

Webs of Intimacy and Influence: Unraveling the Writing Culture at Harper's Magazine during
the Willie Morris Years (1967-1971)
Rebecca Townsend

Dr. Berkley Hudson, Thesis Supervisor

ABSTRACT

Through an exploration of what a collective of writers have written and said about the experience of working together at Harper's Magazine from 1967-1971, this research aims to give shape to the concept of writing culture. Influenced in part by anthropologist Clifford Geertz's assertion that man is suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, this study defines writing culture as a web of intimacy and influence.

This work proceeds from a reading of the Harper's issues edited by Willie Morris and of the books and articles written by him and the writers with whom he most closely worked, in addition to more than 12 hours of research interviews with writers John Corry, Midge Decter, Larry L. King, Robert Kotlowitz, Lewis H. Lapham and restaurateur Elaine Kaufman. By reviewing what these materials reveal about the writing experience, this work suggests that characteristics particular to that venue and era emerge. This work positions Harper's within the emerging New Journalism movement and posits that, at its heart, the writing culture that evolved under Morris's leadership was driven at first by a love of language, which then developed into a commitment to audacious prose that embraced the defiant ideas and spirit of the day.

An analysis of Harper's in a cultural studies framework neither supports nor challenges quantitative effects models; instead it aims to identify a cultural history through the words and actions of the various actors toward the journalism they created.