



America's Women: 400 Years of Dolls, Drudges, Helpmates, and Heroines (P.S.)

By Gail Collins

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America's Women: 400 Years of Dolls, Drudges, Helpmates, and Heroines (P.S.) By Gail Collins

America's Women tells the story of more than four centuries of history. It features a stunning array of personalities, from the women peering worriedly over the side of the Mayflower to feminists having a grand old time protesting beauty pageants and bridal fairs. Courageous, silly, funny, and heartbreaking, these women shaped the nation and our vision of what it means to be female in America.

By culling the most fascinating characters -- the average as well as the celebrated -- Gail Collins, the editorial page editor at the *New York Times*, charts a journey that shows how women lived, what they cared about, and how they felt about marriage, sex, and work. She begins with the lost colony of Roanoke and the early southern "tobacco brides" who came looking for a husband and sometimes -- thanks to the stupendously high mortality rate -- wound up marrying their way through three or four. Spanning wars, the pioneering days, the fight for suffrage, the Depression, the era of Rosie the Riveter, the civil rights movement, and the feminist rebellion of the 1970s, *America's Women* describes the way women's lives were altered by dress fashions, medical advances, rules of hygiene, social theories about sex and courtship, and the ever-changing attitudes toward education, work, and politics. While keeping her eye on the big picture, Collins still notes that corsets and uncomfortable shoes mattered a lot, too.

"The history of American women is about the fight for freedom," Collins writes in her introduction, "but it's less a war against oppressive men than a struggle to straighten out the perpetually mixed message about women's roles that was accepted by almost everybody of both genders."

Told chronologically through the compelling stories of individual lives that, linked together, provide a complete picture of the American woman's experience, *America's Women* is both a great read and a landmark work of history.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Well researched and well written, *America's Women: 400 Years of Dolls, Drudges, Helpmates, and Heroines* is a powerful and important book. Starting with Pocahontas and Eleanor Dare (the first female colonist), this lively and fascinating history records the changes in American women's lives and the transformations in American society from the 1580s through the 2000s.

A history of the oft-marginalized sex must often draw from diaries and journals, which were disproportionately written by whites; as a result, African-American and Native American women are not as well represented as white in the earlier chapters of *America's Women*. However, Gail Collins writes about women of many races and ethnicities, and in fact provides more information about Native Americans, African-Americans, and Chinese, Jewish, and Italian immigrants than some general U.S. history books. She writes about rich and poor, young and old, urban and rural, slave and slave-owner, athlete and aviatrix, president's wife and presidential candidate--and, of course, men and women. And some of these women--from the justly famous, like Clara Barton and Harriet Tubman, to the undeservedly obscure, like Elizabeth Eckford and Senator Margaret Chase Smith--will not only make any woman proud to be a woman, they will make any American proud to be American.

An editor at the *New York Times*, Gail Collins has also written *Scorpion Tongues: Gossip, Celebrity, and American Politics* and, with Dan Collins, *The Millennium Book*. --Cynthia Ward

From Publishers Weekly

The basis of the struggle of American women, postulates Collins (*Scorpion Tongues*), "is the tension between the yearning to create a home and the urge to get out of it." Today's issues--should women be in the fields, on the factory lines and in offices, or should they be at home, tending to hearth and family?--are centuries old, and Collins, editor of the *New York Times*'s editorial page, not only expertly chronicles what women have done since arriving in the New World, but how they did it and why. Creating a compelling social history, Collins discovers "it's less a war against oppressive men than a struggle to straighten out the perpetually mixed message about women's role that was accepted by almost everybody of both genders." These confusing messages are repeated over 400 years and are typified in the 1847 lecture of one doctor who stated that women's heads are "almost too small for intellect and just big enough for love" (ironically, around this time Elizabeth Blackwell became the first woman to graduate from an American medical school). The narratives are rich with direct quotes from both celebrated and common women, creating a clear picture of life in the 16th through 20th centuries, covering everyday (menstruation, birth control, cooking, cleanliness) and extraordinary (life during war, the abolition movement, fighting for the right to vote) topics. Beginning with Eleanor Dare and her 1587 sail to the colonies and ending with the 1970s, Collins's work is a fully accessible, and thoroughly enjoyable, primer of how American women have not only survived but thrived. Photos not seen by PW.

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From [Booklist](#)

In a vibrant history of American women that is as vast and varied as the nation itself, Collins elegantly and eruditely celebrates the hard-won victories, overwhelming obstacles, and selfless contributions of a captivating array of influential women. Chronicling issues both critical and obscure, Collins demonstrates an uncommon appreciation of commonplace subjects, taking a "you are there" approach to illuminate the

extraordinary challenges faced by pioneer women, such as needing to provide diapers for their babies, or to empathize with a young Pilgrim woman faced with forging a life in a hostile wilderness. From the first English child born in the "new world" to the birth of the "second wave" of feminism, the characters and subjects that have formed, and informed, women's current status are presented from a broad perspective and personal viewpoint to create a thoroughly readable, often revelatory, and intimately refined account of the philosophical concepts and practical considerations that embody the past, enable the present, and empower the future of American women. *Carol Haggas*

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Users Review

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