

2012

Book Review: When Everything Changed: The Amazing Journey of American Women from 1960 to the Present

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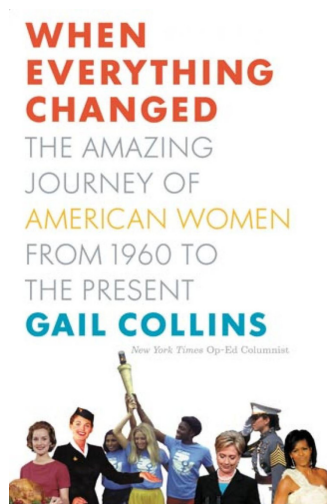
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When Everything Changed: The Amazing Journey of American Women from 1960 to the Present

by Gail Collins.

New York: Little, Brown, 2009. 475 pages.

Reviewed by Melanie Springer Mock



In 1968, the year of my birth, my mom started taking in ironing to help support her growing family. My dad's meager teaching salary, supplemented by shift work at a Libby's pumpkin factory, didn't stretch far enough. Mom had stopped teaching a few years earlier, before my brother was born, as visibly pregnant women were not allowed to keep their teaching jobs at that time.

Before her kids came along, Mom taught elementary school, costumed in skirts, nylons, and high heels. Wearing far more comfortable clothes that would allow her to sit on the floor with her students was prohibited. Girdles and Maidenform bras were almost mandatory, as was making sure one's hair towered into a bouffant. Hers didn't, or couldn't, and so she wore a wig—one that became a welcomed addition to our dress-up clothes about a decade later, once her pretense of having big curls wore off.

Though she was a great teacher, this job probably wasn't her first choice as a career. But as a woman, choices were limited, and being a nurse or secretary—the other go-to options for women of her era—were far less appealing. She made dramatically less than the few male teachers in her district, and the school's only administrators were men. Few women made it into the ranks of senior teachers, either: that whole pregnancy thing, you know.

Sometimes, I'm amazed that such restrictions placed on women—about what they could do, about how much they could be paid, about what they could wear—still existed at the beginning of my lifetime, not so long ago (in the grand scheme of history, at least). Still, my mom's own experience reminds me how much has changed in the span of forty some years, even as there are many battles for equity yet to fight.

This premise—that so much has changed, and that so much work still needs to be done—resides at the heart of Gail Collins's excellent book, *When Everything Changed: The Amazing Journey of American Women from 1960 to the Present*. Collins, a columnist for the *New York Times*, uses her significant authority and her accessible writing style to breathe life into a half-century of women's history, and the result is a fascinating narrative about women's strength, resilience, and hope for a more equitable future.

Collins begins her social history in 1960, an era when expectations for women were clear and rigid. Rosie the Riveter was long in the rear view mirror by 1960, the work women did in World War II factories forgotten by a decade and more of the suburban housewife, raising children in quick succession, cooking meals for a hard-working spouse, and by some reports, miserable in her tightly constricted life—all phenomena Betty Friedan would chronicle in her 1963 *The Feminine Mystique*.

Here, in this first section of Collins's book, we get a clear sense of her writing style. Throughout *When Everything Changed*, Collins relies on her personable voice to connect us to her subject. Even more,

she combines the voices of women, sociological research, and magazine and newspaper reports written during that time to present a rich and accessible narrative, allowing some of her readers to imagine what it would have been like to live during that era—and, of course, allowing other readers to *remember* what it was like both before and after “everything changed.”

After detailing the cultural milieu of 1960 America, Collins provides a compelling story of the women’s movement, sometimes unwinding the narrative decade by decade, and sometimes year by year. She argues convincingly that “the ice cracked” early in the 1960s, that forces were shifting in the country, subtly but powerfully: women were beginning to find their voices in the private and public sector, bolstered in part by the establishment of the National Organization for Women in 1966.

Certainly, readers who lived through this tumultuous time—or who actively participated in changing the conditions for women nation-wide—will find Collins’s narrative familiar. For someone like me, born just after “the ice cracked,” the story Collins tells here is novel and extraordinarily valuable: she compels me to have renewed admiration for my foremothers, fighting against the status quo and making possible the freedoms I now appreciate.

Collins suggests younger women have little idea of the struggles undertaken by earlier generations to create the more equitable society they now enjoy. For this reason, *When Everything Changed* might serve as a vital discussion tool, a way to bridge the gap between those who have lived before the ice cracked, and those born in the years after.

To this end, after my mother read the book, we talked together about her own experiences coming of age in the 1950s and raising children in the late 1960s. Although I had already deeply respected my mom’s life journey, reading about these eras through Collins’s critical lens opened up new avenues of admiration, allowing me to understand my mom in a different, richer way. I imagine other readers my age or younger might also develop a deeper appreciation for the closer-to-equitable society we now enjoy.

Though, of course, some freedoms remain just out of reach, something Collins reminds us in the book’s later chapters. There, she quotes Friedan again, who noted in her late-in-life memoir that “The way women look at themselves, the way other people look at women, is completely different, *completely different* than it was thirty years ago” (emphasis Friedan’s). To some extent, Collins agrees: women have found their place in traditionally male-dominated fields like science and medicine, now fight in wars alongside men, have campaigned for the highest elective office in the land.

But, as Collins notes, even if everything has changed, injustices remain. Although “the feminist movement of the late twentieth century created a new United States in which women run for president, argued before the Supreme Court, performed heart surgery, directed movies, and flew into space,” it did not create an entirely equitable world, one that “remade the world the way the revolutionaries had hoped.”

Thus if Collins ends her book on a hopeful note—and I think she does—she also concludes with the acknowledgement that although everything has changed, some fundamental aspects of women’s lives and their struggles remain unchanged, and that there is still work to be done, an assertion with which most of Collins’s readers will heartily agree.

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