

a thoroughly modern magazine

the many pleasures of the gentlewoman

How does a publication that largely comprises luxury adverts feel so very different to other women's magazines? Georgia Platman is ready to join the club.



didn't know I was a gentlewoman before I started researching this article, but have found my esteem for this unconventional magazine growing to the point where now I am all in. I can see, though, that *the gentlewoman* is not for everyone; even for me, it was not love at first sight. So, let me try to break down where its pleasures lie.

Pleasure One: Modern

'Modern' is a word that *The gentlewoman* loves. They refer to the articles in the first section of the magazine as 'Modernisms'. And they are so in love with this idea that they made a book out of some of these articles, 'Modern Manners' (Phaidon, 2021). But what actually makes it modern? Perhaps the easiest way is to show, rather than tell. Show what the magazine is not.

I was brought up on traditional women's magazines with their names that oozed glossy glamour: *Vogue*, *Elle*, *Cosmopolitan*. I can spot one from across a dentist's waiting room solely based on the layout, the colours, the photograph and the typefaces. It is a genre I know inside out. If you're struggling to conjure up an idea in your mind, simply go down to your nearest newsagent and scan the shelves. Check out the front covers of the four I have mentioned. Sure, they might be aimed at different ages and at women with different spending power, but they are all selling a similar idea of aspirational and stereotypical womanhood in

similar ways. Of course, there are differences too: *Elle* veers slightly more into careers and travel, *Vogue* is fashion-focussed, while *Cosmo* has more sex. But, from afar, they all follow similar conventions, like using uppercase letters to GRAB YOUR ATTENTION. And they do this on purpose, to compete with each other.

Yet, *the gentlewoman* sticks a middle finger up at these conventions. Its minimalist covers are so completely different that it's actually shocking. The only text is the title, subtitle and name of the person in the photograph, which



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is taken as a portrait and framed like a painting. It's a bold statement that says this is more than just a magazine, this is art. In case it wasn't different enough, the masthead is in lower case! Compared with *Vogue*, *Elle* or *Cosmopolitan*, *the gentlewoman* has no need to shout. Its fresh take on what a magazine should look like stands out enough – made you look, it seems to whisper. From its very specific choices around typography to its choices around colour and blank space, *the gentlewoman* oozes class in a different and much more, yes, modern way.

Pleasure Two: Welcome

'Welcome to the fabulous women's magazine', *the gentlewoman's* new subtitle coos. 'Come on in!', one page



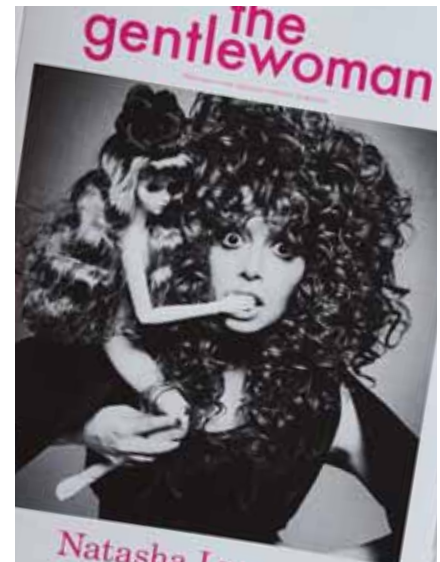
on the website invites. This is for everyone, these phrases suggest. And indeed, representation in *the gentlewoman* is pleasingly wide ranging. *the gentlewoman* does a pretty good job of presenting a spectrum of womanhood (it may not surprise anyone to hear that the vast majority of its subjects are emphatically not men). This includes playing with ideas of gender performativity and stereotypes, such as the fashion feature on the smart summer suit (issue 25, pp.272-287) – a masterclass in androgyny. Most of the non-advertising-related subjects are creatives of some kind – artists, musicians, fashionistas, writers, actors, dancers – but there are occasional oddities, subjects that you simply would not get in other women’s mags – an undertaker, a botanist, a Zambian rapper, a courtroom artist, a Moroccan mountaineer – that both elevate *the gentlewoman* to being more serious and give it a more down-to-earth feel than the ethereal airbrushed beauties we are usually bombarded with in women’s magazines.

The women featured seem to be purposefully chosen across the age and race span. In the latest issue (no. 26), 19-year-old Isadora Barney graces the cover, but there are four features about women aged between 50 and

70. Furthermore, there are women from Africa and Asia, as well as Black and white women from the UK and North America, promoting a structural vision of a multicultural society and nodding to an intersectional, post-colonial future. Coupled with the fact that fashion advertising has become significantly more diverse in recent years, *The Gentlewoman* feels a world away from the pages of willowy white women that filled fashion magazines a decade ago.

Pleasure Three: Club

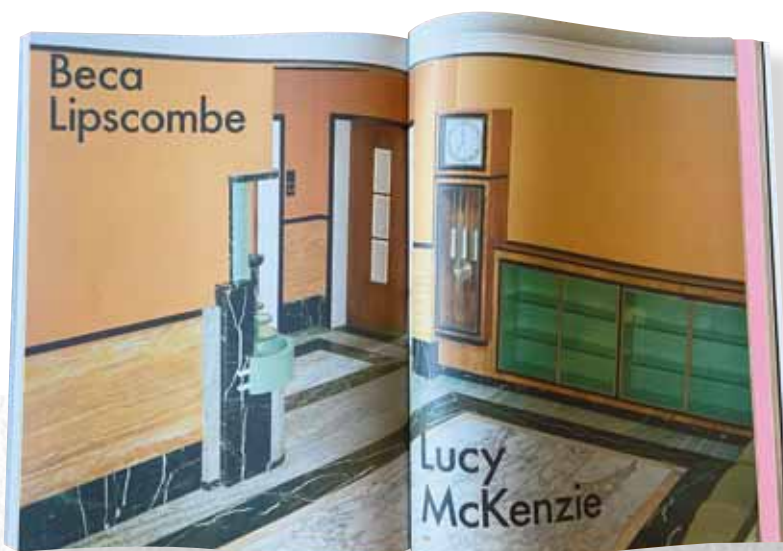
After spending a few days reading and thinking about *the gentlewoman*, I have a sense of not only knowing its creators and the creatives who feature on its pages, but that they know me too. They do, in a sense, for I fit the demographics of their average reader almost exactly. I am a woman, like 85 percent of *the gentlewoman*'s audience. I am 38, which falls right in the middle of its largest readership bracket: 61 percent of its readers are aged 28-46. As a teacher, I fall into one of the 'right' social classes to be an average reader: 47 per cent of *The Gentlewoman*'s readers are in the A or B categories of the NRS social grading system that the UK press uses to gather demographics.

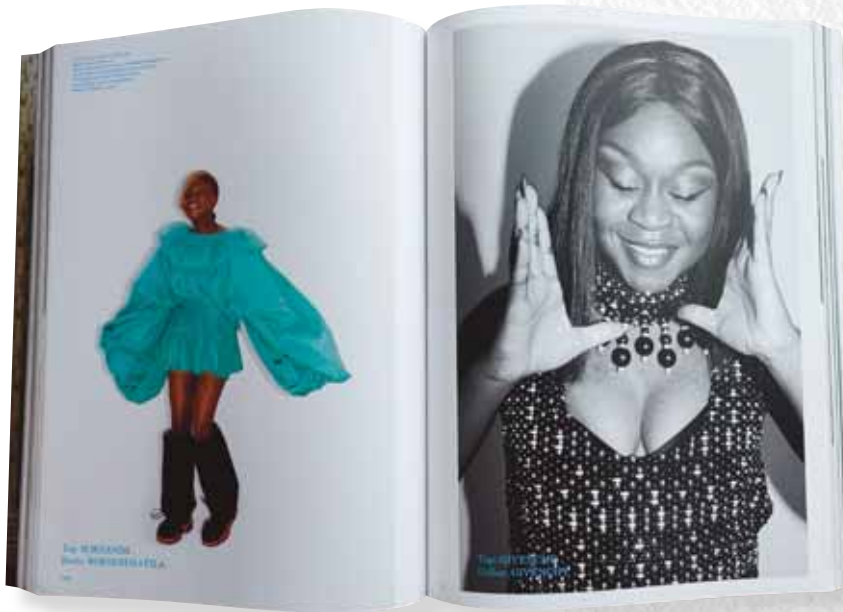


And while I may not have the income of *the gentlewoman*'s average reader (a whopping £87k!) to back up my love of fine things, I had the upbringing and education that allowed me to access culture and appreciate aesthetics in an aspirational way (statistics from *the gentlewoman* Media Kit 2023).

In a bid to set itself apart, *the gentlewoman* is trying to create a bilateral relationship with its readers. Enter *The Gentlewoman* club – an 'international society' of 'sophisticated women and men who demand quality and originality from their agenda of cultural happenings' (text taken from the website and Media Kit). The club is both a real, offline way to get to know others who share similar interests, a way of deepening brand loyalty among readers, and a cynical way to covertly market products to a highly affluent and motivated targeted audience who are made to feel special. A mutually beneficial blur of constructed media and real life, that could be probed using end-of-audience theories by the likes of Clay Shirkey, fandom theories by Henry Jenkins, and David Gauntlett's ideas about how we, as media consumers, use media products to help create our identity. It could definitely be argued that by creating a club, *the gentlewoman* is able to tailor and construct a superglamorous and ultra-modern 'reality' for its readers – a simulation that would make Baudrillard perk up.

Yet I'm here for it, happy to play along. It's a physical magazine that only comes out twice a year (perfect for my information overwhelm). It'll look great





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on my bookshelves. It provides me with a glimpse into the world of high fashion and celebrity and picks a few choice social trends to help me feel in the know. It meets some of my needs for cultural and media interaction and all it asks in return is the price of a cinema ticket and that I put up with some targeted marketing. Yeah, duh, it's 2023. As an avid media consumer I can deal with and filter that.

Pleasure Four: Independent

The team behind *the gentlewoman* is small but clearly influential. Creators Gert Jonkers and Jop van Bennekom have come up with a number of subversive and unconventional

publications. They are clearly savvy and use their websites as great adverts for their products, giving away just enough content to allow potential readers to enjoy full articles and get to know the brand, while being seductively minimalist enough to encourage you to buy the physical product. There are clues as to their business model. Running a small publication with a small team means that running costs can be kept low. Meanwhile the sheer number of luxury adverts tells you that the cost to the reader is not what's really propping up the production. *the gentlewoman's* liberal use of cross-platform social media helps deepen readers' relationship with the brand,

while being a largely free resource to the company.

An important part of the magazine from an industry point of view is what *the gentlewoman* calls its 'creative collaborations'. Also known as 'native advertising', brands use *the gentlewoman's* own writers and photographers to market their products to *the gentlewoman's* audiences. I usually find this type of marketing jarring and cynical, but somehow – probably by carefully selecting which brands it works with – *the gentlewoman* has made it seem like an utterly natural feature of the magazine. And the collaborations spill over into real life with special events for club members. All these strategies help to make *the gentlewoman* feel modern and relevant to those the magazine is targeting.

Of course, what pleases me may not please you; *the gentlewoman* is not for everyone. But this in turn gives it a sort of cult appeal – exclusivity, being in the know, enjoying the old medium of magazines in a modern way. Sign me up.

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