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Well-Behaved Women Seldom Make History



Synopsis

From admired historian and coiner of one of feminism's most popular slogans "Laurel Thatcher Ulrich comes an exploration of what it means for women to make history. In 1976, in an obscure scholarly article, Ulrich wrote, "Well behaved women seldom make history." Today these words appear on t-shirts, mugs, bumper stickers, greeting cards, and all sorts of Web sites and blogs. Ulrich explains how that happened and what it means by looking back at women of the past who challenged the way history was written. She ranges from the fifteenth-century writer Christine de Pizan, who wrote *The Book of the City of Ladies*, to the twentieth century's Virginia Woolf, author of *A Room of One's Own*. Ulrich updates their attempts to reimagine female possibilities and looks at the women who didn't try to make history but did. And she concludes by showing how the 1970s activists who created "second-wave feminism" also created a renaissance in the study of history.

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Customer Reviews

I grew up when that phrase -- Well-Behaved Women Seldom Make History -- was always in the background -- on posters, bumper stickers, and mugs. So I was excited to read the book, by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, who invented the phrase. And I'm glad I did. It taught me about the history of the s (not totally grounded in fact, in turns out), women writers from different eras, and the intriguing Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Bottom line: It's an interesting book, heavy on the history -- perfect if you're in an academic mood.

I've seen thousands of those bumper stickers and t-shirts stating (incorrectly, as it turns out), "Well-behaved women rarely make history." (I interned at NOW years ago, and they were everywhere!) Learning the source of the quote, which Ulrich explains in her preface to this book, was alone worth reading this book. From such humble beginnings it came! Ulrich may have bitten off more than she could chew, though, with writing this book. In her attempt to assess the accuracy of her now-legendary quote, she focuses on three prominent female figures in history: Christine de Pizan, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Virginia Woolf, then branches out with anecdotes from there. Clearly she had to narrow her focus; "women's history" is too vast and varied to be condensed into a single volume. (In that regard, look at what grade school textbooks have done to American history!) But Ulrich's choice of focus seemed arbitrary and, despite occasionally short forays elsewhere, was distressingly White and Western. Even the torso on the cover is White! Anyone considering writing a similar book in the future, I beg of you: remember to be inclusive! If you can't meet the goal of inclusivity in your target page length, perhaps you need to re-think the whole idea of your book. So why do I give this book 4 stars despite my criticism? First of all, because any book that aims to tell the stories and histories of women deserves to be read, for reasons Ulrich details excellently in this book. Second, I enjoyed learning more about Christine de Pizan and Elizabeth Cady Stanton; Pizan because I'd never previously heard of her, and Stanton because she was complex (and controversial) far beyond her enduring fame as a suffragist. In sum, this book is a recreational (and educational) read for those interested in the topic, but it should not be a primary source for learning about the histories of women.

I found this book entrancing and strangely moving. It's important to understand what it is and what it is not: Ulrich is a distinguished historian who specializes in women in early America, but this book is neither a monograph on her own research nor a systematic survey of women's history. Instead, it is a very personal inquiry into the questions, "How did women get left out of the master historical narrative?" and "How do we put them back in?" Ulrich tells a little of her own story, which is satisfying to those of us who always wondered how a Mormon housewife with five children ended up becoming president of the American Historical Association. She highlights historical figures who intrigue her, including Christine de Pisan, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Tubman, and Virginia Woolf, and writes about them so eloquently that I now want to go off and read or reread their works. As other reviewers have noted, this isn't a complete or even very systematic book; Ulrich focuses mainly on women as artists and authors, women in politics, and women warriors, and

neglects some other dimensions of the topic, such as women as economic agents. But as a long-time fan of Ulrich's work, and as someone who really appreciates good non-fiction writing, I was delighted by this book. It will whet your appetite for deeper inquiry into the subject.

Ulrich inadvertently made the quote famous, but then more than 20 years later, wrote a book with the same name. Now, she had the opportunity to access history in ways she couldn't before, with innumerable sources. Just had the opportunity to interview Ulrich for my blog site - she has some amazing insights. Definitely enjoyed this book, especially if you're into women's history.

This never felt like a high school history book but I think it SHOULD be one! I loved it and have recommended it to many women. It jumps across time, across cultures and across disciplines but isn't choppy. It steadily frames just how amazing the history of womenkind is.

Fantastic stories of defiant women. I read this during Hurricane Sandy and felt a sense of empowerment and gratitude for the women that sacrificed so much. I can't imagine a life of not being allowed education, employment & a fair wage, reproductive rights etc... A great gift for women.

The best feature of this book is the wide range of relatively unknown women whose stories are told. The book is very well researched, with vivid storytelling. A must read -- even a textbook -- as an introduction to women's studies at the college level.

Great read. It reinforced my belief in women AND history. I am a midwife, dedicated to women and their transitions in life, such as motherhood, grandmother hood, and the journey from maiden to mother to matriarch to crone. I learned much. And it reinforced my beliefs and knowledge.

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