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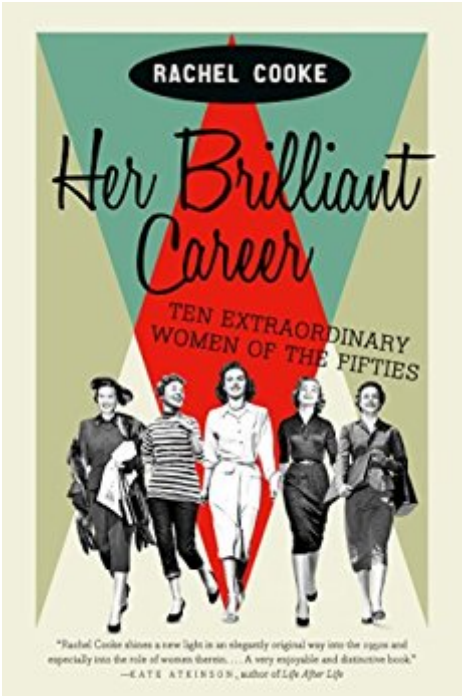
Her Brilliant Career: Ten Extraordinary Women Of The Fifties



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Synopsis

An exuberant group biographyâ ”"a splendidly various collection of ’brief lives’ written with both gusto and sensitivity" (The Guardian)â ”that follows ten women in 1950s Britain whose pioneering lives paved the way for feminism and laid the foundation of modern women’s success.In Her Brilliant Career, Rachel Cooke goes back in time to offer an entertaining and iconoclastic look at ten women in the 1950sâ ”pioneers whose professional careers and complicated private lives helped to create the opportunities available to today’s women. These plucky and ambitious individualsâ ”among them a film director, a cook, an architect, an editor, an archaeologist, a race car driverâ ”left the house, discovered the bliss of work, and ushered in the era of the working woman. Daring and independent, these remarkable unsung heroinesâ ”whose obscurity makes their accomplishments all the more astonishing and relevant â ”loved passionately, challenged men’s control, made their own mistakes, and took life on their own terms, breaking new ground and offering inspiration. Their individual portraits gradually form a landscape of 1950s culture, and women’s uniqueâ ”and rapidly evolvingâ ”role.Before there could be a Danica Patrick, there had to be a Sheila van Damm; before there was Barbara Walters, there was Nancy Spain; before there was Kathryn Bigelow, came Muriel Box. The pioneers of Her Brilliant Career forever changed the fabric of culture, society, and the work force.This is the Fifties, retold: vivid, surprising and, most of all, modern.Her Brilliant Career is illustrated with more than 80 black-and-white photographs.

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Customer Reviews

This book is a fascinating picture of the 1950’s in Britain. Rationing (which continued well past the end of WWII), the return to a peacetime economy, and British cultural and class patterns are completely unfamiliar to most Americans. Television viewers of PBS programs, however, will find familiar themes and events, although the women profiled in the book are pretty much under the radar, even for those who think of themselves as well-informed Anglophiles "of a certain age."I rated the book 4stars because I think it deserves to be read. It fills in the gaps in history as lived by ordinary people, without reading individual memoirs. As the author says, Elizabeth David is regarded as the British Julia Child of the 1950’s and 1960’s in America. But that wasn’t the case in Britain, where other cookbook authors were equally well-known.Another charm of the book is a gossipy quality - some of these women had very "interesting" lives. Family, friendships and networks of friends are shown playing major roles in determining how these women ended up where they did. It seems to me that American writers focus more on the individual’s effort in charting the course of his/her life, rather than exploring the connections around the individual. For years after reading all 12 volumes in Anthony Powell’s "Dance to the Music of Time", I was struck by the constant recurrence of characters in each others lives. In my life in America in the 1960’s and 1970’s, people were always moving on to new locations, new relationships, new interests, new music, etc. This book is of a time with the first volumes of the Powell series (which is definitely worth reading and was also made into a television series).To conclude: Committed Anglophiles, readers interested in a deeper understanding of the post-war era in Britain, and cultural history fans would enjoy this book.

Both my mother - a career woman of the 50s here in the U.S. - and I read this book and were unfortunately a bit disappointed. I think for a woman like my mother - a conventional woman of her time quietly pursuing a career without fanfare - the women profiled here were too unconventional and not women she could relate to. I found the book - a series of chapters profiling various women who rose to prominence in the U.K. - too heavy on the gossip as opposed to keeping the focus on these women’s careers and how they may have paved the way for others.While I appreciated learning about the rise to prominence for these women, what shattered (or at least began to crack)

the glass ceiling for women in the workplace was not the handful of women who rose to celebrity status in any given career but the collective, unheralded efforts of women like my mother who quietly built careers while holding together a family (sans the salacious personal life drama).Perhaps it was the lack of connection I felt to any of these women - either by age or by nationality - that left me feeling less than satisfied when I finished the book.My mother had the connection via her age and the era but still felt a disconnect.I applaud Ms.Cooke's efforts even if this wasn't as inspiring as I had hoped.

Under normal circumstances this is the sort of book I would like. Unfortunately, the 3* rating I am assigning to it belies my feelings. I'll briefly try to explain why.The author begins this book talking about a circa 1954 sideboard she bought at a bargain price on Ebay. This made her think about the 1950's which was a seminal period in British history. From there she launched on a discussion of post WWII deprivation in England and faux food where apricots were doctored up to be eggs. All of this ramped up into the changing role of women and how they transitioned from homes, careers, and then independence. She decided to eventually profile prominent English women of the 1950's and create mini biographies for each. Along the way there were fabulous or at least ground breaking careers, unconventional marriage, infidelity, and many different changes that would point to the changing role of women in British Society. Her subjects included an archaeologist, architect, cook, film director, and even a race car driver that predated Danica Patrick by 50 years.Given my age and nationality, it isn't surprising that the only woman in this list that I had ever even heard of was the film director. I'm a big movie fan. The rest might have been anonymous to me and they were. From my vantage point, these ladies were of moderate interest but not extraordinarily so. At times, I found the material on the slow side. This was as much a social history as it was a story of women who changed the face of women in modern society.It was an o.k. read but it was at times a struggle to read because despite the title it was only moderately interesting and not brilliant or exciting when I finally clunked through to the ending.

Her Brilliant Career is an immensely readable and entertaining group of biographies of (to me) largely unknown British women of the 1950s. Their fields of endeavors are wide ranging, from the law to archeology to the theater and things in between. There are pictures and much appreciated snippets of information to put the stories in historical context.The 1950s were a defining era in Britain, especially for women, and I really enjoyed reading about these unconventional personalities who shaped and were shaped by the times. This book would make a great gift for Anglophiles of a

certain age, and to inspire women of any age.

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