

Book Reviews: Women and the Internet

By N. J. Brown

Lost in cyberspace? These books have the directions to boot up, sign on and surf the net . . . and they're written for us grrls. Women are a growing force on-line. It is estimated that almost 50 percent of the people on-line are women and during the last holiday season, two thirds of all online purchases were made by women (Evans, 1999). Several Internet resource and reference books have been written to assist women in navigating and utilizing the Internet. This essay will describe and discuss five of these books.

One of the latest books is *cybergrrl: A Woman's Guide to the World Wide Web* (1998) by Aliza Sherman. Sherman is president of her company, Cybergrrl, and founder of Webgrrls International. She was selected by *Newsweek* as one of the 50 people who matter most on the Internet. Her web page address is <http://www.cybergrrl.com>.

Sherman's book begins with a brief explanation of what the Internet is, followed by information on the hardware and a list of five service providers. She includes information on computer viruses and ways to protect computers. Sherman's book also discusses e-mail, gopher, FTP, World Wide Web, forums and chat. Sherman gives specific information on how to access each service and their uses. This is followed by a section of online safety tips including a list of myths versus facts. She gives instructions on conversing online as well as online stalking. She includes software and tools for blocking sections of the Internet.

Sherman's book covers careers, health issues, interests, nonprofit organizations, feminism, online publications, and free software. This section is made up almost entirely of website addresses like Career Mosaic at <http://www.careermosaic.com/>, Planned Parenthood Federation at <http://www.ppfa.org/> and Amazoncity at <http://www.amazoncity.com/>. Instead of discussing what is available online, she simply provides the addresses so women can go directly to the sites. It is practical and useful but keep in mind that printed material can be outdated quickly and the some of the website addresses may no longer exist or may have changed.

The next section of the book features interviews with women who are pioneers on the Internet. It is empowering to read about women who have made substantial contributions to the shaping of the Internet—the same women who have been left out of many histories of the Internet.

Sherman also includes a section for girls—those 18 and under, with web addresses of “girl-friendly” sites such as American Girl at <http://www.americangirl.com> and Girl Power at <http://www.girlpower.com>. She ends with resources for women on the Internet.

This book covers all the basics of getting online and explaining various services of the Internet. The chapter that is based on web addresses is very useful and the interviews with women who are pioneers on the Internet make this book an important

historical source.

Laurel Gilbert and Crystal Kile's book, *Surfer Grrrls: Look, Ethel! An Internet Guide for Us!*, is more dated because it came out in 1996. Nonetheless, it is a useful, if informally written, book. It starts off with an extensive Internet glossary. Gilbert and Kile include a brief history of the Internet and a historical overview of women in computer science. The book then provides a glossary of hardware terms and more computer terms with a brief description of each. This is followed by a section of questions and answers, which provide a way for women to troubleshoot problems with their computers and online encounters. Gilbert and Kile provide a checklist to help women get online and utilize various services.

The book also discusses the culture of Internet, including cybersex. It ends with interviews of prominent women on the Internet. The interviews are in-depth and are a good historical source.

This book's glossary section is useful and the section with the questions and answers is unique. However, it does not cover the diversity of topics that some of the other books reviewed did. Nonetheless, it does offer a valuable historical resource by featuring some of the women prominent on the Internet.

Net Chick: A Smart-Girl Guide to the Wired World by Carla Sinclair came out in 1996. Sinclair is no stranger to those familiar with the Internet—she is co-editor of *The Happy Mutant Handbook* and a contributing writer for *Wired* magazine. The web page is the Net Chick Clubhouse at <http://www.cyborganic.com/people/carla/>.

Sinclair's book is filled with photos and graphics from the Internet and uses an informal style of writing. It includes extensive information about cybersex and sex chats as well as including sites for erotic reading and chatting. Sinclair provides interviews with women on-line. For example, she interviews a woman who participates in cybersex. This approach is different from the other books in that she includes women who currently use the Internet as well as women who have been pioneers on it.

Sinclair gives information on how to create a homepage. She provides "hotsites" on fashion, the media, music, sports and spirituality.

This book includes a section of Carpal Tunnel Syndrome and Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI). Her tips for preventing these conditions are excellent and include using a wrist bean bag, support gloves, an ergonomic keyboard, an ergonomic chair, and a headset telephone. She also includes websites that deal with these conditions. She ends the book by defining the Internet and discussing Internet providers.

This book focuses more on the culture of the Internet. The interviews included as well as the sites given provide insight into the culture of the Internet.

Rye Senjen and Jan Gurthrey wrote *The Internet for Women* in 1996. Their web page address is <http://www.publishaust.net.au/~spinifex>.

Senjen and Guthrey address such issues faced by women on-line as sexual

harassment and pornography and offer steps to avoid harassment, including filtering programs that women can use to prevent downloading pornography. The authors also offer explanations about the technical aspects including connections, computers, modems, software, and Internet service providers. On the practical side, Senjen and Guthrey even offer a list of questions that women can ask when choosing an Internet provider. The two talk about e-mail, on-line communities, gopher and the World Wide Web. They provide an in-depth analysis of each service as well as specific instructions for utilizing each to communicate online. The two discuss issues of privacy, anonymity, security online and gender-switching online.

Their book ends with a list of resources for women. The list is diverse and includes sites divided into broad areas such as women and technology, women and history, and women and economics. The list is divided into two parts; the first is for websites, the second is for listservs.

The websites include the name of the site, a brief description and the web address. Some web sites included in the list are The Female Equation, a site for links to women's resources online at <http://www.getnet.com/women/html>, Women'Space that promotes accessibility to the internet, its information, tools and resources at <http://www.softaid.net/cathy/vsister/w-space/womspace.html>, and Her House Home Page, a project of Habitat for Humanity with helps women achieve home ownership and gives work to women builders at <http://www.herhouse.org/house.htm>.

The listserv section includes the name of the site, a brief description, and subscription directions. For example, Women's Studies has a listserv called ws-l. To subscribe, women should email: majordomo@massey.ac.nz. Women must include a message reading: subscribe ws-l [your name] <your email address>. Another example is Maiden L, a list designed for women who are new to the Internet and need a helping hand. To subscribe email: majordomo@women.ca. Women must include the message subscribe maiden-l [your name] <your email address>. These lists of resources make Senjen and Guthrey's book stand out.

Judith A. Broadhurst's book, *The Woman's Guide to Online Services*, may be old—it was published in 1995—but it still is considered a classic. The author not only covers such basic issues as freedom of expression, privacy, and equal access but also helps newcomers familiarize themselves with the online skills necessary to survive on the Internet. Broadhurst includes a section on discrimination, sexual harassment and stalking online as well as gender communication styles online and netiquette tips. The tips are useful to women—and they may help prevent them from being flamed.

The book includes five basic features of an online service: forums (bulletin boards), libraries, chat, e-mail, and databases. Broadhurst then includes an overview of ten service providers, including America Online, CompuServ and Women's Wire. Broadhurst provides a description of each service as well as the benefits, drawbacks, and recommendations for use of the services. This should be a useful guide for women who are just beginning or who may be interested in changing service providers.

Broadhurst includes a chapter on children online. It is written for parents and

provides information on blocking access to services or features as well as rules for online safety. The book also provides sites for parents. In addition, Broadhurst discusses Seniors online and online resources such as AARP and Senior Bulletin Boards such as The Older Women's Network sponsored by Women's Wire. However, she does not provide web addresses for either site.

The author also has sections covering interest groups, such as gardening and travel as well as spirituality online. Broadhurst also offers a bit on online sex and romance and she talks about the appeal—and risk—of cybersex. She also provides a helpful list on how to avoid sexual harassment online.

Broadhurst's book provides health databases and education online. She includes courses and degrees available online, including information on the university, the address and phone/fax numbers, and degrees available. The book addresses online career resources and online job searches as well as how to find mentors online.

For women interested in financial aspects, Broadhurst provides a guide to business management, marketing and financial planning online. The author provides a useful section that included 100 ways to save time and money online. The book also has a section on online research basics to teach women how to utilize the Internet to find what they need.

She ends the book with a section of online services for women and sites for women. She includes a resource guide of online services and service providers as well nonprofit organizations online and online magazines.

This book covers the widest range of topics in comparison to the other books reviewed. Within each section, information is given on cybersites that relate to the specific topic. The advice and information given in this book is practical and comprehensive.

All of the books reviewed provide basic information for women who want to utilize the Internet. The books have different strengths based on the various subjects they include. Broadhurst's book is the best resource guide because of the diversity of topics and practical advice. Senjen and Guthrey provide the best listing of Internet resources for women, although Broadhurst is a close second. Sherman's book includes a list of sites that are also excellent. Gilbert and Kile's book and Sinclair's book are more descriptive of the culture of the Internet. The one limitation all of the books have is that the Internet is constantly changing and the print medium cannot reflect the inherent flexibility of the Internet. All of the books are a valuable guide to women and serve different functions to aid women as they create their own space on the Internet.

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