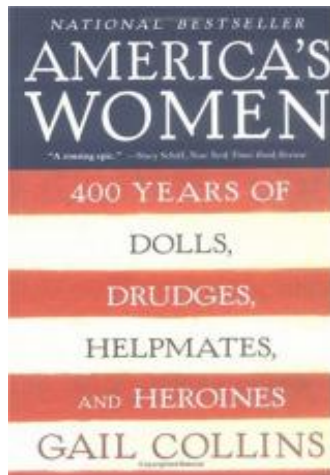


# America's Women: Four Hundred Years of Dolls, Drudges, Helpmates, and Heroines

by Gail Collins



## About the Book

From the women peering worriedly over the side of the Mayflower to feminists having a grand old time protesting beauty pageants and bridal fairs, **America's Women** tells the story of how women shaped the nation and our vision of what it means to be female in America. Spanning wars, the pioneering days, the fight for suffrage, the Depression, the era of Rosie the Riveter, the civil rights movement, and the feminist rebellion of the 1970s, this book describes the way women's lives were altered by dress fashions, medical advances, rules of hygiene, social theories about sex and courtship, and the ever-changing attitudes toward education, work, and politics. While keeping her eye on the big picture, Gail Collins still notes that corsets and uncomfortable shoes mattered a lot too.

## Discussion Guide

### Introduction

In my house, I have a room in which one wall is entirely covered with books that I used while writing **America's Women: 400 Years of Dolls, Drudges, Helpmates and Heroines**. When I look at them I like to remember that there was a time, not very long ago, when teachers who wanted to offer courses on women's history were told there wasn't enough information to cover an entire semester. Some of the books are amazing, full of fascinating stories and little details I love. In one of them, I found a recipe for a basic cake which told me all I needed to know about what it was like to be a housewife in the early 19th century: mix eight eggs and a pound of sugar and "beat it three quarters of an hour."

Much as I love this little library, I know that many people -- well, virtually all people -- don't have the time to get acquainted with everything that's been written on the history of women in this country. My idea in writing **America's Women** was to go through as many books as possible myself, take out the most interesting bits and spin one story. It

starts in England in 1587 with Eleanor Dare, who agreed, when she was pregnant with her first child, to get into a smallish boat and sail across the ocean to settle with her husband and a few other people on a continent where no woman of her kind had ever been before. She was obviously either very brave or very easily led. We don't know which, since she vanished from history, along with her baby daughter and all the other residents of the lost colony of Roanoke.

**America's Women** has all the great heroines in our past, but it's mainly about what it was like to be an average woman, who was supposed to blaze trails while struggling with corsets and cleanliness issues. (The nation acquired handguns and repeat rifles before anybody bothered to invent window screens.) At the end, you'll find a lot of notes that show you where I got my information. If some part of the story really intrigues you, you can follow the same trail back through the books and articles I read along the way.

If you happen to belong to a book club, you're following in the path of the great women's club movement that began right after the Civil War. It was sort of like a huge, informal junior college system, and some of the clubs were founded with great expectations. They vowed to read all the Greek philosophers, or to start with ancient history and make their way all the way to the modern era. Although these women were very big on keeping minutes, nobody has ever managed to come up with statistics on how many of them really did get all the way through Socrates, or Shakespeare, as promised.

In the spirit of those great-intentioned pioneers, let me offer some suggestions to groups that prefer to give members their reading assignments in chunks of a hundred or so pages. This is a story that divides itself into parts pretty easily:

Chapters 1-4 bring you through the Revolutionary War and up to 1800. I'm particularly fond of the stories of the early South, when women were in such short supply they could do just about anything they wanted and still latch onto a respectable husband. (Or two, or four, or five. Any woman whose constitution managed to develop immunity to malaria could find herself widowed over and over again, her estate escalating with every bereavement.) This is also where you want to go if you're one of the many Salem Witch Trial fans.

Chapters 5 and 6 are two of my particular favorites, covering what it was like to be a woman in the very peculiar period before the Civil War, when families moved to the city and middle class women tended to stick to their homes. Husbands even took over the shopping chores. Part of this had to do with the extremely conservative ideology about sexual roles, but I'm absolutely sure part of it also had to do with the fact that this was an era in which virtually every American male chewed tobacco and spit all over every public space in the nation.

Chapters 7, 8, and 9 are about African American women, the abolition movement and the Civil War. This may be the most dramatic part of the story. Black women were staging spontaneous sit-down strikes on segregated streetcars and trains 100 years before Rosa Parks. You have female spies -- one made an early impression when, as a teenager, she protested being excluded from an adults-only party by riding her horse into the living room. Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote "Uncle Tom's Cabin," which changes the way half a nation viewed the institution of slavery. But when she went on her book tour to England, she decorously sat in the balcony of a theater while her husband read her speech from the stage.

Chapters 9, 10 and 11 get us through the rest of the 19th century. How could you not love an era when women were being praised for the beauty of their "huge thighs" and young girls bragged about the amount of weight they gained on summer vacation? This was also the era of the great westward expansion, where girls in their teens fought Indians and drove wagon trains. Meanwhile back East, immigrants were pouring into the country. The life the women found here, at

least for the first generation, depended both on luck and the nation they came from.

Chapters 13, 14, and 15 will take you through World War I. Women finally get the vote, after a nail-biting last minute confrontation in the Tennessee legislature in which women's chances in the 1920 presidential election hang on one vote ... (This is one of my all-time favorite stories in the book. You'll have to read it for yourself.)

And finally, chapters 16-19 get us to the present. The Depression, World War II, the Civil Rights movement and Women's Liberation are all in there, along with the critical roles played by radio soap operas and the invention of the Twist.

### **Questions for Discussion**

There will be plenty to talk about if everybody comes together to tell their own piece of the story. But for more ambitious groups who want to read everything in advance, here are some of my favorite questions for discussion:

1. The book says that for American women "the center of our story is the tension between the yearning to create a home and the urge to get out of it." Do you agree?
2. Were the early colonial women very brave or easily led? If you had lived in 17th century England, would you have opted to stay home or brave the journey? Where would you have wanted to end up -- in New England or Virginia?
3. "**America's Women**" seems to attribute the witch craze in Salem to "teenage girls in crisis who stumbled on a very bad but very effective way of trying to take control of their unhappy environment." Do you agree? The story can be told from any number of perspectives: economic, religious, social, psychological. Is any one, or combination, satisfactory?
4. When families moved from farms to the city after the Revolutionary War, women's role changed and their status fell. The whole concept of the True Woman who radiated goodness was an effort to raise their stature again. Was it a satisfactory strategy? Can you come up with alternatives?
5. There are two role models for women who wanted to have public lives in the early 19th century -- Sarah Josepha Hale and Elizabeth Blackwell. How did they differ? If you had been alive then, which would you have been like?
6. Women were the best clients for the growing medical profession in the period before the Civil War. Why do you think that was? How did it work out for them?
- 7 Some white Southern women had different views of slavery than their husbands. Why was that?
8. The book says the "emotional burden on middle-class black women in the 19th century was stupendous." Has this burden been duplicated in the 21st century?
9. The rise of department stores at the turn of the century meant a huge change for women -- both as consumers and as workers. Why was that?

10. If you had been an immigrant around the turn of the century, what country would you have wanted to come from? Why?

11. Jeannette Rankin was the first woman to serve in Congress, and she wound up voting against not one, but both world wars. Do you approve or disapprove?

12. In the Twenties, women won freedom in areas like dress, dating and drinking but many lost interest in politics and "feminism" fell totally out of fashion. All in all, would you regard the decade as a step forward or back?

13. When women got the vote, the first president they helped elect was one of the worst -- Warren Harding. How, if at all, does this reflect on suffrage?

14. Do you agree that Eleanor Roosevelt was the most important woman in American history? If not, who would you nominate?

15. Speaking about the American civilians during World War II, John Kenneth Galbraith said "Never in the long history of human combat have so many talked so much about sacrifice with so little deprivation." Do you agree?

16. In the 1950s, less than 10 percent of the population felt a person could live a happy life without being married. The status of single women seems to have gone up and down several times in our history. Why is that? Where do you think it is now?

17. Things changed so fast for women in the late 1960s. Why do you think that was? Will we ever go back to the way things were in the 1950s, when the full-time housewife was the universal American ideal?

## Author Bio

Gail Collins is a columnist for the *New York Times*. From 2001 to 2007, she was editorial page editor of the paper --- the first woman to have held that position.

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