

by
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The *Stepford Wives* by Ira Levin is a slight, poorly developed, contrived novel about a woman who is an erstwhile member of women's liberation and the punishment she receives when she attempts to live out her moderate (very) feminist views. Like the author's *Rosemary's Baby*, this novel is written as a mystery, a kind of creepy horror story where evil is pervasive but difficult to detect and fight.

Joanna Eberhart and her all-American family of husband and young daughter and son have just moved to a suburb of New York, the town of Stepford where taxes are low, schools are good, the population is made up almost entirely of other young all-American families (including one black family), and scientific research centers line the outskirts of town.

The first problem Joanna faces is the absence of other liberated women. She is, by the way, a free-lance photographer and a former member of NOW. All the women she meets are sleek, bosomy, and delighted with constant housework. Finally, Joanna meets Sobbie, another newcomer, who is hearty, outspoken, and expresses a keen interest in women's liberation.

The two of them set out to find other women to join them in a women's talk session but they are turned down again and again by women who don't go out and who have no time to talk because they are devoted to their housework.

They also discover that there are no women's groups at all in Stepford but there is a mysterious Men's Association which their husbands join and begin attending several nights a week. The men who belong to this association are married to those big-breasted women who are devoted entirely to their families and housework.

The remainder of the novel is taken up with the mystery of these placid women and the threat to Bobby and Joanna for their concern for small freedoms. And, of course, their subsequent downfall.

My first reaction to this novel is to question whether I can take it seriously. It is a male fantasy which fortunately loses effect because it is shallow and poorly written.

Joanna, for example, is not made enough a full-bodied person to warrant our concern or sympathy. When she is defeated, the reader feels little sense of loss. The extent of her desire for freedom is for her husband to share in dishwashing and childcare, for her to have a little time for photography, and for her to be allowed to enter a discussion with her husband's male friends as a "liberated beautiful waitress."

We don't know much about Joanna beyond these desires and her concern about her sexual tensions in bed with her husband. We never know why these tensions occur except to guess that they come from her great concern to please.

Nor do we know why her husband returns from his first Men's Association meeting and masturbates beside her in bed. Why that scene? Since she awakens, realizes what's going on and asks him to make love, are we merely being given evidence that she is a good woman, ready to please the man she loves?

Because Joanna's character is not fully developed, I find it difficult to determine where Levin is leading the reader. His sympathy is not apparent in the novel, not with Joanna and Bobby, with the hausfrau, or with the innocent-seeming husbands. Everyone is given the same treatment, with the exception of the president of the Men's Association who appears as a stereotyped villain.

Only one aspect of the novel redeems any of its failings for me, and that is too slight to justify reading it. Levin does point out that solid power structure of males (represented not only by their treatment of their wives, but their involvement in the scientific research which feeds the business and war machines) which is difficult to break into and break down. Also, at the end of the novel the author

mixed commune in that we have no sexist structure, and we do function very much as a part of society, a society we are daily becoming more capable of confronting thanks to the support each of us gets from her sisters at home. And no, Midge Decter, our collective is not a convent.

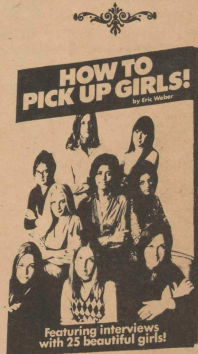
With our individual pasts and our individual futures, we are able to live and function together as a collective because we are all feminists. Our histories as individual women have become our history as women. We are 21, 25, 25, 32, 33, years old. We have been married,

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sets up an analogy between mindless housewives and robots which works slightly above the level of cliché.

But the question remains: how and why did they become robots? The transformation of each woman occurs after a "second honeymoon" weekend with her husband. The author reveals nothing at the end: we never know what secret the men learned at the Men's Association that they were able to employ in the immediate subjugation of their wives. We know only that women who aspire to freedom will be defeated by the males they live with. They, in Levin's vision, are powerless to fight back. One finishes this novel feeling that she has been delivered a thinly disguised threat.

Here is another book from that other movement: that group of people who trail liberal/radical causes in order to profit from them. Women: do not give Ira Levin your money or time.



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INTRODUCTION TO OURSELVES

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Which leads to the point of our having a women's collective: the only way to learn how to manage your life is by managing it yourself. We want independence, freedom, and the right to our own lives. We will not be forced into roles by a male-oriented, warring society. We will look no longer to our parents, husbands, psychiatrists for our direction. Our women's collective allows us to search, struggle, and develop in our own manner, and for ourselves.

Our collective is differentiated from a

divorced, had an abortion, seen the world, lived in mental institutions, learned how to fly. We are gay, straight, undecided, abstaining, all of the above.

We have five heads to learn from, five sets of eyes to see with, five sets of hands to move furniture, paint a room, set the table. And most important for us as concerned women, five people out there in the world, demanding our rights, setting examples, confronting sexist values.

The only way for women to grow strong and find our heads is through other women. And a women's collective can be a fine place to start.