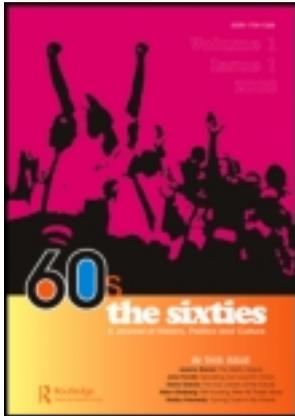


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America and the pill: a history of promise, peril, and liberation, by Elaine Tyler May, New York, Basic Book, 2010, 209 pp., US\$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 0465011527

Ruth Rosen^a

^a University of California

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BOOK REVIEWS

America and the pill: a history of promise, peril, and liberation, by Elaine Tyler May, New York, Basic Book, 2010, 209 pp., US\$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 0465011527

Read most histories of the Sixties and you quickly learn that the 1950s morphed into the next notorious decade because of what important men wrote and did. Their brilliant criticism of the organization man, *Playboy*'s challenge to conventional male responsibilities to the family, the Beats' defiant bohemian counterculture, and MAD's hilarious dissection of the absurdity of the culture always almost appear to have led the way to a new decade.

And they did. But this is a partial answer to what changed American culture and society in the 1960s and beyond. Fewer historians have asked how women fit into this picture and when they do, the narrative gets more textured and complicated. While men were rethinking their experiences in a new corporate postwar culture, women actually changed that culture. Paul Goodman, David Riesman, C. Wright Mills, for example, asked questions that caused both young men and women to question their society's values. But Helen Gurley Brown's *Sex and the Single Woman* (1962) – like Hugh Hefner's *Playboy* – gave women permission to have sex outside marriage, ridiculed aspects of marriage, and urged women to have affairs, rather than weed crabgrass. One year later, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) encouraged housewives to find their own identity, desires, and careers outside of their family and homes. In other words, while men were seeking to reinvent new lives, women also began to redefine how they might live in a changing world. Elsewhere I have dubbed this the “gender gap,” the fact that both young men and women sought to exchange the lives of their parents for something quite new and different.

Also missing from traditional stories of the Sixties, which made women's dreams at least plausible, was the emergence of the pill, which changed everything.

Elaine's May's splendid history of who did the research for the pill, the way it was distributed, and how it affected both men and women, is a major contribution to the history of women, gender relations, sexuality, and technology.

The pill did something historic: it ruptured sexuality from reproduction for the first time in human history. And American women responded with considerable enthusiasm. By 1964, May reminds us, 6.5 million married and unmarried women were using this new form of contraception. Proponents of the pill predicted that it would cure the population bomb, create happier marriages, and end poverty. Opponents feared that women would become promiscuous, violate the Catholic Church's holy sacraments, and emasculate men who would no longer have control over contraception and women's bodies.

Oddly, most of the discourse swirling around the pill did not address how it would affect women themselves or the cultural wars that would polarize a nation

obsessed with sexuality, abortion, the “morning after pill,” and women’s reproductive rights in general. Nor did most people realize at first that the medicalization of contraception would give doctors control over women’s access to planning their sexual lives and spacing their children. At stake was women’s health, their right to control their own bodies, their difficult struggle to move from saying “yes” to a new counterculture after being taught to say “no” to retain their reputations.

The pill caused a revolution and young women – brought up in the 1950s – were the pioneers who stumbled their way through this new confusing world. Some men welcomed, as May notes the new sexual freedom. But others feared what men had lost – control over women’s sexuality. Psychiatrist Andrew Ferber, for example, wrote that the pill was causing “male impotence” because “the male libido depends on culture. In our culture, the ability of the man to procreate is perhaps irrevocably tied to sex drive” (p. 68).

To excavate the experiences of the young women who first used the pill, May uses stories solicited from the Internet. Although I have some discomfort with this methodology and would have preferred personal interviews, her respondents do, for the most part, recount the nausea, dizziness, stress, and anxiety that these young pioneers experienced.

Missing from these stories, however, is the strong ambivalence, not often expressed, that the same women felt about losing an excuse for refusing sex. Elsewhere I have described how a university asked the women in my freshmen class if they wanted to eliminate a curfew. To my astonishment, the women voted to keep it. Only years later, did I understand that maintaining a curfew gave young women an excuse that the pill had eliminated. Raised to say “no,” the girls from the 1950s were suddenly thrust into a sexual revolution that pilloried them as prudish if they did not say “yes.” Such stories would have greatly enriched May’s story of how one generation, raised to be good girls, had to cope with the freedom conferred by the pill.

May offers an important chapter on the seemingly endless effort to create a pill for men. What women had to endure for freedom from pregnancy was unacceptable to men – weight gain, a variety of ailments and discomforts. Now, in 2012, there is still no male pill. It has become, as she points out, the new norm that women’s bodies must bear the responsibility and dangers – from both contraception and child bearing.

Almost a decade after the pill was approved, Barbara Seaman wrote *The Doctors’ Case against the Pill* (1969). Seaman’s book, along with the start of the women’s health movement, ignited decades of debate about how a variety of treatments, including contraception, were affecting American women’s health. Arguably, this movement was the greatest accomplishment of the modern women’s movement. Watchdog groups, congressional testimony by feminist researchers, changes in medical protocols and research, and critical challenges to how physicians treated women, transformed both medical research and practice.

Inevitably, the possibility of sexual freedom without the fear of pregnancy divided a nation accustomed to viewing women as good or bad, depending on their sexual behavior. Debates only deepened after the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision legalized abortion.

When the “morning after pill” was approved, the debate only grew noisier. Why should a woman have a chance to “absolve” her behavior after behaving “badly?” It was not until 2006 that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) finally

approved the sale of the drug as available over the counter, which circumvented seeing a physician. But it was not always easy. As one respondent notes, “Morning-after pills are a great way to make sure a single night of passion doesn’t ruin a woman’s life” (p. 163). But it was often difficult to find because of popular opposition, including those felt by anti-choice pharmacists. One woman recounted her frustrating effort to buy it without a doctor’s prescription:

They claim it’s sold “over the counter,” but I still had to go stand in line at the pharmacist counter just to ask for permission to buy it. I wouldn’t have minded doing that, but I had to go to six different pharmacies ... before finding one that had emergency contraception in stock ... I understood when I was told the first time, “Sorry, we’re out of stock.” But five times? (p. 165)

May’s accessible history of the history of the pill confirms how much historians miss when they focus exclusively on what men said and did. The pill changed women’s choices, created new possibilities – sexual pleasure without fear of pregnancy, childlessness, and planned families – all of which profoundly contributed to the important choices women made during their formative years. The pill was a precondition, in many ways, for a modern women’s movement that would question and debate every aspect of life in American society and culture during the next four decades.

May’s story would have been stronger if she had discussed, with greater rigor, the important legacy left by the emergence of the pill. It is important for everyone to realize that it is largely women’s sexual behavior that changed during the 20th century. The debates over women’s sexuality also became a political litmus test in American political culture, a conclusion that is more important than what the pill did or did not achieve. Still, this is a short, well-written book by one of the best and most penetrating historians of family life and sexuality and it deserves a warm welcome from scholars and the general public.

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Ruth Rosen
University of California
rosen@berkeley.edu
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A saving remnant: the radical lives of Barbara Deming and David McReynolds, by Martin Duberman, New York, The New Press, 2011, 336 pp., \$27.95 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-595-58323-9

In the wake of the largely bloodless Egyptian revolution, organizers have shown renewed interest in nonviolent traditions of struggle. Simultaneously, there seems to be a growing interest in the history of the post-1960s US Left, as indicated by the