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The Working Girl's Champion Plays Pioneering Role in Feminist Revolution

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Bad Girls Go Everywhere, The Life of Helen Gurley Brown. Jennifer Scanlon. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 270 pp. \$27.95 hardback.

The notion that Helen Gurley Brown and *Cosmopolitan* helped define the second wave of feminism feels wrong or, at best, uncomfortable. Can an editor whose magazine featured large helpings of “how to please a man” fare and cover photos with more cleavage than clothes be a serious player in the feminist revolution of the second half of the 20th century?

In *Bad Girls Go Everywhere, The Life of Helen Gurley Brown*, the first biography of the magazine world’s celebrated editor, Jennifer Scanlon makes a compelling argument that Brown’s version of feminism deserves notice.

Brown, author of the 1962 bestseller *Sex and the Single Girl* and 30-year editor of *Cosmopolitan*, was a cheerleader for the working girl. She championed the Cosmo Girl’s right to economic success and sexual satisfaction, and, when necessary, her use of feminine allure to get ahead. And while that latter advice rankled many feminists, *Cosmo*’s construct of the sexy, single, and self-assertive woman resonated with millions of readers.

Advertisers loved the magazine too, and *Cosmo* under Brown’s reign made money for the Hearst Corporation. The story of how Brown, who had never held a magazine editorial position before her *Cosmo* debut, rose to the pinnacle of the business will interest magazine scholars and students. Scanlon also weaves Brown’s childhood and work experiences into a historical context, giving those interested in journalism history and women’s and cultural studies a fascinating portrait of the woman behind *Cosmo*’s “fun, fearless female.”

Brown grew up in the small town of Green Forest, Arkansas, and later Little Rock, the daughter of a former teacher and a state legislator. The sudden death of her father in a 1932 elevator accident when Brown was ten years old left her mother struggling to raise Brown and an older sister in the midst of the Great Depression. Brown later described her mother as “terminally sad,” Scanlon writes, a woman embittered early on from having left

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the teaching job she loved to raise children and later depressed by the toll of poverty. Brown was not proud of her Arkansas background and sometimes said that her family's gift was giving her something concrete to run away from. Only later would she learn to appreciate her mother's sacrifices.

Brown did escape Arkansas but not poverty with the family's 1937 relocation to Los Angeles. Her sister contracted polio shortly after the move, and as their money problems worsened, Brown took on clerical jobs while she tried to finish secretarial school. She switched jobs often to gain more pay or, in at least one case, because she was fired for refusing to sleep with the boss. Brown held 17 clerical positions before gaining a job as an advertising copywriter, and Scanlon notes that Brown did not consider all bosses off-limits for sexual liaisons.

Scanlon studied Brown's diaries and archived documents that show Brown, like many other working women of her time, was underpaid and "vulnerable to the dictates of men's wallets, regardless of their accomplishments." Diary entries such as "How to Get Men to Give You Presents" hint at what would later become a *Cosmo* staple—the how-to article for the single woman with little money. Never-published articles that Brown submitted to *Glamour*, *Playboy*, and *Esquire* in the late 1950s and early 1960s feature two of her favorite themes: dressing fashionably on a budget and making the single woman-married man arrangement work to best advantage.

A chapter describing Brown's relationship with husband David Brown points to an interesting contradiction in her life: She is no longer living the single woman persona that will continue to define her career success. Theirs is an oddly traditional relationship, with Helen making David's breakfast every morning throughout their marriage. The career-encouraging husband, David, pushed her to write *Sex and the Single Girl*, an advice book that sold more than two million copies within three weeks of its launch. Scanlon writes that in the book's first few pages, Brown begins "to shatter the common wisdom of the postwar period, which increasingly and rigorously dictated early marriage for women."

Brown started her two-year, renewable contract as *Cosmopolitan* editor in March 1965, having successfully pitched a proposal for how to revamp the ailing publication. Brown's personal philosophy would become the magazine's, with the core themes of "love, sex, work, and money." Apparently untroubled by crossing into advertising territory, she wrote a series of full-page *Cosmo* ads that ran in *The New York Times* between 1965 and 1990. If there is any disappointment in this biography, it is that the author offers only one chapter on Brown's 30-year tenure at *Cosmopolitan's* helm. Scanlon, a professor of gender and women's studies at Bowdoin College in Maine, is undoubtedly more interested in Brown's cultural impact than in her editorial or management decision-making.

Scanlon writes that the pages of *Cosmopolitan* showcased her particular brand of feminism, a largely cultural version that encouraged readers to strive for economic and sexual independence. But Brown also felt strongly about abortion rights and the Equal Rights

Amendment, and these political topics occasionally found their way into the magazine. And in 1975 she met with a group of women's magazine editors to plan shared content, a meeting that resulted in 35 magazines' producing special July 1976 issues covering the ERA. The political action gained appreciation from Betty Friedan and other feminists.

Brown stepped down as editor of *Cosmopolitan* in February 1996. Scanlon suggests that her philosophy lives on as new groups of women enjoy the third wave of feminism. No longer fighting for suffrage or women's liberation, they feel free to wear revealing clothing, use the term "girl," and "attempt to make feminism more fun if not more youthful."

Bad Girls Go Everywhere deserves a place on the magazine researchers' must-read list. Scanlon's provocative biography may not convince you that Helen Gurley Brown's name should be among the list of pioneer feminists, but it will likely make you look at *Cosmopolitan* from a new perspective. That is, if you're willing to admit you read it.