

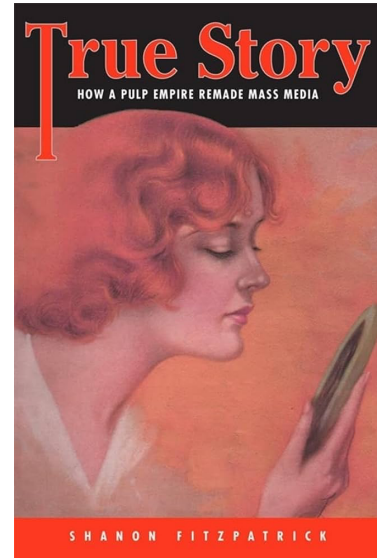
Shanon Fitzpatrick, **True Story: How a Pulp Empire Remade Mass Media**, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022, 320 pp., \$39.95 (hardcover).

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Despite its fame as a low-quality and disposable form of literature, Bernarr Macfadden’s pulp empire reshaped the U.S. mass media landscape thanks to its transnational and interactive content aimed toward the working class, women, and immigrant communities of the early 19th century. Promoted as the “Largest News Stand Sale in the World” (p. 11), Macfadden Publications Inc. and its founder provides a valuable and under researched window into the processes of globalization and Americanization that took place during the Great Depression and World Wars.

At the time of publication of **True Story: How a Pulp Empire Remade Mass Media**, author Shanon Fitzpatrick worked as a historian and editorial consultant. True to her multidisciplinary specialization on topics like U.S. foreign relations, empire, transnational history, and the body, she traces the beginnings of the physical culturist Bernarr Macfadden and provides comprehensive research on his influences and on his company’s role in shaping the popular culture during the interwar period.

*True Story* focuses on deconstructing the history around the “self-made” mass media mogul and the corporation Macfadden Publications Inc. Particularly, the book shifts between the parts of history that are widely documented and the ones that get neglected by scholars who consider the topic to be unworthy of research. For instance, there is the topic of physical culture as a “trend” adopted by the nonelite that can also be interpreted as a transnational movement that has a cooperative relationship with imperialism. Fitzpatrick supports such interpretation by analyzing how Bernarr Macfadden took advantage of the opportunities created by mass migration, the women’s rights movement, the rise of the working class, and the public’s interest in bodily and spiritual regeneration after the upheavals of the Civil War so he could create his “confession” magazine *True Story*. Additionally, she notes how Macfadden’s strength came from catering to audiences ignored or marginalized by other forms of literature. Unlike publications such as *Life* or *Time* magazine, *True Story* held the advantage of being written and edited at least in part by regular readers, turning it into a useful tool in the process of “Americanization” during the rise of the United States in the global media landscape due to the influence the material accepted from its consumers. The connection to the audiences that Fitzpatrick establishes in the earlier chapters then helps explain how the magazine managed to establish itself through international circulations, foreign editions, and publicity gained through the company’s contributions during the interwar period. Lastly, the book argues that Macfadden and his company succeeded to a major scale in the same way that they later faded into obscurity, by undergoing reinvention constantly and expanding to stay relevant as a staple of 19th-century “American” lifestyle,



eventually losing its distinct identity and getting absorbed into other companies that took over the areas that Macfadden Publications first pioneered before, during, and after the Second World War.

By exploring the joint work of other sources documenting Bernarr Macfadden's early life and career as an orphan turned physical culturist and publisher, Fitzpatrick creates a comprehensive picture of the sources that influenced Macfadden and his company. Among his main inspirations lie the cultural center that was St. Louis, Missouri, and the parallel career of Eugen Sandow. After detailing how Macfadden became immersed in physical culture through the German *Turnvereins* (gymnasiums) in St. Louis, the author explains how the young physical culturist built upon the pioneer work done by the British strongman Eugen Sandow, who would model the monetization and propagation of "body-centric" culture through platforms like photography, competitions, and physical culture colleges. The first two chapters of the book do an effective breakdown of Macfadden's "rags-to-riches" and "self-made-millionaire" myths by placing in context the narratives pushed by Macfadden and his biographers.

Regarding the gap between Macfadden's narrative and the contradicting sources, Fitzpatrick makes a valuable connection between physical culturist's mostly unacknowledged influences and his following pattern of capitalizing on momentum created by outside forces to create his "self-made" and "all-American" brand. Despite his efforts to market himself and his company as American icons, Fitzpatrick notes, his success is in part due to mass migration that took place when he was residing in New York, the imperial expansion when he was establishing his company's local iterations across Europe, and the careful curating he did to stay in good terms with both consumers and political leaders like Franklin D. Roosevelt and Benito Mussolini during the First World War.

What follows the demystification of Macfadden is a rundown of the evolution of the Physical Culture Publishing Company into Macfadden Publications Inc. after the release of its iconic magazine *True Story* that covered the topics of physical culture, romance, detective, true crime, as well as film and radio fandom, among some others. Fitzpatrick interprets that the magazine cemented Macfadden's pulp empire thanks to its appeal to marginalized audiences, which would help it retain support even as other publishers or institutions attempted to censor and attack the content. The book details in the earlier chapters how Macfadden and his products were the center of several religious and political controversies; the discussions ranging from the backlash to the nude pictures that his magazines would feature to the alternative health advice that was favored by vegetarians and antivaccine activists alike.

Fitzpatrick also shows in later chapters how Macfadden acquired the ability to sell iterations of the magazine internationally from what he learned in his own travels overseas. Foreign versions were established in countries like Norway, Britain, Australia, and France, just to name a few, thanks to adeptly connecting with audiences who would take and share the magazines back and forth with them in their journeys. Said audiences would use the accessible format of the content to help them in varied purposes such as their acclimatization to the United States or in engaging with topics that other media did not cater to in the same way, regardless of the topics, including physical culture, pulp fiction, confessionals about metropolitan life, or other personalized takes as was the case for queer audiences.

Organized as a stimulating rewriting of the history of Macfadden's media pulp empire, the book frames Macfadden Publications within the relationships among culture, media, and power. Fitzpatrick also engages in important groundwork by pointing out how themes like imperialism, sexuality, and race contribute to the vast reach that Macfadden and his content had access to. The book thoughtfully and directly distinguishes among Macfadden's own vision for his products and the way it differed from the audiences' own reasons for consumption, and how the founder enabled both to a certain degree for the sake of sales. The results could be seen in the magazine's popularity with young working women making their way through the roaring twenties, members of the immigrant communities learning about the language and culture during the early part of the 19th century, or the working class that was steadily increasing its participation in a consumer economy.

The author concludes by arguing that Macfadden's pulp empire offers both a window into the process of U.S. media globalization and helps understand what she calls the transition from the "American Century into a Consumer Century" (p. 262). Her research reflectively makes a compelling argument about what factors shaped the interactive, confessional, and dynamic culture that makes up the U.S. mass media landscape we live in at present.