

**Book Review: The Good Girls Revolt**

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**The Good Girls Revolt: How the Women of *Newsweek* Sued Their Bosses and Changed the Workplace.** Lynn Povich. PublicAffairs, 2012. 304 pp. paperback \$14.99; 288 pp. hardcover \$25.99; Kindle \$10.09.

Before the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the open sex discrimination attitude depicted in the fictional TV series *Mad Men* ran rampant in the real world—with jobs listed by gender and women relegated into supporting workplace roles. *The Good Girls Revolt* by Lynn Povich tells the story of how 46 women, herself included, sued *Newsweek* for sex discrimination. This was the first time a media company faced a gender-based class action suit. Using personal stories and in-depth research, Povich recounts her early days at *Newsweek*, the 1970 lawsuit, and her promotion as the publication's first female senior editor.

Povich succeeds in conveying the culture of time, showing the overt sexism in the conversations between the male writers and editors and their female researchers and reporters through interviews with former employees. One former researcher recalled: "The way we related to men was through sexual bantering. It was the way a compliment was made at *Newsweek*." Povich describes an in-house infirmary containing two rooms with single beds, which were often used for work-time sexual liaisons. As Povich lists each female employee's background, a pattern emerges: Even though the women at *Newsweek* often graduated from top colleges and had the same or higher qualifications than the men, they rarely received promotions into the more respected, higher-paid positions. "Not only was research and fact-checking considered women's work," writes Povich, "but it was assumed that we didn't have the talent or capability to go beyond it."

*Newsweek* alumnae include many recognizable names, such as Nora Ephron, Ellen Goodman, and Susan Brownmiller, who joined the publication for a short period in the early 1960s. Ephron explained her brief tenure this way: "I knew I was going to be a writer, and if they weren't going to make me one, I was going to a place that would."

But not all the women left, and, slowly, the unfairness of the situation caused enough anger that the women began to wrestle with their "good girl" upbringings as they met in secret and plotted how the group could change the company's nature. They found a pro

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bono lawyer, Eleanor Holmes Norton, then at ACLU, who urged them, after weeks of deliberation, to take “off your white gloves.” Finally, the group filed a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in March 1970—the same day *Newsweek* ran a cover story on women’s liberation. The group would sue again in 1972 after promises to change hiring practices were not fulfilled. Povich also writes about the *Newsweek*-inspired spate of lawsuits by women working for other media and how, ultimately, these lawsuits changed working practices and women’s lives, including Anna Quindlen’s, who “considers herself one of the beneficiaries of the lawsuit,” according to the book.

Povich interweaves these stories into the historical context of the women’s movement. Occasionally, the author offers too many historical detours, overloading the reader with minutiae, such as several paragraphs from the National Black Feminist Organization’s statement of purpose. The story becomes more poignant, however, as the author outlines the experience of three recent *Newsweek* female employees feeling stymied by an old-boys-club culture as recently as 2009. This resulted in a four-page story in 2010, “Are We There Yet?” that referenced the original suit and questioned how much had actually changed for women at the magazine.

In 1970, women made up 25 percent of the masthead; 40 years later the number had risen to 39 percent. Povich writes: “We didn’t realize how hard it would be to change attitudes and stereotypes. There still are not enough stories on women’s issues, not enough women editorial writers and commentators.”

Five months after the article’s publication, the Washington Post Company sold *Newsweek* for \$1 plus its liabilities to Sidney Harman, who made Tina Brown its first female editor-in-chief. *Newsweek* has changed hands since then, shuttering its print magazine at the end of 2012 and becoming a digital-only publication. IBT Media intends to bring a weekly print version back in 2014. Povich’s book offers some hope that such a rebirth will not revisit old gender tensions.