

'Having it all' promise putting women in pressure cooker

Book review

Sunday, October 25, 2009

By MiChelle Jones



Post-Gazette

Demonstrators oppose the Equal Rights Amendment in Pittsburgh's Market Square on July 1, 1982.

What is going on with American women? One might well wonder, given the recent revelations that women today are not only unhappier than men, but also -- remarkably -- they are apparently unhappier than their counterparts were 40 years ago.

How is that possible given the legal, social and even biological constraints in place before changes affected by the women's movement?

In the weeks following the release of Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers' "The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness," the state of the American woman has been a topic for news and chat shows, periodicals and blogs. The timing couldn't be better for the publication of New York Times op-ed columnist Gail Collins' follow-up to her bestselling "America's Women."

Ms. magazine and NOW, Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin, "Ozzie and Harriet" and "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," the pill, Roe v. Wade, the Equal Rights Amendment, Gloria Steinem and Lilly Ledbetter, pantsuits and high heels. All are part of the "Amazing

**"WHEN EVERYTHING
CHANGED"**

By Gail Collins
Little, Brown (\$27.99)

Journey of American Women From 1960 to the Present," the subtitle of Collins' book.

It's social history at its best, an engaging and accessible collection of facts fleshed out with cameo appearances by and capsule biographies of people who played a role in transforming the lives of American women.

Some were famous and influential, others were ordinary people who found themselves at the center of battles for equal access to things now frequently taken for granted, including obtaining credit in one's own right, applying for jobs or simply wearing pants in public.

In chapters divided into easily digestible segments set off by tantalizing subheads pulled from the subsequent paragraphs ("An airline or a warehouse?" "We can do it" "He's small"), Collins establishes context with examples of discrimination or oppression in all areas of life.

From there, she shows how the women's movement came about through a "perfect storm" collision of elements. One contributing factor was what writer Jane O'Reilly calls the "click of recognition." This, Collins tells us, is "the moment when a woman realized how the men in her life really saw her, or where her place in society really was."

That moment could be discovering her name was not on the couple's mortgage or that her fiance felt entitled to decide where she could or couldn't work.

Employment is a major topic. Collins uses it to make several perception vs. reality statements. By 1960, "more than 30 percent of American wives were holding down jobs, including almost 40 percent of wives with school-age children," Collins writes, contrasting that statistic with images perpetrated by television programs of the 1950s and early '60s. She also notes that the many magazines extolling the joys of housework were at the time in fact edited by men (and fooling no one).

Helen Gurley Brown's "Sex and the Single Girl" (1962), "Our Bodies, Ourselves" (first available in 1970) and Betty Friedan's "The Feminine Mystique" (1963), on the other hand, are just a few of the books Collins uses to show that there were also a number of women writing about new ideas, expectations and realities experienced by themselves and their peers.

"When Everything Changed" wraps up with chapters observing how far women have come -- a viable presidential candidate, for example -- tempered by acknowledging the challenges they still face. The Equal Rights Amendment was never ratified and on average women still earn only 77 cents to the dollar compared with men.

Collins also addresses backlash to the feminist movement, from conservatives as well as younger women who've never known a world without the freedom and choice to pursue (almost) any future they can imagine. And TV commercials continue to show women gleefully picking up after sloppy husbands and spill-happy children.

Perhaps women are unhappier now because they now face pressure to have -- and do -- it all.

Nashville resident MiChelle Jones proudly tagged along to conferences and went to her mother's office long before Take Your Daughter to Work Day.

"Bob Hoover's Book Club" is available exclusively at [PG+](#), a members-only web site of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. Our [introduction to PG+](#) gives you all the details.



First published on October 25, 2009 at 12:00 am