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Jennifer Scanlon. *Bad Girls Go Everywhere: The Life of Helen Gurley Brown.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. xv + 270 pp. $27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-534205-5.

Reviewed by Kim Voss (University of Central Florida)
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Redefining Feminism to Include Cosmo Icon Helen Gurley Brown

The women of reality television dating shows could use a copy of Helen Gurley Brown's 1962 bestseller *Sex and the Single Girl*. The book's message of self worth and the rejection of marriage as the only ideal for women continues to resonate–particularly for *The Bachelor* contestants who reject dignity in exchange for an engagement ring. Gurley Brown's message still feels timely and is testimony to her progressiveness in her day. As book author, magazine editor, and social critic, Gurley Brown sent a message in support of women's changing roles. Yet, her name is typically left out of the history of those who championed women. As demonstrated in Jennifer Scanlon's *Bad Girls Go Everywhere: The Life of Helen Gurley Brown*, the iconic former *Cosmo* editor's name belongs alongside those of Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem. That is Scanlon's thesis, and she proves it well. As she writes, Gurley Brown "sought to liberate not the married woman but the single woman, not the suburban but the urban dweller, not the college-educated victim but the working-class survivor" (pp. 94-95).

The fight for women's liberation was a war fought on several fronts. The leaders of some of these battles are well known, such as Steinem, Friedan, and Martha Griffiths. Less prominent as a feminist icon is Gurley Brown, best known today as the longtime editor of *Cosmopolitan* magazine. She was an advocate for women outside of the middle class and forthose who saw no need for marriage. She encouraged earning a good pay check and promoted self-reliance. She just happened to do so while fashionably dressed and wearing good lipstick. It's these women who are not recognized as feminists often enough–who did not fit easily into the media-defined feminist categories.

The story of the largely overlooked feminist–a term she embraced–is told in Scanlon's book. It relies heavily on Gurley Brown's extensive papers at the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, and provides impressive primary-source documents–including early drafts of her writing. These materials provide new insight into a woman who has created her own media image. Scanlon, a professor of gender and women's studies at Bowdoin College, has a background in the scholarship on women's magazines. Her previous work includes *Inarticulate Longings: The Ladies' Home Journal, Gender and Promises of Consumer Culture* (1995).

Scanlon's biography of Gurley Brown covers the more recognizable accomplishments of the *Cosmo* editor and, most impressively, her behind-the-scenes struggles. For example, Gurley Brown's papers reveal her male editor's censorship of sections of the initial drafts of *Sex and the Single Girl* and her exclusion from the Hearst (male-only) editorial community when Gurley Brown headed *Cosmo*. Scanlon also reveals Gurley Brown's lesser-known activities such as her pitches for television programs that were ahead of their time. It should be noted that while she was well known for her message about "singlehood," Gurley Brown could also be a fan of marriage, as this book demonstrates. The real issue was finding a man who saw his wife as an equal. The author gives appropriate credit to Gurley Brown's husband, successful movie producer David Brown, and the partnership they created. (He was a force in the entertainment industry in his own right, and his marketing plans were a good match for his wife's talents.)

While Helen Gurley Brown deserves her place in the literature on the women's liberation movement, her role was complicated. Her promotion of sexualized images and make-your-man-happy copy irked many feminists. (And her views on sexual harassment could be updated.) Yet she also championed many of the issues central to the movement–such as women's employment rights and abortion access. But her real embrace of feminism would come later. In early years, she was simply trying to

make her way and hoped to share her story with others. Her voice was a unique one. Being an outspoken single woman carried a stigma of being a spinster destined to a lonely existence. (And this has not necessarily changed much. After all, the reality television program *The Bachelorette* was not entitled *The Spinster* for a reason.) Of course, many women have long thrived without marriage, as is noted by Betty Israel in her book chronicling one hundred years of *Bachelor Girl* (2002). This was especially true by the 1960s when young women saw a (usually traditional female) career and an apartment as an option. Israel noted, "marriage as a national idea, an enforceable teenaged daydream, had lost some of its hypnotic force."[1] It was in this changing societal view that Gurley Brown saw her opening. Women of the time could have a career–but if they wanted to go beyond the secretarial pool, they had to create their own way.

While Friedan would reach out to college-educated, middle-aged women in the early 1960s, this was not the community Gurley Brown related to. Born to poor circumstances and left fatherless at a young age, Gurley Brown watched her mother struggle to raise her two children. (Her mother sacrificed her first love and her career for her family–a sad rather than noble experience that was not lost on her daughter. Later, Gurley Brown would see the roots of the need for women's liberation in her mother's life.) Not an attractive child, she was encouraged to rely on her intellect for her success. This is not to reinforce Gurley Brown's self-described role as an average "mouseburger." Her own high school photos and letters reveal that Brown was a cute, popular young woman. One of the highlights of the book is what the fifty boxes of archival materials reveal in comparison to the persona that Gurley Brown has crafted. (The main criticism of the book is that this analysis is not taken further.)

After a semester of college, Gurley Brown attended secretarial school. A career was not merely an option–it was an economic necessity. And those careers were limited. It was in this low-paying role as a secretary that her education in gender politics began. She learned that women had inferior positions in the workforce but they managed to glean what they could from them, like padded expense accounts and leftovers from business lunches. As Scanlon notes, "For women of Gurley's generation, ambitious or not, gender continued to dictate when and where career paths might open up" (p. 27). She was also a closeted writer, recording her views on unapologetic singlehood in her private time while later developing her professional voice as an advertising copywriter.

Her marriage to David Brown and those musings on the single life led to the book that would change the course of her life and lead to her own brand of feminism: *Sex and the Single Girl*. The title was outrageous for the time and her thoughts were also radical–promoting a single woman's sexual satisfaction, career rather than motherhood, and money of her own. It should be remembered that these messages were seen as a direct affront to the traditional role of women. A 1956 report that ran in *Life* magazine about single women who worked and delayed marriage painted a poor picture: "chances are that she will suffer psychological damage. Should she marry and reproduce, her husband and children will be profoundly unhappy" (p. 77). As Gurley Brown would later prove, the right husband could make all the difference.

The publication of her book (which came out after she had married) made Gurley Brown a star and led to more books and a newspaper column, "The Woman Alone." She became a media darling, making numerous television appearances and becoming a regular on *The Tonight Show*. This led to her position as editor of *Cosmo*. (The couple was looking to start a magazine when they learned that *Cosmo* was ready for a make-over.) The magazine had a long and distinguished history, including as a significant muckraking publication. Gurley Brown had no journalistic experience, but she had an editorial vision that would serve her well for decades.

In essence, she wanted a message that encouraged women to both be individuals and partners for men. This was not a simple message at a time of social change. Despite Gurley Brown's liberated views, the discussion of sex and male attraction fed the perception that *Cosmo* encouraged women to be subservient to men. Her use of revealingly clad women on the cover of her magazine (cleavage was purposely featured every three issues), led to accusations of sexual objectification. Her regular response was: "There is nothing wrong with being a sex object. He is your sex object. It goes both ways" (p. 109). Some of these messages were questioned by feminists. The criticism was unwarranted, according to Gurley Brown. She explained *Cosmo* in an interview with Gloria Steinem: "I've used their magazine. I didn't put up a penny. I've got this instrument in which I say what I want to" (p. 166).

And much of what she had to say was about sex. Readers may have received scientific and medical messages about sex from the Kinsey Report, but Gurley Brown offered a different discussion. Marriage was not a precursor to sex and, furthermore, sex should be enjoyed. As Scanlon writes of female sexuality, "In the end,

Friedan saw danger where Brown saw fun" (p. 109). The magazine editor did not shy away from the topic at a time when it was not just frowned upon, but not discussed at all. Following in the wake of Hugh Hefner's *Playboy*, she promoted women's sexual freedom and enjoyment. This also meant that she addressed the progressive issues of birth control, rape, and abortion in her writing. Unfortunately, her publisher removed sections on date rape–the term was unknown at the time–and the need for abortion access from one of her books. Gurley Brown also regularly attempted to include information about lesbians but was rebuffed each time. Had her work not been censored, her feminism would have been more obvious and her messages would have reached a large audience.

Ultimately, after establishing her magazine as a cultural landmark, she was ousted as *Cosmo* editor in 1997. At that time, *Cosmo* was the sixth-ranked women's magazine and the top women's magazine on college campuses. She stayed on as an international editor of the magazine's nearly sixty editions. Last year, *Slate* magazine named her one of the top people over age 80. It would have been interesting to hear her views, but she declined to be interviewed by Scanlon.

The book's author argues for Gurley Brown's place in both magazine history and the literature of the women's liberation movement. In the 1950s and 1960s, women were not on the mastheads of major newspapers nor did they head the bureaus of wire services. (It would take lawsuits for that enlightenment to occur.)[2] But they often spoke to each other in women's magazines. While research has been done on the "Seven Sisters" magazines, *Cosmo* is also worthy of scholarship.[3] It would also be interesting to learn more about women's newspaper columns, such as Gurley Brown's "The Woman Alone." This well-written book helps to illuminate the complex changes in gender roles in American society, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s. The stories of more women, including Gurley Brown, need to added to the scholarship on journalism history.

In the end, *Bad Girls Go Everywhere: The Life of Helen Gurley Brown* is less the story of a "bad girl" than that of a "smart woman." Her story belongs to the history of women's magazines and the history of women in journalism.

Notes

[1]. Betsy Israel, *Bachelor Girl: 100 Years of Breaking the Rules–Social History of Living Single(* New York: Perennial, 2002), 209.

[2]. Kay Mills, *A Place in the News: From the Women's Pages to the Front Pages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 149-172.

[3]. The Seven Sisters magazines include *Better Homes & Gardens, Family Circle, Good Housekeeping, Ladies Home Journal, McCalls, Redbook,* and *Woman's Day.*

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