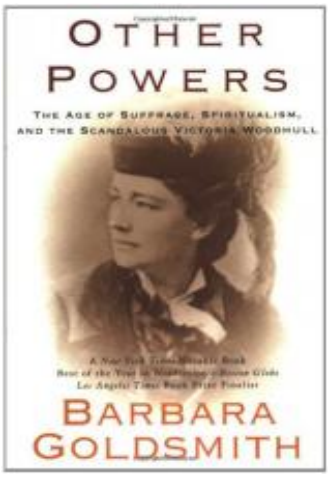
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Other Powers

by Barbara Goldsmith



About the Book

Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism, and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull is a portrait of the tumultuous last half of the nineteenth century, when the United States experienced the Civil War, Reconstruction, Andrew Johnson's impeachment trial, and the 1869 collapse of the gold market.

A stunning combination of history and biography, Other Powers interweaves the stories of the important social, political, and religious players of America's Victorian era with the scandalous life of Victoria Woodhull--Spiritualist, woman's rights crusader, free-love advocate, stockbroker, prostitute, and presidential candidate. This is history at its most vivid, set amid the battle for woman suffrage, the Spiritualist movement that swept across the nation in the age of Radical Reconstruction following the Civil War, and the bitter fight that pitted black men against white women in the struggle for the right to vote.

The book's cast:

Victoria Woodhull, billed as a clairvoyant and magnetic healer--a devotee and priestess of those "other powers" that were gaining acceptance across America--in her father's traveling medicine show . . . spiritual and financial advisor to Commodore Vanderbilt . . . the first woman to address a joint session of Congress, where--backed by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony--she presents an argument that women, as citizens, should have the right to vote . . . becoming the "high priestess" of free love in America (fiercely believing the then-heretical idea that women should have complete sexual equality with men) . . . making a run for the presidency of the United States against Horace Greeley and Ulysses S. Grant, and felled when her past career as a prostitute finally catches up with her.

Tennessee Claflin, sister of Victoria, also a clairvoyant, mistress to Commodore Vanderbilt . . . indicted for manslaughter in connection with the death of a woman in a bogus cancer clinic run by her father during the Civil War.

Henry Ward Beecher, the great preacher of Brooklyn's Plymouth Church--the most influential church in the country . . . brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe . . . caught up in the scandal of the century (first revealed in Victoria Woodhull's own newspaper): his affair with Lib Tilton, the wife of his parishioner and best friend.

Lib Tilton, angelic, obedient wife of Theodore Tilton who believed her philandering husband's insistence that she was sexless and arid--until Henry Ward Beecher fell under her thrall and their affair exploded into the shocking Tilton-Beecher Scandal Trial that dominated the headlines for two years, made radical inroads toward the idea of acceptable sexual relations between men and women, and inspired the first questioning of the sanctity of the middle-class American Victorian home.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, discontented housewife who, bolstered by the great black activist Frederick Douglass, put forth a Declaration of Rights and Sentiments to empower women at the first woman's rights convention in Seneca Falls. Anna Dickinson, lecturer extraordinaire, feminist heroine to thousands of women across the country, the model for Verena Tarrant in Henry James's The Bostonians.

Horace Greeley, editor of the Tribune, whose campaign for the presidency of the United States was centered on his opposition to the policies of Reconstruction . . . who helped to undermine the suffrage movement by writing editorials denouncing Victoria Woodhull.

Anthony Comstock, U.S. special postal agent, enthusiastically in charge of stamping out obscenity and pornography (he compared erotic feelings to "electrical wires connected to the inner dynamite of obscene thoughts"), who arrested Victoria Woodhull and Tennessee Claflin on charges of sending obscene material through the mail and was determined to bring his crusade against vice to the forefront of American thought, and to be hailed as a "paladin of American purity."

Discussion Guide

1. How does knowledge of events that occurred during Victoria Woodhull's lifetime, even if she was not directly involved in them, help to explain her life and her actions? How does her life illuminate connections between events and people that, on the surface, seem unrelated?

2. What elements of Spiritualism attracted women's rights advocates? Why might later historians of these advocates have omitted the relationship between the two movements? What is the value of bringing that relationship to light?

3. Goldsmith states in the Introduction that "in many of the books I read, particularly of the period [of Other Powers], important material that revealed the actual character of these people had been expurgated." What information does Goldsmith include that corrects that amputation of essential elements of Woodhull's character by other biographers? Who besides Woodhull does Goldsmith flesh out and in what ways?

4. The dramatic 1869 American Equal Rights Association meeting occurs approximately half-way through the book. What simmering tensions came to the surface during that meeting? Why was this event a turning point for the woman's movement? Did the end result of this meeting ease the way for Elizabeth Cady Stanton to associate herself and her cause with Woodhull? What tensions did that association cause?

5. Woodhull had a complicated relationship with her unusual, unpredictable family. Did her unorthodox upbringing help her to succeed? How did her family hinder her? What are reasons the family might have stayed so close despite the problems they caused each other?

6. Goldsmith writes that "this was an age in which men were free to treat women with the same detached cruelty as they did their slaves." In what ways can the analogy between white women and slaves, both men and women, help illuminate the state women lived in during this time? What are the limitations of this comparison? What problems did the connection between white women and black men cause in the suffrage movement?

7. Woodhull seems at times simultaneously idealistic and opportunistic. How did these two elements of her personality relate to each other? What role did each play in her decision to expose Henry Ward Beecher's affair?

8. In her introduction, Goldsmith draws a parallel between the sexual and political scandals and trials of the 1990s and those she wrote of in the nineteenth century. How does knowledge of these earlier events inform an understanding of the contemporary era and its scandals?

Author Bio

Prize-winning author and social historian Barbara Goldsmith was born in New York City, graduated from Wellesley College, and holds three doctorates. A founding editor of *New York* magazine, she currently contributes to the *New York Times*, *Architectural Digest*, and *The New Yorker*. She is the author of the acclaimed bestsellers **Little Gloria . . . Happy At Last** and **Johnson v. Johnson**. A trustee of the New York Public Library, Goldsmith also serves on the President's Commission on the Celebration of Women in American History.

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