

schizophrenia so many of us feel, while showing how it has produced tension, anger, and uncertainty in everyday women. Most women take for granted their own conflicted relationships to the mass media. They assume they are the only ones who love and hate *Vogue* at the same time, the only ones riddled with internal contradictions about whether to be assertive or diplomatic, gentle or tough. And too many assume that such contradictory feelings are unusual, abnormal. They aren't. Most women feel this because they've been socialized by the mass media, and women should know that feeling these contradictions on a daily basis is what it means to be an American woman.

And, contrary to media stereotypes, such contradictions and ambivalence are also at the heart of what it means to be a feminist.

Our pop culture past isn't *all* embarrassing, and it's not irrelevant to how we feel or what we face today. Some of it was pretty goofy—I mean, identical cousins, get real—but much of it requires a second look. History, including this history, matters. It may help to explain why American women are both mad as hell and yet resigned, at times even happy, to leave things the way they are. This history also helps to explain why so many women are ambivalent about feminism, shunning the label but embracing so many of the precepts. And in the end it reveals why the mass media are both our best allies and our most lethal enemies.

## Fractured Fairy Tales

In the fall of 1957, the kids of America were castigated by political leaders, newspaper columnists, their teachers, and, worst of all, their *Weekly Readers*. It turned out that while we were running around in our coonskin caps (yes, girls did *too* wear them), learning to twirl hula hoops, and rotting our brains on Twinkies and the Mickey Mouse Club, the Soviets were taking education seriously. The proof: On October 4, they sent the first rocket-powered satellite into orbit before the United States did, terrifying the country that we were no longer number one in advanced technology. Only a month later, the Ruskiens sent a female husky named Kudryavka (Curly, in English) into orbit. On November 10, one week after "Muttnik," as the press called her, went up, the U.S. Office of Education published a study confirming cold warriors' worst fears. The Soviet Union outranked the United States in every aspect of scientific and technical education. Their kids weren't making Pilgrim hats out of construction paper; they were learning calculus, chemistry, and quantum mechanics.

As Walter Lippmann wrote in the *New York Herald Tribune*, *Sputnik* didn't result from "some kind of lucky guess in inventing a gadget." This cosmic humiliation occurred because the Soviets were systematically and rigorously educating their students in science and technology and training them to become relentlessly competitive engineers. And so the worst had happened. We were "falling behind in the progress of science and technology," warned Lippmann, and if

we continued to lose momentum, added *Newsweek*, "Russia will be ahead of the West in almost all fields in a few years. Unless the West steps up its scientific development, it will become technologically inferior to Russia within ten years."<sup>1</sup> The only hope was to reinvigorate American education, to add more discipline, to place more emphasis on science, and to use *Sputnik*, and the threat of thermonuclear war, to get American kids to switch their priorities from spitball hurling to titration analysis.

Between 1946 and 1951, a record 22 million kids had been born in the United States, forming the first bulge of that demographic goiter in the population known as the baby boom. In 1957, those children, between the ages of six and eleven, glutted the overcrowded, antiquated classrooms of America. Nothing less than the survival of the free world rested on our puny, puff-sleeved shoulders. As we earnestly studied our *Weekly Readers* and heard how if we didn't shape up fast we'd all be living on borscht, sharing an apartment the size of a refrigerator carton with all our relatives, and genuflecting to Nikita Khrushchev, one thing was clear: no one said, "Just boys—just you boys study hard." This was on everyone's heads, girls too, and we were not let off the hook, especially in grammar school—we had to get A's as well, to fend off the red peril and save our country and ourselves.

Now, on the other hand, no one painted seductive pictures of us girls growing up to become engineers. The Russians had lots of women engineers, doctors too, and we all knew what they looked like: Broderick Crawford in drag. It was because all their women were dead ringers for Mr. Potato Head that we knew their society was, at its heart, joyless, regimented, and bankrupt. No one was going to let that happen here. But it might if they took over. Our girls were going to stay feminine, but they were also going to roll up their sleeves and make America number one again. So when we were kids, and many of our elders were fighting for an improved educational system, including greater access to a college education, the understanding was that they were pushing these reforms not just for

boys but for all kids—well, white kids, anyway. This activism, stoked by the *Sputnik* scare, led to the construction of hundreds of new schools, and Congress passed the National Defense Education Act of 1958, which authorized low-interest, long-term tuition loans to college and graduate students. Again, not just boy students—girls too.

Just three years later, this very young, handsome, and eloquent man became president, and he breathed energy into our aspirations. In January 1961 he delivered an inaugural address that still has the capacity to choke up even the most hardened cynics who were young and idealistic back then. (Remember, this was before we knew that his dad had bought him the election or that it was impossible for him to keep his fly zipped within a fifty-mile radius of rustling pettipants.) In addition to the "ask not what you can do for your country" part, there was the stirring sentence "Let the word go forth . . . that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans." Less than two months later, he established the Peace Corps to encourage young Americans to work on behalf of those less fortunate than they. Now Kennedy didn't say "a new generation of men," even if that was what he was thinking. Nor was the Peace Corps restricted to males: on the contrary, young women flocked to serve, often as a direct result of Kennedy's inspiration. Never for one minute did I think JFK was talking only to boys. He was talking to me as well. The spirit of the times invited, even urged, girls to try to change the world too.

⊛ Thus did the political climate of the late 1950s and early 1960s begin disrupting, if ever so imperceptibly, comfortable assumptions about girls' aspirations. Economic circumstances, most notably the postwar boom and the triumphal enthronement of American consumer culture, also began to dislodge assumptions about who was important and who wasn't. And the ones who were becoming more important every day were us—the kids.

Many of our parents, of course, survivors of the Great Depression and of World War II, were determined that their kids have a more secure and carefree youth. Because there were so damn many of us—don't forget that the birthrate in 1950s America exceeded that in

India—we created special pressures on the society, and we saw new buildings, from ranch houses to libraries to schools, going up just for us. But precisely because there were so many of us, we, as kids, became one of the most important things any group can become in America: a market. Once you're a market, you're really, truly special. Once you're a market—especially a really big market—you can change history.

Advertisers magnified the national gestalt, insisting we were a new and different generation, blessed as no other had been, riding a seemingly never-ending crest of prosperity and progress. We would be better educated, healthier, more affluent, and certainly more sophisticated than any generation before us, especially if we bought the right products. There we were, surrounded as never before by a blinding and deafening array of images from television, magazines, and newspapers, increasing amounts of it promoting consumer goods from Kool-Aid to Revlon dolls, trying to imagine our futures. As we did so, many of us, boys and girls alike, got this almost transcendent sense of historical destiny. We got this idea that we really were the chosen ones.

Coonskin caps may have been the first important clue. Their success proved that eight-year-olds had such economic clout that they could make the manufacturer of a rather ratty hunk of fur a millionaire—a lesson not lost on enterprising types. Imagine sitting at your kitchen table, trying to figure out how to make a fast fortune, coming up with Silly Putty, and being *right!* Whoever invented Barbie, a toy that today makes a feminist mom apoplectic, must have become a gazillionaire. So did the manufacturers of Colorforms, Magic Markers, Clue, and Trix (with the telling slogan “Trix are for kids”). Just as we became isolated as a market, the television industry partitioned the broadcast schedule into slots just for us—early morning, late afternoon, and at least half the day on Saturday. All of this because we were important—meaning the fastest-growing market segment in the country. When we turned the corner from kid to

teenager, the marketing blitz was even more intense. By 1960 there were approximately 11.7 million girls between the ages of twelve and eighteen in the United States, and their average allowance of four dollars a week was spent on lipstick, Phisohex, size 30AA stretch bras, *'Teen* magazine, Ben Casey shirts, and forty-fives like “Big Bad John.” By pitching so many things to us all the time that were only and specifically for us, the mass media insisted that *we* mattered. They told us that we were a force to be reckoned with. And we girls came to believe that we were freer from constraints than our mothers; that we were modern, riding a wave of progress, less old-fashioned; that, for us, anything was possible.

So this, maybe, is where my confusion began. While exhortations to study hard, make something of myself, and extend democracy throughout the world were going in one ear, resonating with sales pitches that reaffirmed that, as a girl, I had indeed been born into the very best of times, retrograde messages about traditional femininity were going in the other. Saturday morning, after all, dominated as it was by opera-singing supermice and other male heroes constantly rescuing female victims tied to railroad tracks and conveyor belts in sawmills, intermixed with ads for the Barbie game (“You Are Not Ready When He Calls—Miss One Turn” and “He Criticizes Your Hairdo—Go to the Beauty Shop”) was a bastion of sexist assumptions.

Like millions of girls of my generation, I was told I was a member of a new, privileged generation whose destiny was more open and exciting than that of my parents. But, at the exact same time, I was told that I couldn't really expect much more than to end up like my mother. Was I supposed to be an American—individualistic, competitive, aggressive, achievement-oriented, tough, independent? This was the kind of person who would help us triumph over *Sputnik*. Or was I supposed to be a girl—nurturing, self-abnegating, passive, dependent, primarily concerned with the well-being of others, and completely indifferent to personal success? By the late 1950s and

early 1960s, the answer was starting to become less clear. All too often it seemed that being a real American and a real girl at the same time required the skills of a top-notch contortionist.

These warring messages—"be an American"; "no, no, be a girl"—one softer and occasional, one louder and insistent, were amplified, repeated, and dramatized in the electronic hothouse we grew up in. We were the first television generation, and being raised with the box gave us psychological mutations all our own. The black-and-white images emanating from our sets began to illuminate our vision of who we were and what we might become. But even as television gave shape to our most precious and private dreams, our hopes and our fears, cracks and fissures appeared, for the medium's messages were so often at odds with one another.

The major split we began to see on TV in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and to experience in our own lives, even as kids, was the gap between current events and entertainment programming. Although before 1963 TV news was still only fifteen minutes long, television brought politics into our living rooms through its coverage of the civil rights movement, the Kennedy-Nixon debates, President Kennedy's live press conferences, and the televised rocket launches from Cape Canaveral. What we saw revealed a larger world of conflict, inequality, and insecurity. At the same time, entertainment programming got more removed from reality. The so-called golden age of television, with its hard-hitting, socially conscious teleplays, was over, replaced by *Sing Along with Mitch* and *Wagon Train*. The grittiness of shows like *The Honeymooners*, *The Goldbergs*, and *I Love Lucy*—with their emphasis on domestic friction, particularly the war between the sexes, and their reliance on female characters who looked like someone you might see in real life—gave way by the late fifties and early sixties to the pabulum of *Leave It to Beaver*, *The Jetsons*, and *My Favorite Martian*. Now we saw harmonious nuclear families and wasp-waisted, perfectly coiffed moms who never lost their tempers, and we were subjected to the most nauseating innovation to hit the airwaves, the laugh track. News cameras showed us sit-ins pro-

testing segregation; the networks gave us *Dennis the Menace*, *The Flintstones*, *Hazel*, and *Mr. Ed*, inhabitants of a bizarre cartoon world hermetically sealed off from politics and history. These were the poles that we, as kids, oscillated between.

While John Kennedy and *My Weekly Reader* suggested that even we girls had a larger historical destiny, I was still coming home after school and rotting my brain with TV. Most of the shows I watched then were not telling me that I, some dumb girl, could change the world. No, these shows had a different message. I would not change the world; I'd watch my boyfriend or husband do that. I did not have my own destiny; my fate, my life, would be dependent on my man's. Since I would be nothing without a man—especially a cute, strong, successful one—I'd better learn how to be cute and popular, how to stand out from the herd, and how to get my hair to go into the most preposterous style yet invented, the flip. And here came the rub, one of the earliest contortion acts. For embedded in the rather unforgiving gender ideology of the late 1950s was the following contradiction: I was supposed to be, simultaneously, a narcissist and a masochist. To be a success as a girl and then as a woman, I learned early that I was supposed to be obsessively self-centered, scrutinizing every pore, every gesture, every stray eyebrow hair, eradicating every flaw, enhancing every asset, yet never, ever letting anybody see me doing this. No matter what girls did behind closed doors, in front of their mirrors, they were never supposed to act self-absorbed in public. We were supposed to be as self-abnegating, and as cheerful about it, as Cinderella or Snow White. The message to women and girls in the 1950s wasn't just "Be passive, be dumb, keep your mouth shut, and learn how to make Spam-and-Velveeta croquettes." It was worse. It was "To really have it all, be a martyr."

No one more powerfully or more regularly reaffirmed the importance of the doormat as a role model for little girls than Walt Disney. When I was a kid, Disney was a demigod, the personification of America's generosity of spirit, its trusting innocence, its sense of good-natured, harmless fun. When I got older, however, I saw the

dark side of Disney, the right-wing reactionary who supported Barry Goldwater for president in 1964 and denied entry to Disneyland to over 500 teenagers in the summer of 1966 because they had beards or their hair was too long.<sup>2</sup> The fantasy worlds he created were as sterilized and white as an operating room in Switzerland, populated by boys instructed to look and dress like Pat Boone and girls forced to look and dress like Tricia Nixon. As we look back on this much-revered national icon, we see that Disney was obsessed with order and tradition, and there were few traditions he spent more time buttressing than suffocating sex-role stereotypes for boys and girls. For girls, Disney's fairy tales were not harmless.

Let's take another look at these stories, some of which we first saw in the movies or on the longest-running prime-time series in network television, the Walt Disney show, variously titled *Disneyland*, *Walt Disney Presents*, and *The Wonderful World of Disney*. Today, as a mother with the single most important—and insidious—aid to child rearing, the VCR, I have gotten to see with my daughter these female morality plays hundreds of times. (I know, some of you are thinking, “What kind of a mother is she?” Answer: One who needs to cook dinner, take a shower, and read a newspaper headline once in a while.) I remember their effect on me, and I see, with regret, their effect on her.

*Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Peter Pan*, *Lady and the Tramp*, and *Snow White* got us baby boomers during the Paleozoic era of psyche formation, when the most basic features of our psychological landscape were oozing into place. And what got laid down? Primal images about good girls and bad girls, and about which kind of boys were the most irresistible.

First, there were the good and wonderful girls, the true princesses, the ones we were supposed to emulate. They were beautiful, of course, usually much more beautiful than anyone else, but completely unself-conscious about it—you never saw Snow White or Cinderella preening in front of some mirror. They were so virtuous, so warm and welcoming, so in tune with nature, that bluebirds

couldn't resist alighting on their heads or shoulders and surrounding them with birdsong. (I remember playing in the woods as a kid and feeling completely rejected when birds would only run away from me.) These girls were extremely hardworking, always scrubbing cement floors and serving food to others, and, despite the fact that they never heard one word of thanks, and instead just got more unfair abuse, they smiled happily, sang throughout their chores, and never, ever, ever, complained.

Because they were so beautiful and kind and young, they were detested by older, vindictive, murderous stepmothers or queens wearing too much eyeliner and eyeshadow, usually blue or purple. These women had way too much power for their own good, embodying the age-old truism that any power at all completely corrupted women and turned them into monsters. In their hands, power was lethal: it was used only to bolster their own overweening vanity, and to destroy what was pure and good in the world. In the ensuing battle between the innocent, deserving, self-sacrificing girl and the vain, black-hearted, covetous woman, the girl won in the end, rescued from female power run amok by some handsome prince she had met only once. She lay there, in a coma, or was locked in some garret, waiting, powerlessly, for some cipher of a guy she barely knew to give her her life back through a kiss so powerful it could raise Lazarus from the grave.

The only good women besides the princess were the chubby, postmenopausal fairy godmothers, asexual grandmas well beyond the age of successfully competing in the contest over “who's the fairest of them all.” Except for them, all the females were in competition, over who was prettiest, who was most appealing to men, who the birds and dogs liked best, or who had the smallest feet. With the advantage of hindsight, and the VCR, it becomes clear that Disney Studios, in films from *The Parent Trap* to *Mary Poppins*, was obsessed with female competition and seemed determined to offer us only two choices: the powerless but beloved masochist or the powerful but detested narcissist.

Take *Peter Pan*, for example. I loved it as a kid because I thought flying would be real neat. As a mother with a more jaundiced eye, I have a somewhat less charitable take. In the Disney version, one of the central themes is female competition over the attentions of a boy. Tinker Bell is a scheming, overly possessive, vain little chorus girl constantly admiring her reflection in mirrors or any available body of water. These scenes tell us right away she's a no-good little bitch. Wendy is a kind-hearted, servile, masochistic wimp who only wants to wait on boys. She is in awe of Peter from the moment she meets him, silently accepting the dismissive remarks he makes to her in the nursery about girls talking too much and so forth. When Wendy gets to Neverland, the vain and catty mermaids splash her with water and try to drive her away so they can have the happily self-absorbed Peter all to themselves.

In James Barrie's original version, Tinker Bell is indeed jealous of Wendy and does whatever she can to have her eliminated with extreme prejudice. But since she's mainly a flash of light, and described by Barrie as "slightly inclined to embonpoint"—plumpness—we don't get beat over the head with the relentless Disney equation: vanity means a girl is probably evil and deserves to die. And Barrie's Wendy has a mouth on her. From the moment she meets Peter she's pretty patronizing, telling him he's ignorant and conceited. The mermaids in this version splash everyone, male and female alike, because they don't like people, not because they constitute some harem competing with Wendy for Peter.

These differences may seem minor, but with the special license that animation allows, Disney was able to emphasize that girls do primarily two things—stare at themselves in the mirror and fight over boys—while the boys are more outward-looking and doing more important things. And what about Peter, this boy so irresistible to every female he meets? He is cocky, self-absorbed, egocentric, aloof, and indifferent to the feelings of the females around him. (The Tramp in *Lady and the Tramp*, also held up as a real charmer, has the same MO.) Peter likes playing the girls off one another and takes special

delight in the Wendy-mermaid catfight. He refuses to grow up and thus is supposed to be especially charming. Sound like any boyfriends or husbands you ever had?

Now the argument can be made that Disney, just like the other purveyors of pop culture to kids in the late 1950s and early 1960s, was simply reflecting the times, including all the taken-for-granted "truths" about jealousy, vanity, passivity, and a terror of mice being biologically mapped onto the genetic structure of girls. But Disney wasn't passively or innocently reflecting anything; he was actively emphasizing and exaggerating certain assumptions about women and girls while clearly ignoring others. All we have to do is compare his *Peter Pan* with the one starring Mary Martin (which ran on Broadway during the same decade) to see that the story worked fine, if not better, without Wendy being a helpless, fawning twit and Tinker Bell a narcissistic bimbo. But to too many men, or at least male cartoonists, the ongoing catfight between girls, especially beautiful girls, over some boy, any boy, was irresistible; they had to play it over and over—Betty versus Veronica, Lois Lane versus Lana Lang, and so on.

These cartoon dramas put that little voice in our heads, the one always warning us to beware of other girls, especially pretty ones or ones with too much makeup, and installed the little surveillance camera in there too, the one incessantly scanning others—and ourselves—to scrutinize who *was* the fairest of them all.<sup>3</sup> For, in truth, we were damned if we were vain and damned if we weren't. We learned, through these fairy tales, and certainly later through advertising, that we *had* to scrutinize ourselves all the time, identify our many imperfections, and learn to eliminate or disguise them, otherwise no one would ever love us. But we also learned that we had to be highly secretive about doing this: we couldn't appear to be obsessed with our appearance, for then no one would love us either.

No discussion of Walt Disney's influence on our tender psyches is complete without mentioning *The Mickey Mouse Club*, which ran from 1955 to 1959, featuring Karen and Cubby and, of course, Annette.<sup>4</sup> Annette stood out because she was clearly favored by Dis-

ney as the prettiest, and because she was getting “them.” You could see them, just a suggestion at first, then getting bigger each season, shaming the more flat-chested, freckle-faced girls, making Annette more enviable but also more of a joke. Annette’s emerging breasts made many of the boys I knew lust after her, but they also allowed these boys to snicker at her. So here was an uneasy early lesson. Girls were defined by their bodies, by whether their breasts were too big or too small, by whether they came in too fast or too slow, by the fact that these breasts simultaneously attracted and terrified boys. Girls were damned if they had big ones and damned if they had little ones, and were vulnerable, open, and exposed because they had them at all. This is what Annette, through no fault of her own, taught us. Shows like *The Mickey Mouse Club* influenced more than just my own self-image and my notions of how I should look and behave. They also shaped how real boys I knew sized up and treated me and my girlfriends.

Disney’s notions about the ennobling effects of female masochism were echoed by adult programming. *Queen for a Day*, which aired from 1956 to 1964 and was the number one daytime show in America, also became emblazoned on my plastic little psyche. Thirteen million of us were completely hooked on this game show-cum-psychodrama, a monument to the glories of female martyrdom and victimization.<sup>5</sup> Here was the premise. Four contestants were interviewed, one after the other, by Jack Bailey, one of the most condescending, smarmiest game show hosts ever. Each woman sheepishly recounted a really heart-tugging sob story and made a request for a prize she felt would lighten her load, or, more likely, someone else’s. Maybe she had six children, all under the age of seven, and had just been told she had to go to the hospital for a lifesaving operation. She would be laid up for several weeks. Her request: someone to take care of the kids while she was recuperating. Or maybe her husband and child suffered from severe asthma and could barely breathe without a vaporizer, but they couldn’t afford one unless *Queen for a Day* helped. They were always stories like these, about financial deprivation and

physical and emotional loss, about the isolation and sense of helplessness of many bereft housewives. One purpose of the show was to dramatize that there was no problem, no catastrophe that couldn’t be fixed by a new dishwasher or some costume jewelry.

Of the four women chosen for any show, there was always one who was much more pathetic. After all four had spilled their guts on national television, they sat side by side at a table, an applause meter superimposed on the screen under each one, their eyes darting like caged rabbits, waiting to be judged. Who was the most pathetic? As Bailey called out “contestant number one, contestant number two, contestant number three,” the audience was meant to clap the loudest and the longest for whichever woman was most pitiable, and she became Queen for a Day. She almost always burst into tears as she was handed a dozen roses, draped with a fake ermine-trimmed robe, and, of course, crowned. Then began the parade of consumer goods—the washers, dryers, knit dresses, Jell-O molds, Naugahyde recliners, year’s supply of Rice-a-Roni, matched luggage, cases of car wax, wrist-watches, swing sets, and gift certificates to the Spiegel catalog—that would solve her problems. These fetish objects, the witch doctor-host suggested, would obliterate any suspicion that the Queen for a Day and other women like her were trapped because economically, politically, and socially they were, in America, second-class citizens.

The message in *Queen for a Day* was that nothing was more glorious or elevating in a woman than masochism. The woman who suffered in silence, who worked liked a dog and put everyone else’s needs before her own, who washed men’s feet with her hair (like in all those 1950s Bible movies) and, when given the chance, asked nothing for herself—this was the deserving woman, the noble woman, the saint. There was a hint of immortality about all this, that these women would be remembered tearfully, living forever in the grateful hearts of those who knew, guiltily, they could never be as selfless or as noble.

If you’ve ever subjected yourself to the Douglas Sirk melodrama *Imitation of Life*, the number four box office hit in 1959, you know



what I mean. Here we have Lana Turner as Laura, a selfish, blond bitch who is always primping in front of a mirror and is obsessed with her career. She is Marilyn Quayle's worst nightmare, the mother who, once she gets a taste of professional success, callously relegates her child to the care of others so she can claw her way to the top. The word *sacrifice* means nothing to this bloodsucker. She "takes in" a black woman, Annie (Juanita Moore), and her daughter, Sarah Jane (Susan Kohner), and they all live together for the next fifteen years or so. Annie, who is more beatific, good, and holy than the Virgin herself, raises Susie (Sandra Dee), Laura's daughter, while Laura becomes a famous actress.

To make a really long story short, the fair-skinned Sarah Jane keeps trying to pass for white, and since Annie, who's obviously black, kinda makes this hard to do, the Judas Sarah Jane treats her saintly mother like a leper, denying her in public and running away to dance half naked in strip joints. But no matter how spiteful and hideous Sarah Jane is, Annie never gets fed up or even a bit peeved. Annie just keeps loving her, and all she wants out of life is to give Sarah Jane money and get an occasional, begrudging hug. At the same time, Annie selflessly waits on Laura, runs her house, and becomes the real mother figure for Susie. The thanks she gets is that Sarah Jane runs away from home for good and says she never wants to see her mother again.

At the end of the movie, worn out from self-neglect and a broken heart, Annie dies, and, boy, is Sarah Jane sorry then. *Everybody's* sorry. The death and funeral scenes are some of the most effective tear-wrenching moments ever filmed. On her deathbed, with the violins and chorus of angelic soprano voices virtually pumping the water out of our tear ducts, Annie sets a new standard of female self-sacrifice. This is genuine "Forgive them, Lord, for they know not what they do" material. As Laura kneels at her bedside, her chin quivering and her eyes widened as if she's watching the Virgin speak at Lourdes, Annie says, "I want everything that's left to go to Sarah Jane . . . tell her I know I was selfish and if I loved her too much I'm

sorry." By now Sirk has us where he wants us: we in the audience are slobbering indignantly to ourselves, "*Selfish!? You?!?! Why, that little ingrate . . .*"

Annie keeps laying it on: "My pearl necklace—I want you to give it to Susie." She turns to the black minister who's come to the house. "Reverend, I want your wife to have my fur scarf." Then she tells Laura that every Christmas for the past fifteen years or so, she's been sending money to their old milkman from the first cold-water flat they all lived in because he had been so tolerant about their being late with their bills. And here's the kicker—she's selflessly sent the money in Laura's name as well, even though the now filthy rich Laura would have never, ever thought of such a gesture. Yet Annie made sure her self-centered boss would be warmly remembered as an altruist. Annie's final request is to send the former milkman a fifty-dollar bill. As she begins to fade, with Laura, self-absorbed to the end, screaming at her, "You can't leave me—I won't let you," Annie mumbles, "Our wedding day . . . and the day we die are the great events of life."

After we're all given time to bawl our eyes out over this death scene, the camera cuts to a funeral service fit for a head of state, where none other than Mahalia Jackson is belting out a spiritual about redemption and relief in the afterlife. The church is packed with mourners and bleachers of flowers, and Annie's casket is covered with a blanket of lilies. Just after the casket is loaded into the hearse, Sarah Jane appears, hurling herself onto the casket and sobbing, "Mama, I didn't mean it, I didn't mean it, can you hear me? I *did* love you, I *did* love you." Now there's barely a dry eye in the house; even some men are blubbering. As Laura pries Sarah Jane off the casket, Sarah Jane yells, "I killed my mother!" The funeral procession begins, headed by mounted police, who are followed by a brass band and dozens of friends marching, row upon row. Then comes the hearse. Covered with gilt ornamentation and drawn by four white horses, the carriage is right out of a fairy tale, and not unlike the hearses favored by the royal families of Europe.



As the choral music swells, and hundreds of bystanders mourn Annie's passing, we see that, in death, she has finally gotten the attention, the praise, the credit, and the glory she deserves. Through her martyrdom, she has become larger than life, eternal, a legend. All are desperately sorry that they didn't appreciate her more when she was alive. Everyone, especially her wretched daughter, is sorry she's gone; no one will forget her now, for she has achieved immortality. No wonder my mother used to say with some regularity, "You'll be sorry when I'm dead and gone." If you want never to be forgotten as a woman, if you want to live on in the hearts and minds of legions, be a doormat your entire life. Sure, there's some deferred gratification involved, but the payoff in the end is really big. When you're feeling down and as if no one appreciates all you do for others, just imagine your own death and how much they'll all cry, and you'll feel better.

What's especially interesting here is the reversal Sirk does: the fair, blond woman is self-centered and bad, the darker woman is Christ-like and good. Usually in popular culture it was the other way around, although black women, when they got movie or TV roles at all, could only be selfless earth mothers who spoke in malapropisms and loved white children more than their own. We see here how black women and white women were used against each other in American popular culture, the white woman embodying standards of beauty impossible for the black woman to achieve, but the black woman serving as a powerful moral rebuke to the self-indulgent narcissism of the white woman who dares to think of herself. *Imitation of Life* was simply one of the more over-the-top parables, resonating with the sacrificial rituals of *Queen for a Day*, about women learning the importance of behaving like flagellants.

At night on TV in the age of *Sputnik* there were the infamous family sitcoms, like *Father Knows Best*, *Leave It to Beaver*, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, and *The Donna Reed Show*, with their smiling, benevolent, self-effacing, pearl-clad moms who loved to vacuum in high heels. Their messages about a woman's proper place were sometimes surprisingly bald. In a 1959 episode of *Father Knows Best*,

entitled "Kathy Becomes a Girl," Kathy, a.k.a. Kitten, has entered junior high, but because she's a tomboy, she's having trouble making friends. She still likes to climb trees and wrestle with boys, while the other girls like to wear frilly dresses and wash their hands a lot. Even though Kathy protests, "Who wants to be like those silly girls?" her mom and older sister, Betty, know she needs and wants to become a real girl. Mom says she was a tomboy once too, but she knew when to "put down the baseball bat and pick up the lipstick." Betty shoves her into a bubble bath and then puts makeup on her, advising, "Nothing will make a boy sit up and take notice like a little glamour." But, of course, it's the talk with Dad that clinches her transformation. "You can become a queen to some man," advises Dad, who then describes the "cute tricks" Mom uses. "Being dependent—a little helpless now and then" is an excellent strategy, because men like to be gallant, "the big protectors." This is a revelation to Kathy. "We girls have got it made—all we do is sit back!" she exclaims. Then she gets her final piece of advice from Dad: "The worst thing you can do is to try to beat a man at his own game. You just beat the women at theirs."

A year later, we witnessed "Betty's Career Problem." Betty finds herself in constant competition for scholastic honors and class offices with a young man named Cliff Bowman. Then a job opens up at a local department store for an assistant merchandise buyer, and Betty and Cliff find themselves in the personnel office both applying for it. Cliff tells Betty not to waste her time, since no firm will hire pretty girls for career jobs. "They know from experience that pretty girls usually get married and chuck the job." The interviewer, who hires Cliff right away, reaffirms this position. Even though Betty insists that she's "dead serious about this job," he replies, "I don't know what to say to you, Miss Anderson. We find that training pretty girls for career jobs doesn't pay off." He does offer her a modeling job in an upcoming fashion show but advises, "Miss Anderson, take inventory of yourself—are you after a job or a man? You can't have both." It turns out that Betty has to model a wedding gown, and Cliff has been

hired to model the groom's suit. As they stand there in their costumes, Betty announces she won't pursue a career with the department store after all. "I've found something that you could never do better than I can—be a bride," she says, and the sound track bursts into applause. So much for Betty's delusions about working outside the home.

Television shows were filled with such predictable swill. But they kept butting up against real life. In the world of politics and culture, a new kind of woman emerged on the scene in 1961. Our new, thirty-one-year-old first lady, Jacqueline Kennedy, was a one-woman revolution, and an extremely important symbol for baby boom girls just entering adolescence. Only one first lady had been younger than Jackie, but that was back in 1886, much too long ago to count. Jackie personified a generation of women, who, in a variety of quiet but significant ways, represented a departure from 1950s stuffiness, conformity, and confinement. No Mamie Eisenhower sausage-link bangs or crinolined skirts for her. Jackie's smooth, glamorous bouffant hairdo seemed to symbolize a new, relaxed style, an uncoiling of the constraints that had hemmed in other, older first ladies. Jackie was tradition and modernity, the old femininity and new womanhood, seemingly sustained in a perfect suspension. She was a wife and mother, but she had also worked outside the home. She deferred to her husband, but at times outshone him. The week of JFK's inauguration, it was Jackie's picture, not Jack's, that appeared on the cover of *Time*. She was young, beautiful, slim, stylish, and rich—a true princess, it seemed—who, it turned out, read voraciously, loved sports, and had feet the size of pontoons. Jackie Kennedy, in the early 1960s, was the most charismatic woman in America, possibly in the world, and she was critically important to baby boom culture because of the way she fractured the old fairy tales.

The press couldn't get enough of Jackie. And it wasn't just *Time* or *Newsweek*. She found herself on the covers of all those trashy movie magazines I used to gorge on, like *Motion Picture*, *Modern Screen*, *Movie Stars*, and *TV Radio Mirror*, that ran stories like "Is Bur-

ton Jealous of Liz's Children?" or "I Was Vince Edwards' First Wife." By December 1962, a picture of Jackie or some screaming headline about her had appeared on the cover of *Photoplay* in ten of the previous seventeen issues. She couldn't be on all of them because there had to be room for that cuckolding home wrecker Liz Taylor. They did share the *Photoplay* cover once, with a headline that pronounced them "America's 2 Queens!" The other Jackie headlines were great, like "Jackie Turned Her Back on Hollywood" or "The Illness That's Breaking Jackie's Heart." The entire magazine industry—from *Redbook* to *U.S. News and World Report* to *The New York Times Magazine*—was obsessed with her.

Certain images were ubiquitous, such as the shot of her working as an "inquiring photographer" for the *Washington Times-Herald* in the early 1950s. She made this look like a fun job for a young woman. After all, she got to interview politicians and socialites, and she covered, under her own byline, the coronation of Queen Elizabeth.<sup>6</sup> And we constantly saw her horseback riding, even falling off her horse, as well as swimming and waterskiing, prompting *U.S. News and World Report* to gush that she was "the most athletic wife of a president in memory."<sup>7</sup> She also dared to wear slacks in public, some of them "shocking pink," all of them "tapered," enraging old farts who favored midcalf shirtwaist dresses and hats with veils as the only appropriate first lady attire.

Much was made of the fact that she was smart—a "certifiable egghead," said *Newsweek*<sup>8</sup>—and painted; spoke French, Italian, and Spanish; loved literature, art, classical music, and the opera; and had attended Vassar, George Washington University, and the Sorbonne. "Once," reported *Time*, "when Jack lost some notes from Tennyson's *Ulysses* that he wanted to use in a speech, Jackie obligingly quoted excerpts, from childhood recollection."<sup>9</sup> In another widely publicized story, reporters seemed amazed that she knew the ancient Greek origin of the word *ostracize*. I remember vividly the time she went to France with the president and did something he couldn't do at all: addressed the crowds who flocked to see them in French. The

adulation she received—hordes who yelled “Vive Jackie! Vive Jackie!”—prompted one of her husband’s famous quips, “I am the man who accompanied Jacqueline Kennedy to Paris.” The same thing happened when they went to Latin America in 1961. *U.S. News and World Report* headlined its story about the trip this way: “First Lady Gives a Lesson in Diplomacy.” “Breaking the language barrier for the President” by addressing the crowds in Spanish, Jackie stole the spotlight as “a new kind of ambassador of good will for the U.S.”<sup>10</sup> When she went to India a few months later, she was hailed as the *Amriki Rani*, Queen of America. After a visit to England, one Fleet Street reporter summed up her influence this way: “Jacqueline Kennedy has given the American people from this day on one thing they had always lacked—majesty.”<sup>11</sup>

Jackie even added the egghead’s touch to decorating in her highly publicized restoration of the White House. She was appalled, when she first toured the White House, that it reflected so little of the history of the presidency. “It looks like a house where nothing has ever taken place,” she observed. “There is no trace of the past.”<sup>12</sup> She made it clear that she was not assuming the simply female role of redecorating. She was directing a historically informed and accurate restoration. This required (the press was quick to note) knowledge, brains, and organizational skill. She took on the role of curator, persuading Congress to designate the White House a national museum and insisting that its furnishings should represent the full sweep of American history. Yet after watching her assume such a commanding role as first lady, after hearing about what a well-educated intellect she was, it was a shock to watch her conduct that TV tour of the White House in February 1962. She had such a whispery, soft, little girl’s voice, a voice like, well, Marilyn Monroe’s. (Only later would we appreciate the full irony of this.) The little girl voice just didn’t seem to match the eggheaded, accomplished woman. In an October 1962 Gallup poll, people said one of the things they liked least about Jackie was her voice.<sup>13</sup>

But the big story, aside from her fabulous wardrobe, was her feet. This was a media obsession—were they only size 9AA, as had been speculated, or were they really 10, or 10½, or even, as some had whispered, 11? When she was on her tour of India, Jackie had to take off her shoes and put on violet velvet slippers to visit the memorial to Mahatma Gandhi. When she did, Keyes Beech, an enterprising correspondent for the *Chicago Daily News*, looked in her shoes and immediately cabled home with this scoop of the year: “I can state with absolute authority that she wears 10A and not 10AA.”<sup>14</sup> Why did anyone care, and what did it mean? The fact that Jackie Kennedy’s foot would never have fit into Cinderella’s size 4½ glass slipper seemed highly symbolic at this moment in history. For me, it was a personal vindication and a relief, since my feet were edging toward size 9 and I desperately needed to believe you could still be thought of as a girl if your feet were as big as your brother’s.

But that was exactly the point. Jackie had these traditionally “masculine” qualities—she was smart and loved intellectual pursuits, she was knowledgeable about history and the arts, she wore pants, and she had big feet—yet she was still completely feminine, a princess, a queen. She knew how to take charge, and she also knew how to be gracious and ornamental. For those of us raised on Cinderella and Snow White, she suggested new possibilities for the princess role. Being educated, having some knowledge your husband didn’t have, was glamorous, even enviable. This was important because women’s magazines were still telling girls that the way to land a man was to pretend you were dumber than he was. Jackie Kennedy told us all kinds of subterfuges and compromises were possible (as long as you looked like Jackie Kennedy, of course).

Poised on the brink of the 1960s, facing the abyss of the teen and preteen years, the girls of America already had their heads jammed with images and fantasies about how their lives might proceed. We had learned how to put ourselves under surveillance, and learned about the importance of female masochism. Then, in August 1962,

we heard that the greatest living sex symbol in America, Marilyn Monroe, had died of an overdose of pills. Is this, we wondered, what too much beauty, too much sex appeal, and what appeared at the time like too little brains got you—an early, tawdry death? Too much has been written about Marilyn Monroe, and I won't add to the output. But her suicide did represent the death of a certain kind of femininity, and a certain kind of female victimization. When she died, it seemed to me, even back then, that an era had passed, and that the seemingly dumb-blond, busty bombshell would no longer exert the cultural or sexual pull that she once did. For while all these twisted lessons about being nice no matter what, never complaining, and being a doormat were well threaded into my psyche, Marilyn Monroe, *Sleeping Beauty*, and all those pathetic women on *Queen for a Day* made me realize I wanted something else too. I wanted more control than they had. And, one way or another, I was going to get it.

As I watched all these martyrs on the large and small screens, I also watched a woman in real life: my mother. She didn't seem to have much more control over her life than they did, and, as a result, she was what you might call testy much of the time. So it wasn't just that I wanted to avoid ending up as *Queen for a Day*. I especially wanted to avoid ending up like Mom.

## Mama Said

The most popular prime-time shows in the late 1950s and early 1960s were westerns, and those of us glued to the tube back then can still identify, upon hearing the first five notes, the themes to *Sugarfoot*, *The Rifleman*, *Rawhide*, *Maverick*, or *Have Gun Will Travel*. Of the top twenty-five prime-time shows in the 1959–60 season, eleven were about cowboys with shiny metal oblongs of various sizes strapped to their thighs, and their oblongs were bigger and faster than anyone else's. Or they had long, sinewy, powerful ropes that they twirled masterfully to render someone else helpless. They were often astride muscular, thrusting, panting steeds, the horses themselves equipped with guns and lassos, all the various phalluses between, on, and around the cowboy's legs rushing, galloping, stiffening toward a showdown. Because females didn't have any of these cylindrical accessories, they had to stay to home and take care of the youngins, bake corn bread, and darn the cowboys' smelly socks. I watched all these shows that extolled male adventurism and naturalized female drudgery with someone who was extremely pissed off on pretty much a daily basis, my mother.

Unlike June Cleaver, Donna Reed, or Harriet Nelson, my mother worked outside the home—as well as inside it—once my brother and I were established in school. She was not alone—in 1960, one out of five women with children age six and younger was in the labor force, and nearly 38 percent of women over the age of sixteen had a job. Their median income was only 60 percent of what

SUSAN J. DOUGLAS

Where  
the  
Girls  
Are

.....

*Growing Up Female  
with the Mass Media*

T I M E S  B O O K S

R A N D O M H O U S E

P  
94.5  
W652  
U634  
1994

Copyright © 1994 by Susan J. Douglas

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in the United States by Times Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

*Book Design by Naomi Osnos and M. Kristen Bearnse*

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following for permission to reprint previously published material:

*EMI Music Publishing:* Excerpt from "Sweet Talkin' Guy" by Douglas Morris, Elliot Greenberg, Barbara Baer and Robert Schwartz. Copyright © 1966 and renewed 1994 by Screen Gems-EMI Music, Inc. and Ronzique Music, Inc.

All rights controlled and administered by Screen Gems-EMI Music, Inc. (BMI). Excerpt from "Chains" by Gerry Goffin and Carole King. Copyright © 1962 and renewed 1990 by Screen Gems-EMI Music, Inc. (BMI). All rights reserved. International Copyright Secured. Reprinted by permission.

*Stone Agate Music:* Excerpt from "Nowhere to Run" by Holland/Dozier/Holland. Copyright © 1965 by Stone Agate Music. Excerpt from "Too Many Fish in the Sea" by Norman Whitfield and Edward Holland, Jr. Copyright © 1964 by Stone Agate Music. Reprinted by permission.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Douglas, Susan J.

Where the girls are : growing up female with the mass media /

Susan J. Douglas. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8129-2206-9

1. Mass media and women—United States. 2. United States—Popular culture. I. Title.

P94.5.W652U634 1994

302.3'082—dc20

94-490

Manufactured in the United States of America

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

*For my incandescent colleagues,  
Joan Braderman, Meredith Michaels, and Mary Russo,  
and for T. R. Durham, the Leader of the Pack*