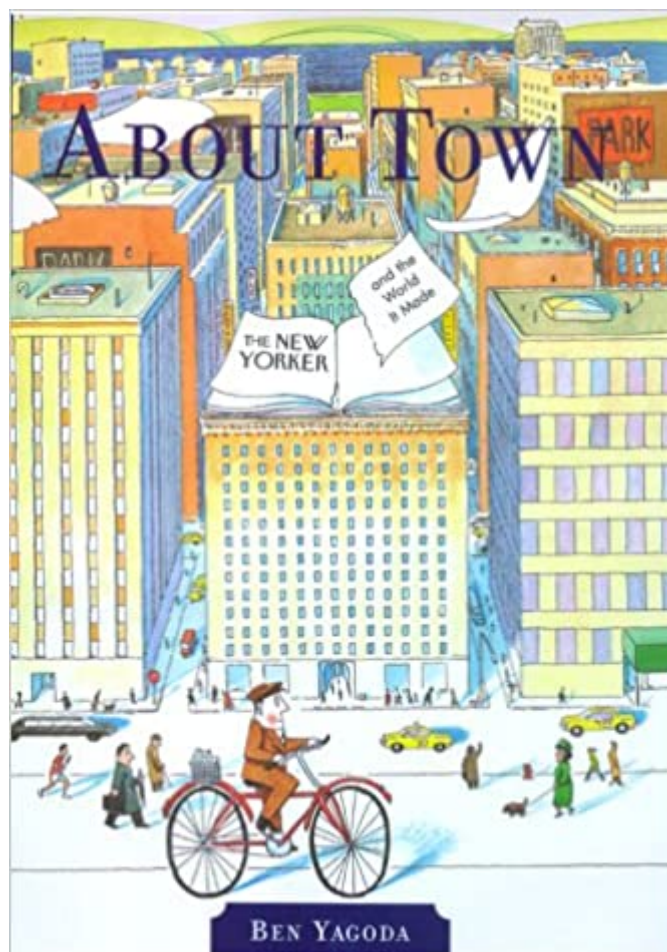


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# About Town: The New Yorker And The World It Made (First Edition)



## Synopsis

Published to coincide with The New Yorker's 75th anniversary, this major work of cultural history draws on never-before-seen archives and offers a comprehensive look at this revered magazine's fascinating evolution. 40 cartoons. 40 photos.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"The New Yorker will be the magazine which is not edited for the old lady in Dubuque." This now-famous line first appeared in the prospectus Harold Ross wrote for a humor magazine he was hoping to start, and, in fact, epitomized the publication's early years. For, as contributing editor E.B. White once ruefully wrote in response to a query about what kind of submissions were wanted, "I myself have only the vaguest idea what sort of manuscripts The New Yorker wants. I have, however, a pretty clear idea of what it doesn't want." Plenty of books have been written about The New Yorker over the years--many by people who were intimately connected with it. Ben Yagoda's *About Town* is the first, however, to concentrate on the magazine itself, rather than the personalities who shaped it. In his introduction Yagoda writes: "What I had in mind was a critical and cultural history. It would consider, first, the content of the magazine--how its original form came to be, and how and why it evolved over the years. Second, I would look at the role the New Yorker has played in American cultural life." Yagoda is as good as his word as he takes readers from the founding of the magazine in 1919 up until 1987, the year William Shawn was forcibly retired from his position as editor in chief. An epilogue covers the Robert Gottlieb, Tina Brown, and David Remnick years, but

the author considers that with Shawn's departure, the curtain came down on The New Yorker as "a unique and influential institution in our culture." Of course devotees of Harold Ross's brainchild could be expected to eat this book up, but *About Town* is more than just the story of how a magazine was made. Yagoda provides a window on a lost age--New York in the '20s, '30s, and '40s before the advent of television, when magazines and newspapers were at the center of the nation's cultural and intellectual life. He writes well, evoking the times, the people, and the places with such clarity that Harold Ross himself would have been pleased. And it is to Ross that Yagoda and the reader owe much of *About Town*, for it seems The New Yorker's founding editor kept meticulous records--as did those with whom he worked. When S.I. Newhouse took control of the magazine in 1985, its editorial files--all 2,500 archival boxes of them--ended up at the New York Public Library. Letters from editors to writers and vice versa, minutes from art meetings, memos, editorial queries, and marked-up manuscripts are the raw materials from which Yagoda shapes his story, and he tells it so well that it often reads like a novel. The section dealing with the magazine's decision to run John Hersey's *Hiroshima* in its entirety is positively gripping. But perhaps the best thing about *About Town*--for those readers who, like Alice in Wonderland, demand pictures and conversations in their stories--is the plethora of memorable quotes (and even a few photographs) that bring to life The New Yorker in its heyday. Consider this letter from Vladimir Nabokov concerning a short story the magazine had bought: A man called Ross started to "edit" it, and I wrote to Mrs. White telling her that I could not accept any of those ridiculous and exasperating alterations (odds and ends inserted in order to "link up" ideas and make them clear to the "average reader"). Nothing like it has ever happened to me in my life. Or this snippet from Ross's letter to H.L. Mencken: "We have carried editing to a very high degree of fussiness here, probably to a point approaching the ultimate. I don't know how to get it under control." Lovers of The New Yorker can thank their stars that Harold Ross never did get his fussiness under control. And they can thank Ben Yagoda for writing this comprehensive and satisfying biography of one of America's most enduring literary institutions.

--Alix Wilber

Based on the recently opened New Yorker archives, Yagoda's compelling if slow-moving volume follows the workings and fortunes of the famous weekly magazine. Yagoda begins in 1924, just before the New Yorker's start as a humor journal. Founder Harold Ross's stylistic conservatism, his meticulous editing and his ability to delegate authority helped build up the magazine, creating what Yagoda considers its Golden Age in the late 1930s. WWII gave it new reach and seriousness. William Shawn's ascent to editor-in-chief in 1951 brought, at first, a prosperous complacency; his

devotion to serious, long essays, and editor Roger Angell's eye for new fiction, created in the '70s, Yagoda argues, the magazine's second great period. But Shawn's eccentric secretiveness, his odd financial arrangements with writers and his unwillingness to allot power laid the grounds for the New Yorker's latter-day troubles. (A brief epilogue covers events after 1987, the year of the 79-year-old Shawn's dismissal.) "Whole new graphic and literary genres"--the long profile, John O'Hara's short stories, James Thurber's humor, Roz Chast's cartoons--"would not have come to be without the New Yorker

Long before David Remnick was a bright and talented schoolboy in River Vale, NJ the New Yorker and its leadership were setting the standard of what good writing should be. It turns out that he is a worthy successor to those editorial giants. H may very well surpass them.

The book was delivered quickly and it was in the promised condition. Looking forward to reading it. As soon as I finish the other three books in front of it in the queue.

There are two types of writers: those who aspire, no, dream of being published in the "New Yorker", and those who, after several rejections, bitterly deride the very institution they hoped to conquer. I am solidly of the first camp, though give it a few years and I might be a latter-day grouch. The work of Ben Yagoda brings the magazine alive, from the heyday of such luminaries as Thurber and White to the tough war years, right up through the Shawn era and even right up to (for 1999) the present. Through it all, Yagoda examines the many lives who devoted themselves to this literary exercise in humor and good faith. The most compelling character studies, however, are the two main editors throughout the magazine's history, Harold Ross and William Shawn. Ross, who founded the magazine in 1925 and managed it through its first twenty-six years, comes across as a gruff, thoroughly Western man who nonetheless saw the need for a magazine like "The New Yorker", and brought it to being through sheer will and fortitude. He also happened to publish significant works by James Thurber, E.B. White, and J.D. Salinger among others. Shawn, taking the reins after Ross's death in 1951, saw the magazine through 30+ years of challenge and triumph, only to be forced out in 1987. Throughout the book, Yagoda makes these men the central focus of his tale, but he includes brief looks at literary and other lights of the twentieth century, some who did get published (like Donald Barthleme, Veronica Geng, and John Updike) and some who didn't (Tom Wolfe, whose scandalous expose on the magazine shook it out of its fuddiness). Overall, the book looks fondly back at the magazine's past, with a hint that it might never reach the same heights of importance it

once had. That may very well be, but there's still something to be said for a magazine that is such an institution no one could imagine starting a writing career without considering the possibility of submitting to it. "The New Yorker" is still the premier magazine in America, and this book explains why, after almost a century, it still carries the weight it does.

I agree with Jack Olsen, who felt this lengthy book wasn't long enough. I spent several nights reading much later into the night than I should have -- and paid for it the following mornings -- but I was extremely sorry when I finished "About Town." Reviewers such as John Leonard in the New York Times Book Review have rightfully lauded Mr. Yagoda for his extensive research in The New Yorker archives. Equally impressive, though, is the acute critical judgement Yagoda brings to bear on the non-fiction, short stories, poems and cartoons that have defined the magazine -- either by their inclusion or exclusion. In meshing the archival letters and notes between writers and editors with his own hard-won views of the magazine's contents and the artists who created them, Yagoda in effect has created and orchestrated a book-length conversation and meditation on good writing. "About Town" is so well written, and so rich in anecdote, telling detail and, with a nod toward New Yorker editor/founder Harold Ross, the beauty of fact, that if it weren't ABOUT The New Yorker I suspect that it would have been accepted for excerpting by the magazine's long-gone original regime. For those like me who finish the book wanting more, the only solace is that, in a sense, you can continue the conversation about good writing with Yagoda by revisiting the works and authors he dissects. I'm looking forward, for instance, to rooting out Peter Taylor's early stories -- I'm familiar with his classic later works -- checking out writers with whom I am unfamiliar, such as Irwin Shaw, and to re-reading some Cheever to follow the evolution outlined by Yagoda. In this continuing quest, good places to start are the collections of short stories ("Wonderful Town") and profiles ("Life Stories") edited by current New Yorker editor David Remnick. Also, check out "The Art of Fact: A Historical Anthology of Literary Journalism" co-edited by Yagoda which includes selections from many New Yorker stalwarts. Years ago one of the magazine's former stalwarts, John McPhee, wrote an article about the farmers' markets in New York City, where customers could be assured of getting their money's worth -- and then some -- from the rural farmers who manned the stands. He titled it, and a subsequent collection, "Giving Good Weight." In "About Town," Ben Yagoda gives good weight.

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