



The Girl I Left Behind: A Narrative History of the Sixties

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At the height of the Vietnam War protests, twenty-eight-year-old Judith Nies and her husband lived a seemingly idyllic life. Both were building their respective careers in Washington—Nies as the speechwriter and chief staffer to a core group of antiwar congressmen, her husband as a Treasury department economist. They lived in the carriage house of the famed Marjorie Merriweather Post estate. But when her husband brought home a list of questions from an FBI file with Judith's name on the front, Nies soon realized that her life was about to take a radical turn. Shocked to find herself the focus of an FBI investigation into her political activities, Nies began to reevaluate her role as grateful employee and dutiful wife. In *The Girl I Left Behind*, she chronicles the experiences of those women who, like herself, reinvented their lives in the midst of a wildly shifting social and political landscape.

In a fresh, candid look at the 1960s, Nies pairs illuminating descriptions of feminist leaders, women's liberation protests, and other pivotal social developments with the story of her own transformation into a staunch activist and writer. From exposing institutionalized sexism on Capitol Hill in her first published article to orchestrating the removal of a separate "Ladies Gallery" on the House floor to taking leadership of the Women in Fellowships Committee, Nies discusses her own efforts to enlarge women's choices and to change the workplace—and how the repercussions of those efforts in the sixties can still be felt today.

A heartfelt memoir and piercing social commentary, *The Girl I Left Behind* recounts one woman's courageous journey toward independence and equality. It also evaluates the consequences of the feminist movement on the same women who made it happen—and on the daughters born in their wake.

The Girl I Left Behind: A Narrative History of the Sixties Details

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Sheela Word says

Interesting, ambitious book that I found confusing and repetitive in parts. Nies describes the sexist culture of the Sixties and how her own life took on a new direction as she became part of the burgeoning feminist movement. She worked for the federal government, for non-profit organizations, in journalism, and in various other capacities. Her jobs took her all over the world, and her political activities made her an object of interest for the FBI/CIA. I loved Nies' insights about how feminism developed and prevailed. I didn't like how past conversations were presented seemingly verbatim, in quote marks; no one's memory is that good. The book is a hodgepodge of memoir, history, and fictional narrative that mostly, but not completely, works.

Linda says

Gives the lie to the "it just happened" theory of history. Changes in society never "just happen" and this shows how they happened particularly in the light of the women's movement. But the book covers so much more: class politics, the Vietnam War, the CIA, women's view of the world vs men and how that plays out in the diplomatic world. Can't recommend it enough! Thanks to my sister Nan for telling me about it. Stayed up half the night to read it in one sitting as I could not put it down.

Dale Stonehouse says

One of my criteria for rating books is how much I learn from them. Here, the author shines light on details of the slow advance of women in American society, business, education and more. It is difficult now to conceive what a woman who wanted a career had to endure to achieve such simple goals 50 years ago. White male "elites" of that day could not understand why a woman would want to be anything but a mother and "the right kind of wife," which was a wife who would be good for her husband's career advancement. It was such a threat that the FBI maintained a file on her activities. Those interested in the grassroots of the women's movement in the US will find a goldmine here.

Lauren Licitra says

Clearly a woman who struggled and fought for her own and woman's rights, the author failed to contain the story and struggle. Poorly edited with extraneous stories that jump back and forth in time and often repeat, the book contains a wealth of information but attempts to give history on way too many peripheral people. However, the marginalization and oppression of women throughout history can never be written and discussed enough. The book provides a blatant reminder of how far we have come as women, and how much more we still need to go.

Kate says

Awesome frontline account of being a woman in Washington power circles in the late 60s and early 70s. Beautifully written, and filled with stunning quotes.

A strong sense of being the outsider, both because of her gender, and because of her working class background in the corridors of power. Traces her growing awareness that it's odd that her husband is naturally accepted into those corridors, while she's expected to "help out", "volunteer" and "be a good sport" when it comes to sexism.

Enjoyed every minute of it.

Anne Sachs says

Excellent book, especially in the "Me Too" era

Steve Mayer says

Interesting but not compelling. Judith Nies came of age slightly before the 60's. This book chronicles the changes in her personal life made by the women's movement--also describes the effect of the Vietnam War on her political consciousness. In 1974, she left her marriage and, it seems, a career working for liberal democrats on Capitol Hill. While eminently readable and enjoyable, there is nothing particularly dramatic or unusual about her life to make this a "must-read."

Linda says

During the Vietnam War, Judith Nies and her husband were living in Washington and working for the government – Judith as the speechwriter and chief staffer to a group of antiwar congressmen, and “Mac”, her husband, as a Treasury department economist. She called her job “the most interesting job in Washington.” She had a masters’ degree from Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies but the one factor that she couldn’t overcome in her search for success was that she was a woman. Her memoir recounts her efforts to further equality for women and “is a compelling and perceptive biography for our current political landscape that presents the underpinnings of the 60s era and the women's movement in a fresh and personal way.” An interesting sidelight to me was that in 1975 she was appointed to the Lowell Park commission, charged with creating a national park out of the decrepit mill buildings of America’s first planned industrial city. Boott Mill, built in 1835, was to be restored. Was it to be a monument to the Lowells, Cabots and genius of the founders, or the story of the human cost of the mill workers? It was in part due to Nies’ influence that the story of the mill girls was told.

Ann Marshall says

I lived through the same Sixties that Judith Nies chronicles so compellingly in *The Girl I Left Behind*; enjoyed similar international adventures on my own; objected to the Vietnam War; embraced civil rights; and struggled to understand what women's liberation meant for me. Reading her memoir was a shot of adrenalin distilled from the energy of the times, a walk down memory lane, and a reminder of how far we have come in the 50-plus years since.

For many young women and men, the Sixties was about far more than free love, Woodstock, burning bras, and smoking pot. It was about reinventing the world around us to accommodate our desires to live in a country where women had access to the same opportunities as men.

In addition to mapping out that life, Nies also documents how far we had to come to achieve our goals. Some juicy tidbits that might amaze younger generations:

- On equal treatment in the judicial system: "In 1962, women in America were still excluded from serving on juries, an exclusion the Supreme Court unanimously upheld so as not to interfere with women's functions as wives, homemakers, and mothers."
- On equal access to banking and credit: "Women were denied credit and mortgages by banks unless they had a male cosigner."
- On obtaining the right to vote: "America's collective memory had erased almost a hundred years of radical political activism on the part of five generations of women; no mention of millions of dollars raised in nickels and pennies to finance 56 campaigns for state referenda, 480 campaigns to urge state legislatures to put woman's suffrage on the ballot, 47 campaigns for state constitutional conventions, 30 campaigns to urge presidential party platforms to include woman's suffrage as a plank, and 19 lobbying efforts with 19 successive Congresses before the Nineteenth Amendment was proposed in Congress in 1919 (passed in the House by 1 vote), and ratified in 1920."

I highly recommend this book to young women and men, as a rueful history of the many ways women have been "less than" in our history, and of how far we have come. I recommend it also to older readers who will assuredly enjoy a walk down memory lane and will celebrate how far we have come.

Ciara says

i obviously have a soft spot for the memoirs of people who came of age &/or had some fundamental political awakening during the 1960s, much as i will probably enjoy those types of memoirs when people start writing them about the 1990s eventually. & i get even more excited when those memoirs are written by women, about their feminist awakenings, just because i wish dudes would shut it a little more often & stop thinking that i give a rip what they think about stuff. so i was pretty interested to check this book out, thinking it would be a narrative of a young woman who enters the sixties all business casual, doing the hair flip/sweater set thing, & then discovers feminism & liberates herself from the tyranny of pantyhose & bossy boyfriends. & it kind of was, but with a whole lot more working-for-the-government involved. this judith nies character was all about washington DC. she was one of the first female aides in the capitol & garnered a lot of political power for herself thanks to her alliances with some pretty influential lefty senators. her husband also worked for the government, & the big climactic reveal that destroys their marriage is the fact that he works for the CIA. he thinks she's not a typically feminine enough wife for a high-ranking government official, because she wants to keep working even after having a child, & isn't as interested in the minutiae of entertaining as some of the other washington wives, & they end up getting divorced. judith seizes her opportunity to travel

around in europe & northern africa, working for a writer, getting to know herself & her true callings in life when not feeling the pressure to attend good schools & be a good wife. it was a pretty interesting book, but all the government jobs & DC intrigue threw me for a loop. i don't really know much about that stuff, like, when it comes down to details, so i found it a little (or a lot) difficult to follow. hence the two stars. perhaps i was ungenerous. decide for yourself.

Jessica Barkl says

For every woman out there...you should read this. Not only is it a well-written, but it is also a one-of-a-kind history book about us. Men should read it too because I don't think this history has ended. Anyway, I was humbled by this woman's journey and inspired. "Play to win" is a new piece of inspiration that I have walked away with after reading this book.

Kira says

I loved this book. Nies has had a truly remarkable life, and it was a pleasure to live it with her in this book. She does an incredible job of weaving her life into the larger forces at play in the antiwar and civil rights movements of the sixties. Whether she was frankly discussing the rise and fall of her marriage or the inner workings of being a staffer on Capitol Hill, I felt ready to follow her story wherever it went.

I also love how she took the reader along her own discovery of the deeply sexist forces at play in American life at the time. Her awareness grows steadily and encapsulates the experience of many women of the era who fought for justice for others as they realized just how much had been denied to themselves.

Sara says

I really enjoyed this book, although would probably give it a 3.5 really. Would get a 5 if the author was a bit more disciplined about not wandering off into long historical tangents. I liked how she wove the history of the women's movement, and other world/US politics into the story, really liked it, but at times she went on for too long and I really just wanted her to get back to the story.

Anyway, good book, very interesting story, and I learned a lot about the 1960s and 70s, that I didn't know am glad I do now. Also made me very glad I was born in the 80s.

Claire says

People always tell me I was born in the wrong generation, I've always had such an attraction to the 60s. This book was no exception - in fact it taught me more about that decade than anything else I've read or watched, ever. And from a woman's perspective! Judith Nies had such a unique experience as a woman in politics during an era where there were almost none except secretaries and receptionists. I was captivated by this book and Ms. Nies' "insider account," and I highly recommend it for people who are curious about politics and history of the 60s. I think it would be a fascinating read for both experts and lay people.

Terri says

Judith Nies' memoir of the 60s-70s is remarkable. She lived through the birth of the modern feminist movement. It's difficult to remember (do younger people even know??) that college-educated women were expected to be secretaries or that doctors didn't admit women to medical school because they didn't think they (the entire species) was smart enough. Same goes for business schools. Who knows what havoc this systemic sexism has wrought on our lives?
