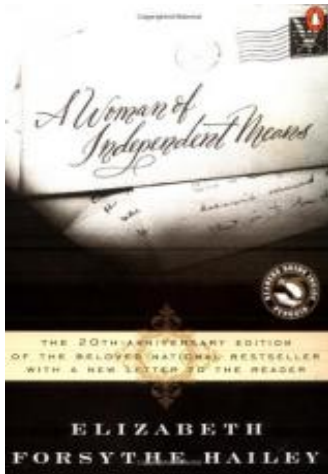


A Woman of Independent Means

by Elizabeth Forsythe Hailey



About the Book

Domestic Feminism in *A Woman of Independent Means*

Elizabeth Forsythe Hailey wrote **A Woman of Independent Means** in 1978, when to most Americans feminism was beginning to become associated with angry politicians who neglected their femininity and were capable of shocking radicalism. This book, however, portrays a very different ideal for the capable, socially responsible woman of the Twentieth Century. The character Bess Steed Garner was partially inspired by the feminist movement of the 1970s, and partially based on the author's grandmother. When Hailey told her husband of her intention to write a novel called *Letters from A Runaway Wife*, he responded, "Runaway wives are a passing fad. Why don't you write about somebody who doesn't have to leave home to be liberated? Why don't you write about somebody like your grandmother?" Therefore, in the life of her heroine, Hailey portrays a domestic feminist, a woman who is not only confident about her gender's equality, but who proves it every day in her judicious maintenance of her home and finances, her unfailing support of her husbands, family, and friends, and her personal, independent engagement with the world around her. The letters that comprise this book—both personal and business letters—reveal that Bess's liberation is not only manifest in what she does, but in how she regards herself and her position in the various contexts of life.

Bess's first letter is dated 1899, and her last 1968. The tremendous social changes that occurred in this sixty-nine year span are reflected in the ever-evolving personality and character of Bess, who is gradually transformed from a sheltered, privileged child into a competent woman, encountering adversity with increasing intelligence, sensitivity, and courage. In 1913, Bess writes to her husband, "Last night the train sped through the heart of a forest fire, and I watched with fascination as the flames encircled but could not touch us. Sometimes my life seems as safe and insulated to me as the compartment in which I was riding last night. I see the flames of death and deprivation outside, but they do not touch me" (15). In 1916, however, those flames swept closer when Bess's daughter was hit by a car and forced to undergo a long, difficult period of hospitalization. Bess's relentlessly energetic care was probably instrumental in saving her daughter's life, while her creativity and devotion assured that Eleanor's psyche mended, as well as her body, during the

long convalescence. This is the first tragedy that tests Bess's domestic heroism, but not the last. Over the next several years Bess endures the untimely deaths of her husband and eldest son, yanks a failing business back to its feet, and&ironically&loses her home and all of her possessions in a fire. Though her wealth eases Bess's burdens, it does not remain a protective shield that keeps the most painful realities of life at bay. Gradually one comes to feel that the "independent means" are not the social status and financial security Bess was born into, but the personal and spiritual strengths and resources she has acquired.

Discussion Guide

1. Consider the epistolary format of this book. What do Bess's letters reveal that a first person narrative would not? How do the style, tone, and subject matter of her letters change as Bess matures and grows older?
2. Once she reaches her middle age, Bess begins to muse on the process and consequences of developing relationships through written correspondence, an example being when she writes to her son Andrew, "I have always had enormous respect for the written word and invariably find a letter more revealing than a face-to-face conversation. In a strange way I suspect I will get to know you better at a distance than I would if you had stayed at home" (169) How do you think a written correspondence can be a greater spur to intimacy than "a face-to-face conversation"?
3. Bess seems an extraordinary woman for her time in many ways: her open-mindedness toward people of other social classes, creeds, and races; her eager acceptance of technological and social progress; her interest in and savvy regarding business affairs; and her unstinting assertion of herself as the equal of the men around her. As admirable as these qualities seem to us, is there ever any indication that Bess's acquaintances and associates are shocked or threatened by her attitudes? Who do you think tries to discourage her ideals, and to what end? Are there instances where you as a reader feel Bess has gone too far in her unconventionality?
4. Bess's marriage to her first husband, Rob, seems to have been undeniably a union of love, whereas, in comparison, her later marriage to Sam appears to have been one more of convenience and even coercion. How do the tone, subject matter, and style of address to each of her husbands affirm or refute this analysis? How do the benefits and drawbacks of Bess's marriage to Rob compare to those of her marriage to Sam?
5. We are witness to Bess's tragic losses of loved ones&her parents, her elderly cousin Josie, and, as she ages, her friends, as well as the untimely deaths of her husband and eldest child. How do Bess's reflections and feelings about death change over time?
6. When her son Andrew and her daughter Eleanor leave home and grow autonomous, we observe Bess attempting to modify her maternal relationship with her children, tempering it with a sense of friendship. To what extent is this attempt successful? In what ways does Bess retain her role of mother and in what ways does she assert herself as a friend to her children? How does the advice and encouragement she offers Andrew differ from that offered to Eleanor? Does Bess have similar expectations of each of her children?

7. Bess's lifestyle is neither typical nor modest, and we see many examples of how Bess's wealth makes her life more comfortable and easier to manage. We can easily imagine how the outward circumstances of Bess's life would differ if she were in another social class, but how would her character and her personal philosophy be different?

8. There are many marriages to scrutinize in this book, all rendered with varying degrees of detail and depth: Bess's parents, her father and Mavis, Totsie and Dwight, Totsie and Arthur, Lydia and Manning, Anna and Hans, Mr. Prince and his wife, not to mention Bess's two marriages and those of her children and grandchildren. Is there a single, abiding message about marriage in this book, or does each marriage contain its own message, emphasizing the varieties of romantic and marital experience? Is there one romantic relationship that seems to be particularly poignant or familiar to you? Do any seem idealized or unrealistic?

9. Originally Hailey wanted to write a novel called *Letters From a Runaway Wife*. Does Bess fit your image of a "runaway wife"? Is she at any time errant in her responsibilities to her husbands and the other people in her life? What is the impulse behind her many travels?

10. In Bess's disjunctive last letter, written to her granddaughter Betsy on June 19, 1968, Bess states, "Must call Sam so he to bed. Then I can sail. Dining with Captain tonight." Do you think this is the work of a fragmented memory, recalling its many voyages and the instance of dining with the Captain, or is this a metaphor for her final voyage? How does this last letter offer a resolution to the life of Bess Steed Garner, and how does it anticipate a forthcoming life of the spirit, as Bess's desired epitaph? "To be continued" promises?

Author Bio

Elizabeth Forsythe Hailey, born in Dallas, Texas in 1938, studied at the Sorbonne in Paris and received her Bachelor's degree from Hollins College in 1960. In the same year she married Oliver Hailey, a playwright and the father of her daughters, Elizabeth Kendall and Melinda Brooke. She worked briefly in journalism and publishing before joining her husband in writing for film and television. They served as creative consultants for the enormously popular television series *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*.

Hailey's first novel, **A Woman of Independent Means**, written in 1978, was an instant bestseller, and her adaptation of this work for the stage won the Los Angeles Critics Award. In 1995, NBC aired **A Woman of Independent Means** as a six-hour miniseries starring Sally Field, and in this medium, too, the work won critical acclaim. In addition to **A Woman of Independent Means**, Hailey has written three other novels: *Life Sentences* in 1982, *Joanna's Husband* and *David's Wife* in 1986, and *Home Free* in 1991. All of these novels have been praised for their commitment to searching out the subtler truths of interpersonal relationships and personal integrity.

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