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We live in the age of the full disclosure, so I am obliged to issue one about this biography of Cosmopolitan magazine's legendary editor: I'm in it.

Commenting on Helen Gurley Brown's firm belief that what men don't know about a woman's sexual history won't hurt them, her biographer Jennifer Scanlon writes: "Her all-time favorite Cosmopolitan piece, 'The Contraception Capers,' offered a humorous 1970s look back on sexual practices during the 1950s." It was about birth control before the Pill and my original title was "The Sperm and I." I liked mine better and so did Helen, but she decided that it was too explicit for "upstairs," as she called the always-nervous Hearst executives, so she presented them with a toned-down title before they had a chance to object. As one of the editors later explained, this etched in their minds a portrait of a suddenly self-chastened Helen, rendering them sufficiently hors de combat long enough to enable her to get the entire explicit article into the magazine without being challenged.

Helen Gurley Brown combines the deftness of a Talleyrand with a compulsive girlishness that, during her 32 years as editor-in-chief, made her italicize every word having the slightest emotional context and decorate Cosmo's breathless copy with strings of exclamation marks. To call her a study in contradictions is an understatement because there are more than two of her, but Jennifer Scanlon never meets an incarnation that fazes her in her recounting of what she calls a "delightfully knotty life story."

Now 87, HGB has been kicked upstairs to the post of Cosmo's international editor at a salary of $2 million a year, but she could match any politician in the poorer-than-thou campaign testimonial. Born in Green Forest, Ark., a tiny town in the Ozarks, she has frequently said: "I had no money, no college degree, an average IQ, wall-to-wall acne, and my family were hillbillies." They weren't. Her mother, whose family traced
itself back to the earliest Spanish explorers, taught school. Her paternal great-great-grandfather's will left 13 slaves to his widow; her father graduated from law school, served as Arkansas fish-and-game commissioner, and was elected to the state legislature, where he voted against the women's suffrage amendment. He was getting ready to run for secretary of state when he was killed in a freak elevator accident in the state house when Helen was ten.

Hard times followed. Her older sister caught polio and was permanently paralyzed. Her shellshocked mother took in sewing for a while, then moved herself and her daughters to Los Angeles and fed her resentment by running down Helen's looks. At this, the lowest point in her life, she was what Southerners call a "poor thing" and what she, years later, called a "mouseburger" -- the kind of girl she would inspire, instruct, and build up, first in her bestselling 1962 book, Sex and the Single Girl, and then in the pages of Cosmo.

She did not remain a mouseburger for long. The acne cleared up and, by dint of sheer determination and charm, she became one of the "in" crowd at her Los Angeles high school. And though she would continue to lay claim to a mediocre intellect, she was valedictorian of her 1939 class back when Los Angeles had one of the finest school systems in the country. It was at this time that she threw off her mother's power to erode her self-confidence. She had bettered herself by trying her damnedest. Meanwhile her mother, instead of setting her cap for an alpha male who could take care of her, had given up and married the Good Humor man.

Unable to afford college, Helen went to business school and began the climb up the office ladder, in one of the few white-collar occupations then open to women. She had 17 secretarial jobs before landing as a copywriter at the Foote, Cone & Belding ad agency. Years later she would tell an interviewer, "I've never worked anywhere . . . without being sexually involved with somebody in the office," so we can simply count her jobs, or we can see what she said when she was more passionately aroused: "Use your own guts and energy to improve yourself, your job, your intellect, and every other possible thing. You can't sleep your way to the top or even to the middle, and there is no free lunch. You have to do it yourself, so you might as well get started."

Scanlon calls this "Horatio Alger feminism," designed to appeal to the young, lower-middle-class, non-college women who read Cosmo. It was one of the three trajectories of feminism that competed in the period starting in the 1960s. Another was Betty Friedan's Feminine Mystique feminism, driven by the "problem without a name," i.e., the vapidity of suburban life endured by college-educated women who felt their education and talents going to waste in wife-and-motherland. A third was Movement Feminism, the left-wing variety promoted by Ms. Magazine that coined
"sexism," "sex object," and "male chauvinist" and held workshops on the evils of capitalism.

It was inevitable that HGB would clash with the Movement. She regularly enraged them with statements like "If you're not a sex object, you've got trouble" and -- when they called cosmetics unnatural -- "Cosmetics were never meant to be natural, and men have always known it is fun to be fooled." But what really made her lose her cool was their campaign to stamp out sexual harassment. This involved sacred ground because most sexual harassment happens in offices. A Cosmo Girl without an office is like Bwana without a game preserve. There must be great herds of rutting wildebeest stampeding out of elevators, thundering down tiled halls, headed straight toward the sleek, tawny lionesses lurking in wait for them. If there aren't, you've got trouble.

The threatening possibilities unraveled HGB to such an extent that she told, publicly, a nostalgic story about a good-natured game called "Scuttle" they used to play at a radio station where she had once worked. The men would chase the female employees around the office and try to pull off their panties. This, she averred, was just friendly sexual teasing and feminists were taking it far too seriously.

You can take the girl out of the South but you can't take the South out of the girl, at least not entirely. HGB possesses an instinctive, kneejerk patriotism; during the debate over drafting women she said she would willingly die for her country. But the rest of her politics have undergone a sea change that Scanlon describes in one of the book's most fascinating passages:

Her leanings were from the start conservative if not libertarian in their favoring of the free market. "I believe so devoutly in the private enterprise system," she stated, but ultimately feminism complicated her relationship to the American political system. . . . For much of her adult life, [she would] swing her vote from Republican to Democratic candidates as issues moved her. In the end, though, her political leanings were socially liberal and fiscally conservative, so as the Republican party moved further to the right she found herself, somewhat to her surprise, moving further toward the Democratic party. The abortion question in particular piqued her, and although she initially voted for Ronald Reagan because of his adherence to strict definitions of the free market, she found it difficult to fathom how someone so enamored of liberty came out against abortion rights. Her own stance on abortion, among the most liberal in circulation, would steer her so clearly toward the Democrats that in later life she would be more likely, regardless of her feelings on other issues, to vote Democratic. By 2007, when . . . asked by Vanity Fair magazine to name the living person she admired most, she would, without hesitation, choose Bill Clinton.
Jennifer Scanlon delivers Helen Gurley Brown's "delightfully knotty life story" in a neat and satisfying package, notwithstanding the contradictions that -- she admits -- leave her puzzled. As she notes, in a felicitous phrase: "The gift of biography is that it allows these various stories to tangle with each other." A professor of gender and women's studies at Bowdoin, Scanlon rescues the reputation of her own field, long notorious for its droning manifestos, with her witty and consistently readable literary style. This is not an authorized biography; Helen Gurley Brown has not read it, but she granted the author permission to quote from her published and unpublished writings covering her childhood up to the present, now stored in 47 boxes of literary papers at Smith College. In other words, this is not chick lit but cultural history, the first serious biography of the woman who, in Scanlon's view, "ushered in and has long continued to define the feminist mainstream."

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