
OTHER TITLES

History

FABLES OF ABUNDANCE: A Cultural History of Modern Advertising. By T. J. Jackson Lears. Basic. 492 pp. \$30

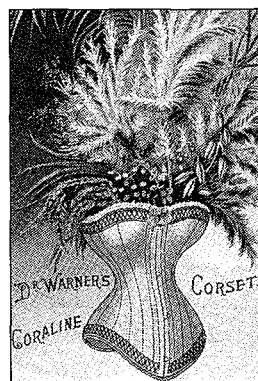
Jackson Lears's fascinating history of advertising is really two books in one. The first tells the story of how, around the turn of the last century, advertisers put their Barnumesque past behind them and remade themselves as professionals. Distancing themselves from patent-medicine salesmen and itinerant peddlers, the new breed of advertisers traded old-fashioned images of plenty and a carnival rhetoric for a technocratic language of efficiency and control. Contrary to popular opinion, the consumer culture they created did not promote hedonism; instead, it subordinated longings for a bountiful agricultural paradise to the demands of modern industry. This 1909 counsel from the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency handbook might have served as a kind of manifesto: "The chief work of civilization is to eliminate chance, and that can be done by foreseeing and planning."

As Roland Marchand did in *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (1985), Lears emphasizes the role of advertising in promoting a scientifically managed world. In this brave new world, expert authorities and mass-produced commodities combined to dispel the uncertainties not only of a market economy but of the human condition. Advertisements repeatedly stressed the victory of a scientific civilization over the limits of nature, including human nature. Early-20th-century ads were obsessed with bodily odors, slimness, and intestinal "regularity," and suggested that a "unified, controlled, sincere selfhood" was necessary to successful competition in the modern marketplace. In 1926, *Guardian Memorials* carried this strain of advertising to its logical conclusion: "The thought of its clean, dry, airy above ground crypt is a constant consolation to those still living."

Lears has done more, however, than remake the case against advertising's vision of a sanitized world of happy, robotic consum-

ers. His other story is that of late-19th- and early-20th-century writers and artists who formulated similar critiques of modern consumerism. Marcel Proust, Rainer Maria Rilke, and artists such as Kurt Schwitters, the abstract expressionists, and—above all—Joseph Cornell objected to the advertising culture of consumerism not for its materialism but for its careless betrayal of the material world. "The materialism promoted by advertisers was antimaterial," Lears writes; "the success of the corporate economy depended less on the esteem accorded material things than on the constant restimulation of the desire for more of them." Lears describes artists such as Cornell (1902-72), a semirecluse in Flushing, New York, who made surreal boxes filled with the paraphernalia of everyday life—stuffed birds, buttons, toys, fragments of old theatrical posters—juxtaposed and treated with the moral authority of religious icons. To counter modern advertising's drive for mastery over nature, Cornell revived an irrational, "magical" outlook that valued apparently useless objects and attempted to reconnect dreams and reality, "matter and spirit, thoughts and things."

Lears's two stories—of advertising as an agent of bureaucratic order and of the artistic counterappeal to a holistic worldview—coexist uneasily in this volume. Indeed, Lears seems less interested in reconstructing the rise of the advertising profession than in probing the spiritual resources of artistic modernism. What inspire Lears at his best are not the conceptual boxes of social history but the actual boxes in which Cornell assembled a more sensuous and fantastic private world. By reconstructing this subterranean celebration of animism and hedonism in modern American culture, Lears brilliantly redefines the debate about con-



sumer culture and, in the process, establishes himself as a profound and original cultural critic in his own right. *Fables of Abundance* is a rare picture of an intellectual searching for fresh, new ground on which to stand as an interpreter of modern life.

THE PRIVATE LIFE OF CHAIRMAN MAO: The Memoirs of Mao's Personal Physician. By Li Zhisui. With the editorial assistance of Anne F. Thurston. Trans. by Tai Hung-chao. Random House. 682 pp. \$30
BURYING MAO: Chinese Politics in the Age of Deng Xiaoping. By Richard Baum. Princeton. 489 pp. \$35

Ever since Mao Zedong officially founded the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949, the inner workings of its political system have remained clouded in mystery. Two new books plumb that mystery and uncover, at bottom, a large irony: a country supposedly governed by ironclad ideology was buffeted this way and that by a few men's personal whims.

Li Zhisui was Mao's personal physician (his great-grandfather had also been physician to a Chinese emperor), but his story of Mao's private life belongs less to medical annals than to the *National Enquirer*. Mao's insatiable appetite for young women (he passed on venereal disease to hundreds of them), his slovenly personal habits (he neither bathed nor brushed his teeth), his drug addiction, and his extravagant "imperial" processions from city to city hardly fit his once-popular image as an ascetic, ideologically inspired patriot. Convinced that Chairman knows best, Mao trusted few and worked closely with no one. When thwarted, he would contemplate returning to the mountains to launch a new guerrilla campaign. He seems to have enjoyed few things as much as the terror and chaos caused by his Cultural Revolution (1965-68).

But can this tale, with its lurid sex and the relentless pettiness of Mao and his vicious, self-indulgent wife, Jiang Qing, be entirely believed? Anne Thurston, a noted China authority, has

shaped and written much of the book, and her contribution gives a creditable historical background to Li's anecdotes. Li's source materials, his diaries, were burned in 1966, yet he asks the reader to accept verbatim dialogues as well as minutely observed details of events he could not have personally witnessed. Nor can Li qualify as an unbiased observer when it is obvious that he allowed few standards, political or ethical, to interfere with his role as Mao's physician, confidante, and servant.

Baum, a political scientist at UCLA, readily admits that he is using limited and questionable documents, but he nevertheless manages to construct a richly textured and convincing portrait of the political transformation that ensued after Mao's death in 1976 at the age of 82. Deng Xiaoping, the master manipulator, demonstrated again the centrality of personal control in China, and during his reign the scheming of factions and rivals customarily took the place of policy debates. It was, after all, his ambivalence about market reforms and political liberalization that led to the Tiananmen Square massacre in June 1989. Deng is now 90 years old and sick, and the People's Republic stands on a precipice once more, with few institutions in place that can guarantee stability, economic reform, political change, or even the shunning of nationalistic militarism. Baum makes clear that Deng's one-man show has been better for China than was Mao's. But Deng, too, has cast the Chinese people adrift in complex and dangerous circumstances, being no more willing than Mao to trust China's fate to independent political processes he cannot dominate.

THE SOUTHERN TRADITION: The Achievement and Limitations of an American Conservatism. By Eugene D. Genovese. Harvard. 138 pp. \$22.50

If any more evidence is needed that the end of the Cold War turned the world upside down, this book should do it. It is not so much the author's argument that "southern conserva-