

BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

READING GROUP GUIDE

# When Everything Changed

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THE AMAZING JOURNEY OF  
AMERICAN WOMEN  
FROM 1960 TO THE PRESENT

BY

Gail Collins

## A CONVERSATION WITH GAIL COLLINS

The author of *When Everything Changed* talks with  
Doree Shafrir of Jezebel.com



Gail Collins spoke to me from a hotel room in Philadelphia, where she was in the midst of her book tour. We discussed everything from ironing to why only 17 percent of U.S. Senators and Representatives are female.

*Hi, Gail. Is this still a good time?*

It's a great time. Let me just go turn off the oven. [*A minute later*] Did I say oven? I meant iron.

*I was confused as to why you had an oven in your hotel room. But that actually reminds me of something I wanted to ask you. In a recent interview with Forbes, you said you didn't know any men who ironed.*

I'm sure this has something to do with being in New York and class — men send their shirts out, unless their wives iron them for them.

*My boyfriend usually sends his shirts out, but I did recently show him how to iron.*

That is something my husband would never let me teach him, under the theory that someone is imprisoned by doing ironing — the

## READING GROUP GUIDE

revolution will be achieved when no one has to do ironing. Yet here I am ironing a shirt.

*Maybe the revolution will be achieved when we can wear wrinkled shirts.*

Maybe!

*Anyway. In your book, in the section on the sixties, you write about two books, *The Feminine Mystique* and *Sex and the Single Girl*, both of which had a major impact on women's consciousness. I wonder if it would be possible for a single book to make such an impact today.*

Both of those books were partly the huge things that they were because they just caught a moment. Especially *Sex and the Single Girl* — she caught that exact moment when the sexual rules were changing and expressed it in a really dramatic way. It's harder to do that now, because once a thought gets out there it gets devoured so much faster, by so many.

*Is that why there hasn't been a clear successor to Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, and other big names of the feminist movement?*

No, it's the same reason there's not a clear successor to Martin Luther King. There are these crystal moments in history when something that's so obviously wrong gets tackled in the context of a society that's ready to hear it, and it happens very fast and it's very dramatic. Everyone who's part of it remembers it for the rest of their lives.

*What was your mother like?*

She wanted to be a journalist. She left college after her first year to work for the war effort.

## READING GROUP GUIDE

*Was she supportive of your career choices?*

Yes. My parents were the kind of parents who would say, “Look at that, what a good sentence!” They were just wildly supportive, and not in a terrifying or bad way. It was very easy to feel empowered.

*Did you encounter discrimination?*

The truth is I didn’t. I came in at just the exact moment when the windows were all thrown open by women who were about three seconds older than I was. They did all the suffering, the filing of the suits, the protests, the challenging of employers. I got all the benefits. I stand completely on their shoulders.

*Did they ever feel any resentment toward you and the women of your generation — since, as you said, you were born at that exact moment three seconds after them when things got a lot easier?*

They never felt any resentment at the women who got to do things. They felt resentment at the people who didn’t let them do what they wanted to do. They were a very generous group of women who celebrated all the good things that happened to other women in their fields.

*Do you think women are willing to mentor young women in journalism?*

To the degree that people have time to mentor anybody. It’s way, way better than when I was starting out. Mentoring was not heard of. Early on, I remember we had a meeting of women. This was at one of the tabloids. A woman said that she would go in and say to her editor, “I want to know what I’m doing wrong.” And he would never say anything. Finally, he said, “You’re about where we thought you’d be at this point.” I think guys were more comfortable with each other than they were with women back then. My particular profession was

## READING GROUP GUIDE

not known for its mentoring. Now I think people are dying to mentor, but they're overworked. There's not enough time.

*Did you read Joanne Lipman's op-ed in the Times on Sunday? She claims that in her entire career, a woman never asked her for a raise or a promotion.*

I was only an editor for five years but that was not my experience. I had lunch just the other day with a young woman who used to be one of my researchers. She now has a really good job in the outside world, and she appears to ask for a raise on a weekly basis. It did certainly used to be true that women were not as good as men at asking for stuff. You did run into women who wanted their bosses to offer them promotions because it would be a validation. It was not a validation if they just demanded it. I really think that period is behind us. Then again, because of the economy, nobody is asking for raises now. They're just hoping they won't be given notice.

*You don't get to the eighties until almost three hundred pages into the book, and then you only spend a hundred pages talking about the eighties to the present. Why did you decide to pay more attention to the sixties and seventies?*

The sixties were really important. I wanted to drench the readers in the details of life for women fifty years ago — what they wore, how they dated and married, what kind of jobs they got, and how the media portrayed them. Even people who were there don't actually remember what it was like. Because it wasn't as if everyone was suffering — women thought they were doing very well. They weren't comparing themselves to the guys. They were comparing themselves to other women, or their mothers. Then the change was so wicked fast. It was less than a decade, from 1964 to '72 or '73. Women became equal under the law, applications to graduate school, law school, medical school shot up, and the country's vision of what women could achieve was just transformed. After that, it's a story about how the country digested all this, and how women coped with the new challenges, like how you balance a serious career with kids.

## READING GROUP GUIDE

*You were the first female editorial page editor at the New York Times. I was looking at the paper's masthead and there are still only seven women on the masthead, out of twenty-five people total. And in your book you mention the writer Laura Sessions Stepp, who decided not to become an editor and stay a writer at the Washington Post. Why is it still so difficult for women to advance to the top in journalism?*

It's difficult for women to get to the very top in most industries — law, medicine, engineering, the Senate. I think it goes back to that family-work question. It's not that you can't have a career and kids. But it's extremely difficult to have one of those careers that demand sixty, seventy hours a week, lots of travel, etc., unless you have a ton of money for help or a partner who's eager to be the main caregiver.

*How can that be remedied?*

When I was in college, if you had told me that in the twenty-first century jobs wouldn't be structured to accommodate family issues, that men wouldn't be as willing as women to take two years off to take care of their families, that there would be no national access to quality child care at every age — I'd just have been shocked. But those things haven't happened, and given the trouble we've had getting health care reform, the chances of a national entitlement for early child care isn't likely to arrive anytime soon. So we have to focus on getting it for the poorest working mothers. And everybody else had better make sure that if they want a really ambitious career plus kids, they've got a partner who's eager to take more than half of the responsibility at home.

*Are things better in other countries that have better family leave policies and child care?*

I'm not a person who gets all bent out of shape about Sweden. Lovely country, but we're never going to be Sweden. And there are devel-

## READING GROUP GUIDE

oped countries where things are worse. Russell Shorto did a piece for the *Times Magazine* on Italy and Greece and Spain and their incredibly low birth rates. These are countries where women are expected to work, but men retain their old patriarchal attitudes. That's a recipe for zero children. And while we have terrible government support for working mothers, Russell thought our companies were more flexible than those in most other countries. And men here, despite their failure to live up to the fifty-fifty thing, are shouldering quite a bit of the load, especially when it comes to child care.

*You mention a Times article from last year by Lisa Belkin, where she wrote about households that split the chores fifty-fifty, and how difficult that was.*

It's really hard. One of the big barriers to genuine sharing is that most men don't seem to have as high a standard when it comes to keeping the house clean, making sure the kids are wearing matching socks, or that the relatives occasionally get invited to dinner. It's very hard to argue that they have to be in charge, say, of producing the dinners and then complain when company comes and it's macaroni and cheese. Some people feel this is all a plot on the part of the men, that they're just waiting it out until the women get frustrated and take over.

*Right now, 76 out of 435 House members, or 17 percent, are women, and it's the same percentage in the Senate. You also mention a statistic about female law firm partners — in 2005 it was also at 17 percent. Why are we still stuck at around 20 percent?*

As I said, the work-child tensions are part of the problem. Women tend to get into politics later in life than men, because so many wait until their kids are older. But it's also reapportionment. Once politicians figured out how to draw the district boundaries with a computer, they were able to be very efficient about protecting incumbents. And that makes it hard for newcomers to get elected. Also, in a lot of

## READING GROUP GUIDE

places, the political culture is so hidebound that it's very unwelcoming for new blood of either sex.

*You didn't have much discussion of women choosing, or not, to take their husband's name. Among my friends this has been rather controversial — women finding out that their fiancés actually feel strongly about it, for example.*

The trend is definitely back to taking your husband's name. I've never felt it was a very big issue. Maybe that's because I changed my name when I got married way back in the day. Of course, I was encouraged by the fact that the mailman said he wouldn't deliver the mail if I had a different name.

*Why are there no late-night female hosts?*

I presume there will be eventually. All those kinds of things are matters of what people are used to and what seems normal to people. There was a long time when we were sure we wouldn't put up with women being anchors or radio announcers. Now no one thinks about it. That's what Hillary Clinton did for women running for president. It's never going to seem weird again. So you just need one to be there, and then it'll be a normal thing. I can see it happening with someone like Ellen DeGeneres.

*The Times ran a story this weekend about how the White House is kind of like a frat house. Should Obama be making more of an effort to have women in positions of power?*

Clearly the basketball game is really important to the president and part of me feels — the poor man is tired, let him just have twenty minutes to himself. But it is a little weird to think that when he relaxes with friends, it's with guys only. So I think it's fair to discuss it.



## READING GROUP GUIDE

### *Anything else?*

A lot of older women come up to me and ask: “Why don’t younger women want to hear these stories? They don’t know what it was like for us in the past.” Sometimes it sounds a little like: “When I was young I walked fifty miles to work in the snow. And I couldn’t wear slacks! You don’t appreciate our suffering.” I’m actually thrilled that a generation of young women has come into the world without feeling they’re constrained by gender. I know they have problems of their own, more complicated than the black-and-white issues we fought out. But on the other hand, I think it’s great to know your own history. It makes life much richer. And this particular story actually has a happy ending. It just knocks me out that throughout recorded history people believed that women were inferior, that their place was only in the home. And that it all changed in my lifetime.

Adapted from an interview originally posted at Jezebel.com on October 28, 2009. Reprinted with permission.

## QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION



1. Were you aware before reading *When Everything Changed* that Congress had passed a child care bill in 1971? Did you know that there were quotas for the admission of women to law and medical schools in the 1960s and '70s?
2. With ever-increasing equality of opportunity, so too came the desire to “have it all” — family, career, community. How has this affected the quality of life for both men and women? Do you see this as a positive or a negative change?
3. Discuss some of the ordinary women interviewees who defied authority in order to better themselves — Lorena Weeks, for instance, who maintained that she could lift her thirty-four-pound typewriter and was therefore sufficiently strong to be promoted from clerk to “switchman” (page 91). Would you have the courage to risk your livelihood to achieve justice?
4. In Chapter 6, Gail Collins writes about African American women’s fight for representation. Discuss how the intersection of race and sex marked their struggle. What was your reaction to Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm’s saying, “I knew I would encounter both anti-black and anti-feminist sentiments. What surprised me was the greater influence of the sex discrimination” (page 205)?

## READING GROUP GUIDE

5. With the waning of the double standard came the sexual liberation of women. What followed was another era of the sexualization of women, at younger and younger ages. Do you think that women have lost control of their images and bodies? Or do you agree with Gloria Steinem that “we should be able to wear anything we damn well please and still be considered human beings” (page 370)?
6. Do you think the struggles of American women in the 1960s, ’70s, and ’80s has been forgotten by today’s generation? Why or why not? How do you think feminism has affected younger women’s attitudes, actions, and activism? Why is the word “feminism” resisted?
7. Hillary Clinton is an exception in her generation as a woman who graduated from law school. After working as a corporate lawyer to support Bill Clinton’s political ambitions in Arkansas, she became the most active First Lady in the human rights arena since Eleanor Roosevelt. What impact do you think her presidential campaign will have on the role of women in public life in the future?
8. Do you think that after more than four decades of monumental change women and men now enjoy equal opportunity? If not, in what way has the movement failed and what are the most important goals that women still need to accomplish?
9. Discuss the ways that traditional assumptions can affect awareness and expectations, beginning with Jo Freeman’s late realization that she had spent four years as an undergraduate at Berkley in the ’60s without ever encountering a female professor. “Worse yet,” she says, “I didn’t notice” (page 11). Can you imagine a time when a NASA spokesman would think it appropriate to say “talk of an American Spacewoman makes me sick” (page 6)?