

Review of Paul Rutherford, *The Adman's Dilemma: From Barnum to Trump*. Toronto, ON: [University of Toronto Press](#), 2018. x + 456pp., tables, notes, index. Cloth; ISBN 9781487503901, Cdn \$110.00, Paper; ISBN 9781487522988, Cdn \$39.95.

The adman, Paul Rutherford shows in this brilliant and eclectic book, is a “necessary evil”(329) for modern capitalism. He works knowingly and skillfully to create messages that are in varying degrees false and misleading, and the adman plays upon our fears, vanities, and desires in encouraging us to believe that buying things will make our lives better even when we know that they really won't. Rutherford's book is an exploration of what it means for advertising professionals to operate in this morally ambiguous yet emotionally compelling social space. If advertising was, Rutherford proposes, “simply a form of untruth, of deceit, it would be much less interesting – and likely less effective.”(5) As consumers, we know that we are being played by the adman, who we come to see as a “kind of licensed deceiver allowed to transgress the rules of truth-telling.”(5) As Paul Rutherford shows, the adman's vocation involves a complicated relationship with the truth that is designed to give us what we want and not what we need, and his “dilemma” is that he is fully aware of this.

As a cultural history of advertising, *The Adman's Dilemma* extends the tradition of scholarship pioneered by Neil Harris, Roland Marchand, and Jackson Lears. Considered as a work of business history, Rutherford's narrative is framed around the explanation of ideas and moods rather than the evolution of firms, regulations, or products. “My book,” Rutherford acknowledges, is a “cultural biography: not a biography of a ‘real’ person, though many genuine ad executives and creatives appear here, but of an equally ‘real’ figure found in commentary, literature, and entertainment.”(12) *The Adman's Dilemma* offers a composite “life story of this significant *social* type whose activities intrigued and disturbed the public mind.”(12)

Rutherford explores this composite biography through a roughly chronological analysis starting with Herman Melville's 1857 novel, *The Confidence-Man*. As the narrative develops, Rutherford shows how the adman's professional development was out of step with a business culture that was increasingly driven by empiricism and a search for control. The tools of management and the tools of persuasion moved in different rhythms, Rutherford argues, with the former tending more rational and organized while the latter more abstract and emotional. The adman became “the front man of capitalism,” and the development of his profession shows “one of the signal contradictions built into the saga of modernity: the dichotomy between the ideal of truth-telling and the practices of deception.”(7)

After analyzing Melville, Rutherford settles into the pattern that defines the rest of the book, as individual chapters and subsections are anchored around historically contextualized readings of key texts in the history of advertising. Readers will find fresh and incisive takes on familiar figures like P.T. Barnum, George Creel, and Vance Packard, as well new perspectives on well-known fictional sources like Frederic Wakeman's novel, *The Hucksters*, and films like *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. Beyond these prominent people and texts, one of the strengths of *The Adman's Dilemma* is its consideration of a number of works that are not a part of the familiar canon of advertising history, for example films like *Wag the Dog* and *Thank You for Smoking*, and published works by advertising executives such as David Ogilvy's *Confessions of an Advertising Man*. The analysis of relatively obscure figures like the novelist Ellis Parker Butler

and copywriter Earnest Elmo Calkins shed new light on the evolving ethos of the advertising profession. Rutherford's inclusion of William Gibson's cyberpunk fiction and Morgan Spurlock's gleefully anti-corporate documentary films show important elements of the public discourse around advertising that most historians have ignored. At its best, *The Adman's Dilemma* is a guided tour through some of the most important primary texts in the history of advertising.

At some points, however, the book can strain under the weight of an attempt to be exhaustive, and parts can read like an exercise in covering ground that has already been fairly well trodden. In considering the book's ethical argument, one might also ask if Rutherford has explored fully all of the moral dimensions of the dilemma at the heart of the book. He offers some fascinating analysis of the "anti-advertising" perspective articulated by such diverse figures as James Rorty and Naomi Klein. But, for the most part, this critical tradition appears in the book as a series of well-intentioned but practically meaningless jeremiads. *The Adman's Dilemma* might have given more attention to these critics and opponents of advertising, and in so doing might have done more to consider the role of cynicism in the adman's work. In the last century, as advertising has become more pervasive and ubiquitous, some of the most important products being promoted have had serious and negative social, health, and environmental consequences. One thinks, for example, of those working in the service of the tobacco industry to craft campaigns promoting products that the industry knew were harmful, and there are the more recent attempts by corporations in the fossil fuel industry to create campaigns that are willfully misleading about the damage they are doing to the environment. In the realm of ideas, there were the toxic and dishonest political campaigns that David Brock explored in his illuminating autobiography *Blinded by the Right*. Rutherford describes *The Adman's Dilemma* as "not only a cultural history but something of a moral biography of the modern sinner,"(329). The adman may be rather harder to absolve of his guilt than the book suggests.

But, then again, Rutherford's deep and nuanced argument leaves the reader with much to wrestle with on this point. Advertising's critics really have ultimately had mixed results persuading a broader public to be mindful of the deception at the heart of mass consumption. Advertising, Rutherford rightly argues, is designed to sell products, and it is at its core a kind of barking. It is part of a circuit between seller and buyer, and even in a mass mediated form is part of a ritual process of bargain and negotiation between sellers and consumers. "The marketplace," Rutherford argues, "required usable fictions to speed the circulation of goods from producers to buyers. The public, consumers and voters, needed the exaggerations and the fantasies of advertising to guide and soothe, to reassure and excite, despite the many social costs. Thus the adman had a definite utility. As a master storyteller, though that would be only grudgingly recognized."(329) This book does a great job of showing the moral complexity and complicity at the heart of the circulation of these stories.

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