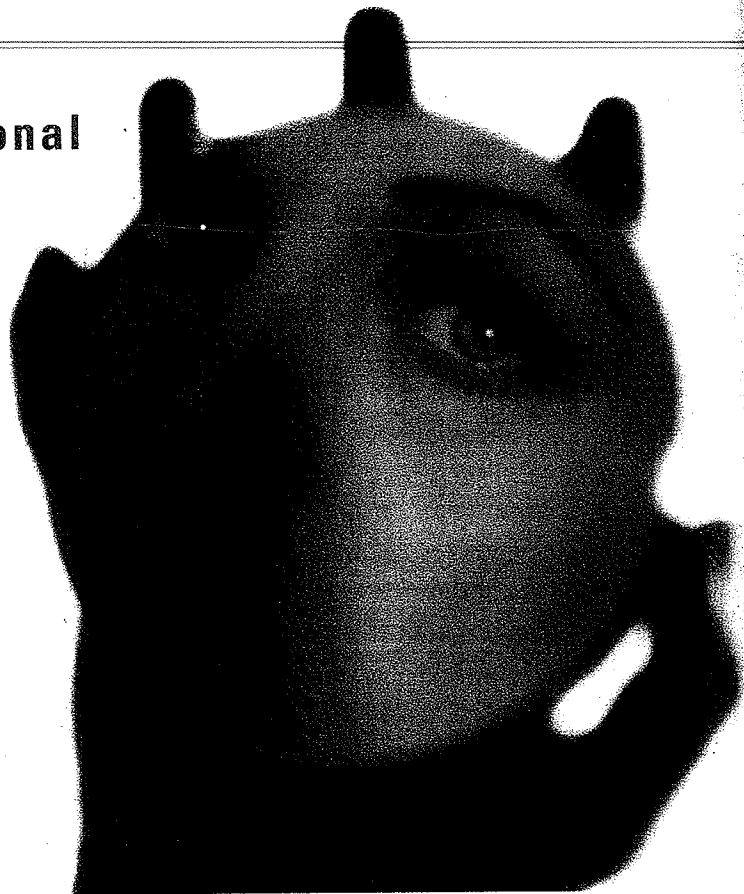


# I WAS A TEENAGE

# INGÉNUÉ

er at  
National  
Brag

LEAH ROSS



## Focus Your Learning

Reading this article will help you:

- analyse the writer's viewpoint
- explore language use in popular culture
- identify the characteristics of magazines
- produce a magazine

So, like, there we were! Six totally wired teens, selected from like kajillions of other girls to be the Teen Advisory Council for Maclean Hunter's new teen rag, *Ingénue*. Ohmigod, I was sooo excited!

So, editor Kara Lee Smart bounces into the room on platform shoes and goes, "Hi-eee!" And all us girls are like "Hi-eee!" back. Then she passes around all these pictures of chronically *hot* guys and she's like, "These are the male models we're considering for our next fashion shoot and I want you guys to rate them from one to 10."

I am not joking—it was the hardest decision of my life. Eventually, I had to go with the brunette straddling a motorcycle.

After that, it was out for a power lunch at the restaurant of our choice (Lime Rickey's). Then we went to the Maclean Hunter corporate offices to meet our real boss, Fatima. She told us she was the executive assistant to the president.

For the rest of the summer, Fatima was going to be kind of like our camp counsellor. You know, she'd take us out shopping and let us play with the fax machine and stuff. On the

first day she showed us our office. It was like this really big sunny room with a long desk and this little computer that you didn't even have to plug in. Cool!

Then we met this old dude who was like the president of Maclean Hunter for all of Canada. We hung in his office for a bit and he told us about golf and the importance of advertising and stuff. He was a pretty rad guy (minus the loafers).

Later on we went back to our office to do some paperwork. Kara had given us these reader surveys to fill out. They were photocopied from the latest issue of *Seventeen*. The questions were like: "What's your fave piece of clothing and where'd you get it?" It wasn't very hard, not like school or anything. But then there was this one question: "If you were stranded on a desert island and you could only have one beauty product, which one would you choose?"

I was totally stumped so I asked the girl behind me what she put. She goes, "Tough call, but I went with Revlon Summer Peach Lipliner."

I wrote down, "Does a canoe count as a beauty product???"

Such was my first day on the job. Working on *Ingénue's* Teen Advisory Council was, to put it mildly, not what I had expected. The job description in the ad had been vague—it called for a few teenage girls to work for the summer on a new teen magazine set to launch in the fall. We were asked to submit a short essay describing "Why I am perfect for this job."

I wrote about how the majority of magazines targeted to young women—like *Seventeen* and *YM*—are a bunch of Barbie Doll dreck that seek nothing more than to sell warped ideals of beauty and romance to vulnerable minds. These ideals serve one purpose: They sell the

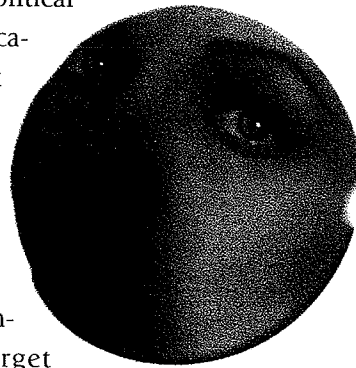
products advertised within the magazine. A survey of "What boys like" runs beside an ad for Clearasil—first, diminish self-esteem, then offer a cure available at your local drugstore.

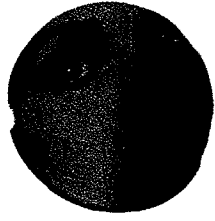
Apparently the *Ingénue* creators liked what I had to say, since they hired me. But what they hired me to do was a mystery. A few weeks into the job, our duties and responsibilities as the teen council were still murky. Either no one had bothered to think of any, or there simply were none. I suppose it was the kind of job that many people dream of, but I quickly got bored with reading the July issue of *Flare* over and over again.

You see, I had imagined that the *Ingénue* job would be something along the lines of *Sassy* magazine's annual reader-produced issue, which includes articles written by young women on issues like date rape and body image. I was eager to have a role in the making of Canada's first mainstream teen magazine.

Most of the other girls' interests lay in fashion and beauty, but I wanted to have some editorial input. I had ideas for a column about underground teen culture and feature articles that would make current political issues accessible and applicable to teenage girls. I don't mean to moralize or anything, but I wanted to excite the substance-starved minds of my peers by creating a magazine that didn't try to pacify or patronize young women. (Forget Revlon, we need *revolution!*)

And I figured I was in a good position to do it. All through my adolescence I was lucky enough to be exposed to a huge range of reading materials—from *The New Yorker* and *Ms.* to quirky underground comics and independent music zines. I'm lucky because my parents





encouraged me to read whatever I wanted from day one. I'm also lucky because I attended a high school for the performing arts, where the word "freak" didn't exist in my friends' vocabularies.

But as a teen council member at *Ingénue*, my eclectic tastes didn't seem to count. I had been hired as a typical teen with typical interests; the kind of girl who follows *The Young and the Restless* and dreams of nothing more than having a nice boyfriend. My job, in short, was to be this girl.

Over the first couple of weeks, the teen council was led on a seemingly endless tour of the Maclean Hunter offices. We met the white men in suits in the corporate offices, the brown-skinned women in customer service, and the harried-looking staff in the newsrooms. Each time we arrived on a new floor, Fatima would find someone—an editor, a secretary, or a photocopier repairman—and, regardless of what they were doing, direct them to take us on a guided tour of the office in question. Most employees smiled charmingly at Fatima and reluctantly led us around for a while. In the meantime, Fatima scooted back to her own office, returned some phone calls, arranged a few meetings, and was back in time to deliver us to the next department.

A question began to arise: "What the heck are we doing here?"

"Just learning a little bit about the publishing industry so we can put your talents to use," Fatima assured everyone. I was sceptical. The tours continued.

Sometime during the second week we met with Brian Segal, the publisher of *Maclean's*. We knew he was a bigwig because we actually had to make an appointment. So there we were, all six of us, sitting in his office when he cheerfully

asked, "So how do you kids like the name of the magazine? It took everyone a long time to decide on *Ingénue* and I think it's fabulous."

A couple of my fellow council members murmured things like, "Cool!" and, "Very French."

I had been waiting for this question. "Do any of you guys know exactly what an ingénue is?" I asked.

Everyone, including Mr. Segal, drew a blank.

I took out a definition scrawled from the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "Ingénue—An artless, innocent, or naive girl, esp. of the type represented on the stage." They all just stared at me. Brian Segal shrugged. No one seemed shocked or insulted like I had been.

"Come on guys!" I cried out. "It's the French word for bimbo!"

One girl commented diplomatically, "Well, I mean, like, we *are* naive."

As the summer weeks passed, our jobs dwindled into non-existence. At the beginning, Fatima had planned activities for us, like touring the Maclean Hunter printing plant, or visiting the Mac Cosmetics factory and getting a free makeover. We spent a couple of days hanging around a fashion shoot and a couple more shopping at the Eaton Centre. I was getting pretty darn tired of talking about the season's colours, but kept in mind I was getting paid for this. As the days wore on, however, Fatima just ran out of things for us to do. She did, after all, have a full-time job other than baby-sitter-in-chief.

Feeling useless, I contacted Kara, the editor of *Ingénue*, to see if she could give me some writing or research to do. I offered to act as an intern, an apprentice, a gopher—anything to get me out of the corporate offices and give my life some meaning again. I craved stress and challenge. Even my old waitressing job was beginning to seem appealing.

But Kara couldn't use me. "I'm trying to get this magazine off the ground," she explained. "I'm just too busy, sorry."

Again, the question popped up: "What the heck are *we* doing here?"

The answer finally struck me in the last week on the job, at a meeting with the publicity people. They were trying to figure out how to market the magazine and, finally, someone wanted our advice. We were scrutinized carefully. I didn't resist as they picked our brains about where we bought our cosmetics, clothes, and junk food; what TV shows and radio stations we tuned in to; and whether we took the bus or drove to school. I felt like a specimen under a microscope labelled "teen consumer."

They had found their target market and they were going to cater to it.

A few months later, I saw a girl in my English class reading the launch issue of *Ingénue*. A Claudia Schiffer look-alike gazed off the cover with a dumbstruck expression. From where I sat, I could still make out the feature headline printed in bold yellow letters: "I LOVE MY HAIR!" I slouched down in my seat. While the teacher discussed the theme of water in James Joyce's *Dubliners*, the girl across the room happily filled out an *Ingénue* quiz entitled "Are You a Snob?"

I gave up, and I cursed myself for being such an ingénue. ■

## Activities

1. In this article, Leah Ross exposes what the magazine creators see as the "typical teen." She, however, does not see herself this way. In a paragraph, identify the ways in which Leah is not a "typical teen." Use evidence from the article to support your points.
2.
  - a) The opening paragraphs of the article are written in an informal style that includes many colloquial and slang expressions. Is this an effective way to begin the article? Discuss your thoughts in small groups.
  - b) Make a Dictionary of Teen Language. List the expressions found in the article, as well as any others you can come up with. Then write definitions for each expression.
3. In groups, select a teen magazine to examine. Deconstruct the magazine, analysing the following:
  - a) story topics
  - b) images used
  - c) products advertised
  - d) level of language used

Compare your analysis with that of other groups. Create a list of the common features of teen magazines, and discuss their appeal. What advice would you have for the publisher of these magazines?

4. In groups, design your own magazine for teens. Consider what segment of the teen market you wish to reach. Create a cover, including the name of the magazine and the stories.