a lot out of her. When she’s through she’s good and tired, and she enjoys a quiet evening, don’t you, Candy?” “Yes,” Candy said weakly. “Yes, I do.” She looked at Jack and she saw his eyes change. “I didn’t know you made airplane parts. You never—I should say that is an important job. You must be pretty good.” His voice was warm and live and interested, and he put down the plate and grabbed her hand. It was the first time he had touched her. . . . He was looking at her in a different way now. He was looking at her as though she was somebody special.

The heroine’s delight in the power granted to her by a high salary is shown here to be selfish and immature. The soldier is alienated by her new image and responds positively only when he learns that she is performing a key job in war production. Not only does the story discourage war workers from spending their money (to discourage consumption of scarce consumer goods) but conveys the idea that they should view their role as one of duty to the men overseas, not as an opportunity for exercising personal power.

Confessions writers also centered recruitment stories upon patriotic workers whose dedication was rewarded with romance. Unlike her middle-class counterpart, however, the confessions war worker was frequently encouraged to put her country’s interests ahead of her own, not by a soldier, but by a male worker, supervisor or company owner’s son who leads her to view herself as part of the working class army: “The poor girl, meeting conditions with courage and ingenuity, showing her community, perhaps, how to cooperate in lessening common sacrifice, demonstrates to the rich young man her superiority to the gals of his own milieu.”

(Supplement for *Love Story* and *Western Love Magazines*, September, 1942) In “Young Girl’s Secret” (October, 1943), for instance, the narrator is a disgruntled secretary at an aircraft plant who resents her transfer from a well-paying assembly line job to the office. Because her new job is less glamorous and interesting than what she had been doing before, it is difficult for her to feel much enthusiasm for her work. Gradually, however, her supervisor’s appreciation of her importance sheds new light on the situation and her excitement mounts as she comes to feel part of a worthy cause: “All the world seemed filled with high endeavor; the noise of the factory an articulate voice, saying: more planes, more planes, more planes—we’re making them, we’re building them, we’re sending them out. I looked with pride at the lists which came into my hands, and often I would glance up and see the pride in Courtney Atwell’s eyes.” As a result, she adopts a willingness to do whatever she is asked in order to help her country: “Whenever I’m most needed, wherever I can be the most help—that’s all I want.” Pleased with her subordination of her own wishes to those of the company, the boss approvingly replies: “That’s the spirit . . . that will win this war.”

Similarly, in “The Education of John Manley by a Girl” (September, 1943), a skilled metal worker convinces the narrator that she ought to abandon her college plans and take a factory job. Though initially upset by the noise and unfamiliar work at the aircraft plant, she is persuaded to stay when the larger purpose of the enterprise becomes clear to her: “. . . suddenly the patriotism that John had publicized awoke in me and flamed in a flower of radiance. When I stood beside a machine, the machine achieved not only vitality but immortality, and gadgets that I passed to the operator of the machine became the food with which it was nourished, and I told myself that when it had been fed sufficiently it would have the strength to gobble up opposition—yellow opposition with slanted eyes, square-headed, ruthless opposition that spoke in gutterals. As I felt muscles tightening in my grease-covered arms, I felt something intangible tightening in the arms of my spirit.” Another aircraft worker whose work is singled out for praise by the company president displays the same kind of pride in viewing her role as that of a soldier of industry:

I was so thrilled to be learning aircraft production that I didn’t know anything else existed. The big Commanche Training Center . . . was the most glamorous place in the world to me. I thought nothing could be more deeply satisfying than to shape a piece of shining aluminum—carefully, conscientiously—knowing that a man’s life might depend on the skill of my hands . . . When my class finished the basic training I was so proud I thought I’d burst. (“Each Moment a Memory,” March, 1943)

When forced by loyalty to her job to separate from her fiancé, this character subsumes love of man to patriotic duty: “We didn’t say good-by. We said, ‘Keep ‘em flying.’ For we must turn out our hopes in shining aluminum. Build our dreams into winged weapons for our fighting men.”

While middle-class heroines were similarly portrayed as energetic hard



workers, eager to do their part, confession stories glorified war workers as sterling representatives of the working class who toiled hand-in-hand with management to defeat a vicious enemy. They were far more fervent in their dedication to the cause, more inclined to subordinate self to demands of employers. This heightened emphasis on loyalty to the company reflects OWI's concern that workers not create disruptions through absenteeism, carelessness or high job turn-over rates, all of which were serious problems during the war. It therefore asked writers to encourage a patriotic attitude in working-class readers, one which would help stabilize the wartime labor force. In a memo concerning the pulps, a category which included the confessions and which attracted a blue-collar audience, Dorothy Ducas explained that she thought it crucial for propaganda to lead pulp readers into supporting home-front campaigns. She advocated that plots present "emotionally, the story of democracy's fight, the attitudes of good Americans, the stakes of all of us in the war." (Memo, July 15, 1942) Leo Rosten, Deputy Director of OWI, expressed similar sentiments when he addressed a meeting of pulp editors: "Pulp magazines reach one of the largest and most important audiences in America. Propaganda is aimed to hit the readers of pulp magazines more than any other group." (Editors Conference Report, April 5, 1943) Feeling it was vital that confessions readers develop a sense of solidarity with the nation as a whole, the Magazine Bureau urged writers to glorify blue-collar workers as defenders of democracy: "Fiction should bring out the . . . spiritual satisfaction of serving the common cause." (Supplement for *Love Story & Western Love Magazines*, September, 1942) The portrayal of super patriots in *True Story*, then, spoke to the government's desire for a loyal and productive workforce, one which would identify the country's interests with its own.

### reconversion

In what way did OWI support the massive lay-offs of women workers and the channeling of women into the low wage jobs during reconversion? A definitive answer to this question is made somewhat difficult by the fact that there was a slowdown of OWI activities in late 1944 when the War Manpower Commission asked that recruiting efforts be stopped. OWI was also hampered during reconversion by congressional budget cuts and Republican attacks on the propaganda operation as a tool of the Democratic party.<sup>9</sup> After the "Women in the War" campaign of early 1944, OWI failed to launch any other major drives. With adequate funding, it is conceivable that it would have provided the media with more detailed instructions for dealing with reconversion, in particular for handling demobilization of the wartime labor force.

This slowdown did not mean, however, that OWI failed to address the issue. The Magazine Bureau continued publication of the *Magazine War Guide* from June, 1944 to August, 1945, and the Writers' War Board remained very active until the spring of 1946, determined to carry on despite OWI's enfeeblement. While it never tackled the issue of reconver-

sion in a clear and comprehensive way, the *Guide* did inform magazines that the best fields for women in the postwar market would be in traditional female areas: teaching, nursing and clerical work. In addition, it dropped the campaigns to generate positive attitudes toward child care centers and to develop ways for women to cut down their hours of housework. These items were replaced by suggestions that magazines concentrate on the “new national problem” of juvenile delinquency, one of the social ills blamed on working mothers and one of the major weapons used to turn the public against women war workers. Finally, it urged magazines to acquaint the public with ways to help veterans adjust to peacetime while ignoring the problems of discharged women.

In the absence of explicit government directions for handling demobilization of the female workforce, those who had written propaganda continued to operate from an ideological framework which emphasized temporary patriotic service over self-advancement. The assumption that women’s role was to help out in an emergency while keeping soldiers’ interests of paramount concern led naturally to the conclusion that they ought to leave once the emergency was over and help veterans adjust to civilian life. In addition, just as writers had found in women workers a convenient symbol of collective strength during the mobilization of civilians, so now did they find in that figure the embodiment of peace: a tender nurturant family woman.

The domestication of the war working heroine was most marked in the *Post* wherein women who had performed competently in challenging war jobs were shown yearning for a life at home. A common figure was the stoic tough-minded worker who gladly turned in her factory overalls or blue-collar uniform for a “normal” life that revolved around a family. In “Taxi Taxi” (Clarence Budington Kelland, 4/14/45), the heroine, after destroying an international spy ring and successfully managing her absent brother’s taxi fleet during the war, dreams of presiding over her own home: “No taxi-cabs, no telephones. Just a home and a long, drooping, sleepy man coming to it each evening and leaving each morning. And maybe some dratted kids.” Likewise a female aeronautical engineer and pilot in “Mission for Henry” (Robert Carson, 7/21/45) is pleased when the soldier protagonist anticipates her transformation into a homemaker: “I keep visualizing you in a rose-covered back yard, wearing simple coveralls and designing a baby carriage with retractable wheels.” Stories concerning war workers did not portray them performing competently in their war jobs but as performing maternal tasks. For instance, “The Reconversion of Johnny” (James C. Lynch, 7/14/45) is a story about an aircraft worker and former WAC who is an expert in bomber instruments. However, we do not see her performing mechanical skilled tasks but instead caring for her deceased sister’s baby whom she has been forced to bring to the plant with her. Similarly, in “Diapers for Flight Six” (Win Books, 3/30/46), the heroine is a pilot and a former poster model for military recruitment, but she is now employed as a stewardess. The story concerns her efforts to care for an abandoned baby on board, and the

pilot's reaction indicates the postwar shift in defining female attractiveness: "Hanscomb looked good holding the baby, dim-eyed and sweet and motherly . . . Ladies should be having babies, not flying all around the country . . . Hanscomb wasn't a Career Girl, after all."

Rather than publish narratives dealing with the transformation of factory workers into homebodies, *True Story* editors focused on returning veterans as the primary subject of the reconversion period with women functioning as their nurturers. A typical story is "The Return of Johnny Williams" (April, 1945) which is narrated by a veteran. He has difficulty adjusting to civilian life as everything seems different to him. He cannot find a comfortable role, and it is especially hard for him to accept being a mere assembly line worker after having been an Army captain. Though he has a devoted wife and a healthy baby, life appears dull and meaningless. With the help of a sympathetic friend, however, and the patience of his wife, he successfully reorients himself. The focus of such stories was on male confusion over peacetime identity, a logical extension of propagandists' portrayal of women as responsible primarily for soldier welfare. Ironically, then, writers of middle-class fiction paid more attention to changes in women's status than did those of the confessions which were geared to an audience far more likely to be involved in war work, although non-fiction sections of the magazine advised readers to quit war jobs. Perhaps fiction writers found it impossible to handle the subject of war workers within the sin-suffer-repeat formula and therefore chose to fall back on the standard problems of young wives and single women. One difficulty with telling a confession story about workers returning home, for instance, is that characters who had been portrayed as patriots would tend to have been cast as wrongdoers, a move that writers might have been reluctant to make at a time when war workers functioned as symbols of national strength. Although the theme of working women as destroyers of the family did appear at this time, it centered on the safer stereotype of the ambitious career woman, a variation common to the confession formula prior to the recruitment campaign.

## conclusion

In both magazines, the impression given by writers as the war drew to a close was that the role of women in the postwar world would be that of family caretaker, one in which there was no room for satisfying public work. This was a theme which developed logically out of OWI's campaign to recruit women as emergency laborers and to whip up public support for all home front activities through using war workers as symbols of wartime sacrifice. These goals were incorporated into media with wide appeal to a female audience stratified by class and the resulting themes reflected differing strategies for reaching the two audiences: middle-class characters gave up a carefree luxurious existence to find success in romance, and confessions heroines put aside self-interested goals in order to become

dutiful workers, gaining self-esteem through feeling a part of the mobilization effort.

Though not intended to mislead the public, both images falsified much about the meaning of women's participation in the wartime economy. For professional women, the war provided opportunities to become newspaper editors, personnel managers, pilots, engineers and to enter other occupational roles offering creativity, power and status. For working-class women, it lowered barriers against employment in high wage durable goods industries with chances for advancement. In a typical war production center like Detroit, for example, the average weekly take-home earnings of women in war industries was \$40.35 whereas those of women in laundries, restaurants, hotels, retail and wholesale trade and consumer goods ranged from \$24.10 to \$29.75. It was largely the incentive of such increases that drew 50 percent of all women in trade and personal service to war manufacture.<sup>10</sup> Undoubtedly, some women entered the labor force out of patriotism, but the majority worked for economic reasons even if they wanted to help win the war as well. The Women's Bureau, for instance, found that most women employed in war production areas had work histories pre-dating Pearl Harbor, with most having been forced into homemaking by the Depression: "When war conditions created the need for their work and an opportunity for employment, they again took their place among the working women. Despite the influx of many newcomers into the labor market during the war period, the group of wartime-employed women contained a markedly high proportion of women with extended work experience. Wartime employment for these women was not, therefore, a venture into something new but rather part of their continuing work experience."<sup>11</sup>

Further evidence that women took war jobs for reasons other than patriotic service is provided by a Women's Bureau survey conducted in 1944, which showed that 75 percent of women in war industries wanted to keep their jobs, including 50 percent of those who had described themselves as homemakers previously.<sup>12</sup> Far from looking forward to leaving the grind of factory work, such surveys indicate that women did not intend to leave the labor force. Indeed, three out of the five million new workers continued to work in the postwar period but in less desirable positions. The Women's Bureau described these workers as "reluctant to return to household work [paid domestic work], and also to other services, and to the more unattractive and low-paid clerical and manufacturing jobs as well."<sup>13</sup> These were, however, the jobs primarily available to them. The image of the war worker's heroic service to the nation with her subsequent "return to the home" belied the reality of women's resistance to losing their improved status in the workforce.

The imperatives of wartime propaganda coupled with the government's erroneous assumptions about working women resulted in a distorted picture of women in war plants, an image which failed to develop the egalitarian implications of women in male occupations. However, I reject the notion that wartime ideology was a purely top-down phe-

nomenon which manipulated a gullible audience into betraying its own interests. For one thing, we have evidence that women employed in defense plants protested and resisted their lay-offs, a move they would not have made had they entirely bought the patriotic propaganda and the domesticity dreams of the reconversion period.<sup>14</sup> Clearly, economic imperatives and the fulfillment of doing skilled work exerted a greater influence on women who had advanced during the war than did propaganda. In addition, war workers who were ignored by the media considered here—such as black women—obviously had little reason to respond to the appeals being generated.

Secondly, in the area of popular fiction at least, writers could not afford to impose an alien ideology on their readers. Therefore we must assume that some of the elements we find in wartime fiction accurately reflected the desires and feelings of many women. While we can attribute some of the themes to that portion of the audience which failed to enter the labor force, not all of the emphasis on patriotism, love and postwar domesticity can be said to reflect the views of a homebound readership. Many consumers of popular magazines were wage earners, particularly of confessions. Given the long-standing appeal of these formulas with their emphasis on winning the love of a stable attractive man and the benefits of homemaking, it is clear that most women have located their identities largely in marriage rather than careers, an understandable perspective given the dismal job opportunities normally available to them. Wartime fiction demonstrates that male love and happy homes remained important to women, even though wage earners desired good jobs. What we need to recognize is that popular fiction accurately mirrored only those aspects of women's lives which were compatible with an ideological framework that rested on traditional values and propaganda goals. As a result, though women workers desired a fulfilling private life *and* rewarding employment, fiction reflected the former while rendering the other in terms that conformed to government needs and expectations. In similar fashion, the patriotic hyperbole represented real responses to new work opportunities but in a way that distorted that reality in order to weld the home front into a fighting unit. For instance, since women were able to earn high wages in heavy industry, and were aware of how important their products were to the nation, it makes sense that their increased fulfillment would find expression in stories of enthusiastic proud factory workers. This pride, however, was portrayed as stemming from self-abnegating, male oriented motives rather than from earning good wages or doing skilled work. The message conveyed was that economic factors or the desire to have interesting work play no part in women's lives; rather their fulfillment lies in service to others. This message undercut the idea that women could competently fill any job a man could and therefore should be integrated into the male work world.

To recognize the complexity of the way propaganda interacted with female aspirations during the war, however, is not to deny that it had damaging effects on working women. Though war workers may not have

been convinced that their role was to come into defense plants only to support the country and the men in their lives, the fact that the media conveyed this message almost certainly persuaded the public as a whole that this is what the wartime employment of women signified since most would have had no personal experience which countered the prevailing image. This conclusion is partially supported by opinion polls conducted in 1943 and 1946 which show that the public felt men were more entitled to a job than women, who were perceived as primarily responsible for the well-being of their families, and that a woman running a home had a more interesting job than one with wage work.<sup>15</sup> Because propaganda reinforced widespread beliefs about traditional gender divisions, laid-off women could not use popular support in their attempts to be rehired in comparable jobs. Although the distortions of propaganda resulted from a host of factors more complicated than a simple conspiracy to exploit women, the lack of a congenial ideological framework undoubtedly made it more difficult for workers to mount an effective defense of their rights.

The use of popular fiction as propaganda sheds light on some of the cultural factors that prevented women's progressive role in the wartime labor force from changing public conceptions about their place in American life as well as on the properties of popular culture. Specifically, the campaign to mold civilians into a domestic economic army dovetailed with plans to temporarily employ women in nontraditional jobs. As a result, war workers were given a symbolic role first as caretakers of the nation in danger, then as menders of the social fabric in victory. Writers were able to integrate mobilization propaganda into plots designed for pure entertainment, to attempt a kind of social engineering through using frameworks with proven appeal. Whether this attempt produced the desired changes in attitude and behavior is perhaps impossible to prove, although some conclude that implicit messages are especially effective because they are not consciously analyzed.<sup>16</sup> What is more important for us to recognize from the activities of wartime writers is that popular culture can mesh the needs of a mass audience for satisfying fantasies with social goals of which that audience is largely unaware and which may reinforce myths destructive to its interests.

University of Nebraska—Lincoln

## notes

This article is based on analysis of archival records from the Office of War Information, 1942-1945, Record Group 208, National Records Center, Suitland, Maryland. Because of space limitations, I have omitted full citation to these records but will be happy to provide it upon request.

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3. Theodore Peterson, *Magazines in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964), 183, 302.
4. Robert Howell, "The Writers' War Board: Writers and World War II" (Ph.D. dissertation, Louisiana State and Agricultural and Mechanical College, 1971), 58.
5. This opposition is noted in Allan Winkler, "Politics and Propaganda: The Office of War Information, 1942-1945" (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1974), 73-80.
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11. *Ibid*, 4.
12. *Ibid*, 11-12.
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16. Frank Fox, *Madison Avenue Goes to War*, Charles E. Merrill Monograph Series (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), 11.