



Girl I Left Behind, The

By Judith Nies
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Introduction

At the height of the Vietnam War protests, twenty-eight-year-old Judith Nies and her husband lived a seemingly idyllic life. Both were building their respective careers in Washington. Nies as the speechwriter and chief staffer to a core group of antiwar congressmen, her husband as a Treasury department economist. But when her husband brought home a list of questions from an FBI file with Judith's name on the front, Nies soon realized that her life was about to take a radical turn. Shocked to find herself the focus of an FBI investigation into her political activities, Nies began to reevaluate her role as grateful employee and dutiful wife.

A heartfelt memoir and a piercing social commentary, *The Girl I Left Behind* offers a fresh, candid look at the 1960s. Recounting Nies's courageous journey toward independence and equality, it evaluates the consequences of the feminist movement on the same women who made it happen and on the

daughters born in their wake.

Questions for Discussion

1. What connections in your own life do you draw from *The Girl I Left Behind*?
2. How does *The Girl I Left Behind* differ from other books about the 1960s you've read? What famous '60s topics does Nies leave out?
3. Male readers of the book have said they found the story important, either because they had daughters they didn't know how to advise, or they were simply unaware of this history. Women readers have said that in reading Nies' experience, they better understand why they feel they have had "to invent their life every day." Does either view reflect your experience?
4. Throughout the memoir, Nies emphasizes the theme of change—the change in her own consciousness, the changes in the society around her. Do you think the changes in women's opportunities came from benevolent people at the top making decisions or from a grassroots movement of women acting on their own behalf and pressuring institutions to change?
5. Many readers and reviewers have described the book as important for younger women who do not know any of this recent history. Do you think it is important to understand patterns of history in order to chart the future?
6. Nies describes herself as typical of her generation—i.e., expecting hard work and a positive attitude to bring her success. Do you think she was naïve or that she didn't have an accurate model of the limitations for women of her generation? What changed her attitude? How did learning that she had an FBI file affect her marriage and her future?
7. In interviews, Nies has described herself as interested in history as it is portrayed in all its forms—in movies, television, biography. Many readers who have seen the television drama series "Mad Men," about the advertising industry and Madison Avenue in the 1960s, have asked her to comment about the show's accuracy in its treatment of women as well as historical events—such as the Cuban Missile crisis and Jackie Kennedy's tour of the White House. If you have seen "Mad Men," what do you think about the roles of the women characters? Did you know that Jackie Kennedy's public voice was a breathy, weak, non-threatening voice with what some described as an affected accent?
8. How did Nies end up going to graduate school in international relations at a time when women were told that the only jobs for them were teachers, nurses or secretaries? How did her understanding of social class in America change in graduate school?
9. Several chapters of the book deal with her experiences as a drop-out in Europe in the mid-1960s. How did the experience of living in Paris and Rome and getting to know Europeans change her thinking about the Cold War views she had been taught in graduate school? How did that experience help her get a job as a speechwriter in Congress in 1968 when very few professional women worked in the House of Representatives? How did her treatment as a congressional staffer politicize her?
10. Some readers have felt the book ends abruptly. They would like to know more about how Nies made a living, raised a daughter, balanced family and career. These are still the same questions that face young women today. How much do you think circumstances have changed for today's young women and how much has stayed the same?

About the Author

Judith Nies has worked as a journalist, teacher, historian, researcher, and corporate speech-writer. The author of three books, including the classic biography *Nine Women*, she teaches a course on memoir as history and lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.