

# H-Net Reviews

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Marilyn S. Greenwald. *A Woman of the Times*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1999. xxiv + 220 pp. \$26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8214-1265-7.

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## Just a Little Girl From Ohio

Readers will like *A Woman of the Times* for its sympathetic yet thorough picture of Charlotte Curtis, former reporter for the long defunct *Columbus Citizen* paper, and its behind-the-scenes peek at one woman's rise out of the ghetto of the women's pages to one of the most coveted spots in journalism: the masthead of one of the nation's most respected newspapers.

When former Columbusite Charlotte Curtis joined the venerable *New York Times* in 1961 to write for the paper's Food, Fashion, Family and Furnishings section – often called the Four F's – it was a bastion of maleness and whiteness. By the time she left the *Times* in 1986 due to ill health, she had been named the first female editor and was the first woman to have her name appear on the masthead of the crusty old paper. How did this woman who often referred to herself as “a little girl from Ohio,” (p. xvii) survive and thrive at a time when women had so few opportunities? Greenwald's fast paced biography uncovers a woman who, despite her petite size, impeccable three-strands-of-pearls grooming, and privileged upbringing, possessed a will of iron and a steely determination to succeed. Her inability to see herself as a victim because she was a woman generally stood her in good stead. Greenwald repeatedly reminds us that Curtis was raised during a time in which women did not compete openly with men, and so she taught herself to join them and ultimately beat them at their own game.

Curtis was born in 1928. Her mother was an ardent suffragette and in 1920, took the tests to join the For-

eign Service, the first woman to do so. Her father was an internationally known professor and researcher, who eventually became the chairman of the department of research surgery at Ohio State University. Curtis's upbringing was somewhat contradictory. She and her sister attended Columbus School for Girls, which while academically rigorous, also trained its students to marry well – which she did, right out of college. Yet within the family, Charlotte and her sister Mary were expected to argue logically, think critically, engage in sports and outdoor activities, and excel. Charlotte also graduated from Vassar, where she had a passing acquaintance with the young Jacqueline Bouvier, about whom she later wrote a book that was thought by her editors to be so caustic it had to be extensively revised before it was published.

During her first summer vacation from Vassar, Curtis applied for and got a \$40-a-week job on the society and women's pages of the *Columbus Citizen*, one of three daily papers in Columbus. From then on she was hooked. While she longed to report hard news, there was already a woman on the news desk, so Curtis took the society and women's beat and made it her own. Reporters at the *Columbus Citizen* had a great deal of independence, and her stories reflected this. They were varied and full of intricate detail, puns and alliteration. And while the men at the newspaper teased her unmercifully about what they considered her hoity-toity background – they called her Vassar (p. 35) – she loved it. Her affinity for the reporter's life helped contribute to her divorce in 1953. Like many well-bred women of her generation, Curtis had

married early and unsuitably, and the divorce scandalized her family and the community in which she lived. But it freed Curtis of the straitjacket that women of her generation often found themselves in, and allowed her to devote herself to her first love, reporting.

After her divorce, Curtis threw herself into her work. She became active in the journalists' union, the Newspaper Guild, and later became an officer. Curtis also traveled to Paris and Russia at her own expense and sent stories back to Columbus. It was during this time she honed what was to become her life long style: intricate detail, irreverent asides, and the use of direct quotes which often made her subjects look very foolish. She also skewered the rich and famous. Two of her stories from the presidential campaign of 1960 portrayed Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy and Patricia Nixon in unusually unflattering ways, branding the former as a spoiled rich woman and the latter as a seething cauldron of resentment at the indignities of political life.

Indeed Curtis was practicing what was then a new style of reporting known as the new journalism, ". . . a brand of analytical journalism [that] stressed details about the subject, his or her personal characteristics and the surroundings." (p. 67). When Curtis moved to the *Times*, she took this style with her, and shook up the staid women's pages. Heretofore, the Four F's was a backwater of the *Times*, a place that Curtis began planning to escape as soon as she was hired. Instead, her unusual style of writing—and a timely friendship with Clifton Daniel, an influential assistant managing editor—set the Four F's on its ear. Curtis approached her job as a society writer as an exercise in sociology, approaching each story as an examination to be aced. As such, she studied her subjects and their surroundings assiduously, turning her columns into history lessons as much as society reporting. By the end of her first year at the *Times*, she was hailed as "the Boswell of America's social scene from coast-to-coast with her byline gems." (p. 81) She had also developed a coterie of influential and devoted friends, including Iphigene Ochs Sulzberger, mother of "Punch" Sulzberger, the *Times*' publisher.

One group of people who did not like Curtis, however, were the women who sued the *Times* for sex discrimination. In 1974, after four years of attempting to resolve the discrimination issue in house, seven women filed a class-action suit against the *Times*. Charlotte Curtis and architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable were not among the plaintiffs. Two decades later, many of the women were still angry at Curtis, and at least one spoke of her as a traitor. As one of two very powerful women at

the *Times*, it was thought that she could have done more for the 550 female employees there. To this day, Curtis's friends defend her lack of a substantial role in the lawsuit, pointing out that as a member of management, she was not eligible to join the plaintiffs. Moreover, even though early in her career she had been very supportive of workers' rights, openly supporting the women in their lawsuit was not Curtis's style; she genuinely disliked confrontation, and preferred to work behind the scenes. Finally, her lack of assistance was tied to her own confusion and ambivalence about feminism and the so-called women's liberation movement. On the one hand, Curtis was a strong believer in equal opportunity and equal pay for equal work; on the other, the inability of many of the movement's spokeswomen to clearly and logically define their mission irritated her, and she loathed the attention-getting tactics of the radical fringe of the movement.

Greenwald's story of Charlotte Curtis is the story of America in the second half of the twentieth century: the 1950s twin goals of fitting in and belonging, the incredible turmoil of the 1960s – Curtis covered Robert F. Kennedy's funeral train and the famous Leonard Bernsteins' party for the Black Panthers – the third wave of feminism in the 1970s, and the institutional greed of the 1980s. Through it all we see Curtis in a series of firsts and onlies. Yet despite her talent, popularity, and friendships among influential people at the *Times*, she was treated poorly as management changed and she aged. Stripped of her title as op-ed editor in 1982, she was made a weekly columnist in the paper's news section and again forced to report to Abe Rosenthal, her old enemy. Her lifelong goal of becoming a reporter came too late in her career, an irony surely not lost on the astute Curtis. She never regained her old edge, and floundered in her new role. In retrospect, it seems almost merciful that she became too ill to continue.

While Curtis never thought of herself as a feminist, Greenwald helps us to see her in that role. Clearly she paved the way for others, among them Anna Quindlen, the first female deputy editor at the *Times*, and Maureen Dowd, *Times* op-ed columnist and Pulitzer Prize winner, noted for her writing style which is very much like that of the young Curtis. Yet Greenwald concludes that Curtis's legacy is not that of a feminist, but a journalistic pioneer. Ultimately, her hairsplitting on this issue may not matter. Just ask Quindlen or Dowd.

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