H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Elaine Tyler May. *Pushing the Limits: American Women, 1940-1961.* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. x + 143 pp. $12.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-512407-1; $24.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-508084-1.

Reviewed by Elizabeth Purdy (Georgia Baptist College of Nursing)
Published on H-Women (August, 1998)

Pushing the Limits Reviewed

Elaine Tyler May has done an excellent job in presenting this history of women between 1940 and 1961, or, as she also calls it, "From Rosie the Riveter to the Baby Boom and Beyond." May, who is a professor of American studies and history, continues to add to the growing body of literature chronicling the history of women. This contribution is the ninth volume in The Young Oxford History of Women in the United States series, which has detailed the history of women since the seventeenth century, beginning with John Demos' *The Tried and the True: Native American Women Confronting Civilization* in 1995.

In *Pushing the Limits*, as in her other earlier works, May attempts to examine the lives of women "who have not held the reins of rule in their own hands but nonetheless participated in making history" (p. 7). She accomplishes this by using a large number of case studies that give her work a "You Are There" quality, allowing the reader to experience a personal involvement in the lives of the women who appear in *Pushing the Limits*.

May informs the reader that she chose this particular period because women's lives were undergoing rapid change. Women's lives, of course, changed forever during World War II as they began to enter the work world in unprecedented numbers and to take on jobs that had previously been closed to them. The 1960s brought the revival of the women's movement, which had been virtually dormant since the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920.

In all her works, May offers support for the notion that specific cases expand our understanding of the scope of history. In *Great Expectations*, for example, May offers a plethora of examples of the lives of women. In this vein, we are introduced to such women as Marsha Langfield who was divorced in 1920 because she wore a bathing suit that "revealed her body" (p. 1). In _Pushing the Limits, we meet Margaret Starks, an African American tenant farmer who became an N.A.A.C.P. activist (p. 11) and Ella Baker, who "should have been a leader of the movement" (p. 125). These glimpses into the lives of women are both fascinating and enlightening.

In these case studies, we find both the greatest strength and the only weakness in May's work. The strength is that we come away from *Pushing the Limits* feeling that we actually knew the women who are showcased, and we possess a greater knowledge of events that may have taken place before we were born. The weakness, albeit a minor one, is that sometimes we–and May–become so engrossed in the details that we lose site of the larger portrait of women's lives.

That said, I return to praise of May's works in their entirety and to *Pushing the Limits* in particular, and there is much more to praise than to criticize in her work. May's contribution to the fields of women's history and women's studies is significant. For example, we learn in *Great Expectations* that in Los Angeles at the turn of the century, "everyone knew how a good wife should behave and what a good husband should do" (p. 27). May ably illustrates the changes that a few decades brought by examining the roles of Rosalind Russell in *His Girl Friday* and Scarlet O'Hara in *Gone With The Wind* (p. 19). At the same time that perceptions of women were changing, she notes that a 1936 Gallup Poll revealed that "82 percent of those surveyed (including three-fourths of the women) believed that wives of employed husbands should not work outside the home" (p. 21). In *Barren in the Promised Land: Childless Americans and the Pursuit of Happiness*, May examines significant issues in women's lives such as forced sterilization and the Baby M case, noting that women "are still much more likely to be infertility patients than are men (even though men are just as likely to be infertile" (p. 258).

It is this combination of specifics and generalities that fool the reader into believing that he/she is not reading a text book. Yet, make no mistake, *Pushing the Limits* is a piece of comprehensive scholarship. It is just that May is a great story teller.

Pushing the Limits is full of little tidbits of information. For instance, we are told that Marilyn Monroe, a defense plant worker, became recognizable to the general public, when she appeared in a Rosie the Riveter ad (p. 25). We also learn that Native American women, who have been virtually ignored in the chronicles of women and war, actually joined the armed forces during World War II, and that approximately twelve thousand of them were engaged in war-related work (p. 29). Black women, writes May, were given the most dangerous jobs in the defense factories (p. 33).

These tidbits of information and significant conclusions are evident in all May's works. In *Homeward Bound*, May offers another surprising conclusion: She contends that "In many ways, the youths of the 60's resembled their grandparents, who came of age in the first decade of the 20th century" (p. 9). This conclusion would certainly astound many of the Baby Boomers who were convinced that they had broadened the concept of being young and of breaking down barriers put in place by older generations.

May's account of the history of marriage in the United States might offer much needed insight into the current divorce rate. She points out that "the bomb-shelter honeymooners" of the Cold War period "lowered the age of marriage for both men and women and quickly brought the birth rate to a 20th-century high after more than a hundred years of steady decline" (p. 53). By contrast, May points out that the late 60s signaled a return to lower birth rates and a higher divorce rate (p. 53).

Another lesson to be learned from *Pushing the Limits* is found in May's account of the economic plight of American women. She notes that even though more women were in the labor force in 1947 than had been active in the war effort, women's weekly wage declined from $50 to $37 per week. The situation was even more dismal for black women who made less than one-half of the salary of white women (p. 57). The disparity in women's wages continues today.

The knowledge to be learned from *Pushing the Limits* is vast, and well worth the effort. May can hold her own with other writers of women's history. To get an overall view of women's history, read *Born to Liberty* by Sara M. Evans, and to get an overall view of women in society, read *Women in American Society* by Virginia Sapiro. But to experience the feel of a specific time period and the lives of ordinary women, May should be your first choice.

I highly recommend *Pushing the Limits* for classes in women's history, women's studies, sociology, popular culture, and American studies. I also recommend it for anyone who wants to know more about women's history from 1940 to 1961. I think the book would be especially helpful for young people who did not live through this period and for international scholars who are interested in a concise, well-written and thoroughly-researched account of the lives of American women.

References

Demos, John. *The Tried and the True: Native American Women Confronting Colonization.* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Evans, Sara M. *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America.* New York: The Free Press, 1989.

May, Elaine Tyler. *Barren in the Promised Land: Childless Americans and the Pursuit of Happiness.* New York: Basic Books, 1995.

May, Elaine Tyler. *Great Expectations: Marriage and Divorce in Post-Victorian America.* Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980.

May, Elaine Tyler. *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era.* New York: Basic Books, 1988.

Sapiro, Virginia. *Women in American Society: An Introduction to Women's Studies.* Mountain View, California, London and Toronto: Mayfield Press, 1994.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Elizabeth Purdy. Review of May, Elaine Tyler, *Pushing the Limits: American Women, 1940-1961.* H-Women, H-Net Reviews. August, 1998.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2280

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication,

originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.