

Enter Helen: The Invention of Helen Gurley Brown and the Rise of the Modern Single Woman

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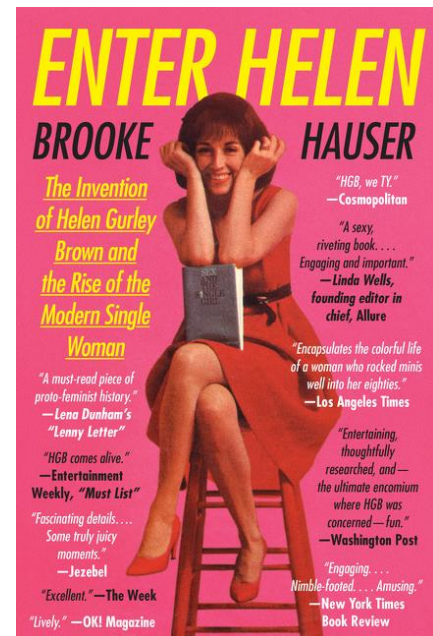
Introduction

This female *Mad Men*-like story chronicles the legendary *Cosmopolitan* magazine editor's rise to power as both a cultural icon and trailblazer who redefined what it means to be an American woman.

In the mid-Sixties, Helen Gurley Brown, author of the groundbreaking *Sex and the Single Girl*, took over the ailing *Cosmopolitan* magazine and revamped it into one of the most successful brands in the world. At a time when magazines taught housewives how to make the perfect casserole, Helen reimagined *Cosmo* and womanhood itself, championing the independent, ambitious, man-loving single woman. Though she was married, to Hollywood producer David Brown, no one embodied the idea of the *Cosmo* Girl more than the Ozarks-born Helen, who willed, worked, and—yes—occasionally slept her way to the top, eventually becoming one of the most influential media players in the world.

Drawing on new interviews with Helen's friends and former colleagues as well as her personal letters, *Enter Helen* brings New York City vibrantly to life during the Sexual Revolution and the Women's Movement and features a cast of characters including Hugh Hefner, Nora Ephron, and Gloria Steinem. It is the cinematic story of an icon who bucked convention, defined her own destiny, and became a controversial model for modern feminism, laying the groundwork for television shows like *Sex and the City* and *Girls*.

“Bad Feminist” or not, Helen Gurley Brown got people talking—about sex, work, reproductive choices, and having it all—forever changing the conversation.



Questions for Discussion

1. Helen Gurley Brown broke barriers as a career woman and a leader of the sexual revolution before the Women's Liberation Movement caught fire. And while she knew how to manipulate her way through "a man's world," she later came to identify as a feminist. Do you think she was a feminist—why or why not?
2. "Cosmopolitan is talking to women one by one," Ms. Editor Suzanne Levine told the New York Times in 1974. "We're talking about making all women's lives work." Which magazine do you think has had more of a direct impact on women's lives, Cosmopolitan or Ms., and how so?
3. In her own writings, Helen portrayed her background as poor and hillbilly. But according to her cousin Lou, Helen's childhood in Little Rock was "solidly middle class," and her parents were educated: Cleo had been a school teacher, Ira had a law degree. Why do you think Helen exaggerated her story?
4. Helen's father was killed when she was very young, and she had a complicated relationship with her mother as well as with her older sister Mary. How do you think his premature death, Cleo's depression and Mary's early illness shaped Helen's mindset and message?
5. According to her friend Lyn Tornabene, Helen once said she slept with 178 men. She believed that "sex is power." Do you think that sex empowered Helen as much as she claimed?
6. David Brown was a producer, and Helen Gurley Brown may have been his biggest and best production of all time. He came up with the idea for *Sex and the Single Girl*, and helped her become editor of *Cosmopolitan*, where he had been a managing editor. How would you describe their marriage and professional partnership? Do you think they were equals?
7. In the past, the relationship between Helen Gurley Brown and Gloria Steinem has been portrayed as contentious, but they became allies over the years. How do you think they helped and influenced each other? What did you think of Gloria's attempt to unmask Helen during their on-air interview in 1982, toward the end of the book?
8. In 1976, Helen published an article about the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) in *Cosmopolitan*. As a rule, she wanted *Cosmo* to be sexy, optimistic, and "baby simple," but occasionally she ran political pieces on controversial topics like abortion. Do you think women's magazines should be more vocal on political issues affecting women—why or why not?
9. More than 50 years have passed since Helen became editor of *Cosmopolitan* in 1965, and so much has changed in the magazine industry. How do you think she changed media, women's magazines and blogs in particular? Do you read *Cosmo* today, and if so do you think it still bears her stamp? Where else do you see her influence?

10. With her 1962 bestseller *Sex and the Single Girl*, Helen anticipated the growing number of single women in America, and rebranded the “extra woman” as “the newest glamour girl of our time.” Do you think single women of a certain age are still stigmatized in our society—why or why not?