



The Girl in the Show: Three Generations of Comedy, Culture, and Feminism

Anna Fields

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“I’m not funny at all. What I am is brave.” —Lucille Ball

With powerhouses like Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, and Amy Schumer dominating the entertainment landscape and memoirs from today’s most vocal feminist comedienne shooting up the bestseller lists, women in comedy have never been more influential.

Marking this cultural shift, *The Girl in the Show* provides an in-depth exploration of how comedy and feminism have grown hand in hand to give women a stronger voice in the ongoing fight for equality. From *I Love Lucy* to *SNL* to today’s rising cable and web-series stars, Anna Fields’ entertaining retrospective combines amusing and honest personal narratives with the historical, political, and cultural contexts of the feminist movement.

With interview subjects like Abbi Jacobson, Molly Shannon, Mo Collins, and Lizz Winstead among others—as well as actresses, stand-up comics, writers, producers, and female comedy troupes—Fields shares true stories of wit and heroism from some of our most treasured (and under-represented) artists. At its heart, *The Girl in the Show* captures the urgency of our continued struggle towards equality, allowing the reader to both revel in—and rebel against—our collective ideas of “women’s comedy.”

The Girl in the Show: Three Generations of Comedy, Culture, and Feminism Details

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From Reader Review *The Girl in the Show: Three Generations of Comedy, Culture, and Feminism* for online ebook

Patty Simpson says

It's really 2.5 stars, not 3. The book looks at how female comedians intersect with feminism. Some interesting discussion and some of her interviewees said interesting things, but she ascribes attitudes to people from the past based on what she thinks they probably felt/thought (like Lucille Ball) that often seem like a stretch; she makes sweeping statements (such as that ALL art comes from deep suffering); and there's one entire chapter that just rips apart *Roe v. Wade* because it only ensured the rights of one group of people - pregnant women - and didn't include ALL women and gay men. It's like a complete step away from what her book is about into a personal pet peeve of her, with no attempt to link it to her theme about comedians at all.

Kelly Hager says

I can't even imagine the extent of the research that Anna Fields did for this novel. It's smart and funny and so interesting. I never really thought about the...we'll say sociology of comedy, especially female comics (or the way that I gender comedians, like I JUST DID).

Like Anna (and a lot of the women mentioned here), I absolutely love Gilda Radner. Part of it (on my end) has nothing to do with how funny she is (although she is hilarious), it's because I have hair that's a lot like hers and it's the first time I saw someone who looks like me be funny and get to do things. It meant a lot. And I know women younger than me probably feel the exact same way about Molly Shannon and Tina Fey and Amy Poehler and Mindy Kaling.

What I didn't understand before reading this book was the sort of throughline connecting Gilda to the women after her and how all of that really began with Lucille Ball, who was the first woman to be a really powerful comedian. She created and wrote a show, and she was protective of her character. She set rules for what Lucy would and wouldn't do, but also made rules like, "Lucy can make fun of Ricky's accent; nobody else can." There was no way any earlier lady could've even made a rule like that, let alone have it be listened to.

This book is smart and important (and relevant) but it's also really fun. If you like to laugh, read this book. Highly recommended.

David says

good topic kept me going to the end, but very boring and overlong analysis. As far as I could tell she had....

a couple of catch-phrases ("yes, and" is the supportive mentality she wants people to have toward "comedienne-ballerinas" [aka women comics]),

a couple of historical observations (Joan Rivers was mean to other women; Amy Poehler and Tina Fey are

nice to each other and other women), and

a couple of takes on comedy and women (there are double standards in what people will laugh at; people blame all women if they find a woman not funny, whereas they don't do that to men....; women have to decide if they want to talk about female-specific tropes vs. just any topic.....)

.....and just repeats each until I wanted to scream.

Structuring it by subject, with interviews of much the same cast of characters each time, might not have been best choice. I'd be curious to read maybe a person-by-person (Phyllis Diller, Mary Tyler Moore, etc.) account going in chrono order and working in the history by examining the career of each in more detail.

In fairness, it's hard to write about comedy in an engaging way I guess. I'm not a fan of Lucille Ball, but if you are I'd have to think it's a lot more entertaining to watch a video clip from her show than to read a lot of analysis of it.

Debbie says

The following take on this book must be attributed to my exhaustion as a 40-something-year-old woman with a Ph.D. in a humanities subject that leaned heavily on women and gender studies:

Ugh.

This book will excite and appeal to readers who are just getting into the topics of comedy and feminism. It is earnest in its pursuit and thorough in its analysis. Although not written for an academic audience, its tone suggests a desire to be taken very seriously as a scholar, which in all fairness, the author deserves to be. I enjoyed reading the perspective of so many living and passed "comedienne-ballerinas", and my sympathies are firmly aligned with all who seek to find their place in the male-dominated world of comedy.

However, this book also has the potential to bore those who have been gnawing at these bones for much of their adult lives. The takes aren't all that fresh and in many instances, the analyses feel over-wrought and tiresome. Further, the author's writing style distinguishes itself by its lack of discipline.

Celebrate if you love this book. Forgive yourself if you don't. Either way, give it a chance.

Joanna Abillama says

I was hoping for a book that went into details about women in comedy. While there was definitely discussion of that, there were also a lot of parts that just talked about feminism in general, including a whole chapter on Row vs Wade. That bored me as I am already knowledgeable about feminism. I also wished she had more quotes from her interviews with female comics.

Marie Andrews says

Full Review also posted on my blog: <https://lotsoflivres.com/2017/10/01/t...>

The Girl In The Show explores how comedy has developed over the last 3 generations (20th Century onwards) in terms of women's involvement and the way that comedy is portrayed to a wider audience, with a focus on feminism and culture. I found it a particularly interesting read, especially to see how and why comedy has changed and to learn more about some of the groundbreaking acts that I didn't know much about beforehand.

Admittedly, I didn't know many of the acts that Anna refers to throughout the book, so although it was great for me to read about specific jokes and performances that I didn't know about, I imagine for people who have seen them, it was probably a bit repetitive. In a way, it does make this book appeal to a larger audience, both younger and older, because it was easy to follow and understand the point of the examples.

Although this book is all about comedy, it isn't funny – and it's not supposed to be. It's informative, with it being very clear that Anna has done a lot of research in this field, especially when interviewing various comedians. I wish there was a little bit more said about contemporary comedians, but overall, I do think it had a good balance between the “three generations” as said on the cover.

If you want to learn about the history of comedy in relation to the emergence of women, and the effect that feminism has had, this is the book for you! It's very informative, clear, and easy to understand. A great feminist read!

I received a copy of this book in exchange for an honest review

Kathryn MacDougall says

I initially assumed that *The Girl in the Show* was going to be more of a funny girl-esque memoir that really emphasized the ‘comedy’ aspect of being a young woman in entertainment. Instead, it's much more of an analytical look at the evolution of “comedians-who-happen-to-be-women”, or as Fields calls them (and this is my new favorite term) “comedienne-ballerinas”. Fields includes interviews from an incredible array of comedians - I cannot imagine the sheer amount of research that went into this book. There's Mo Collins, Lisa Lampanelli, Abbi Jacobson and so, so many more, all in their own words discussing their comedy and their lives. It's far more insightful and wider reaching than I was expecting, but also feels deeply personal. This book is not just an academic exercise in the rise of feminism and fight for equal representation in comedy (and the world of entertainment in general). It makes wider cultural and political movements intensely personal through the words of the comedienne-ballerinas themselves. Reading about Marga Gomez's experiences as a young woman confronting homophobia drives home the point that the political is personal. The arguments driving the political discourse are not far-off, abstract ideas but rather have very real implications for the people living them.

The Girl in the Show is at its best when it is presenting the powerful anecdotes from its comedienne-ballerinas. There is one particularly poignant moment when Judy Carter discusses how Gilda Radner helped comfort her in a bathroom stall of all places - it drives home a deep sense of heart and community not often seen at the forefront of comedy.

These were not notions typically associated with comedy, and when they do appear, they tend to be relegated into niche issues. *The Girl in the Show* provided a new perspective for watching comedy, from *I Love Lucy* to *Saturday Night Live* to *Broad City* and the deep underlying emotional work that accompanies it. Fields challenges the typical paradigm of “women comedians” and completely transforms it by demonstrating just how the personal and the political intersect for both the comedienne-ballerinas themselves and the audience watching at home.

I received this book free from NetGalley in exchange for an honest review

Angie says

Slloooooowwwwww..... good, but slow. I found myself checking how much progress I made way more often than I should have. Part of that was due to the chapter lengths. They were REALLY long and it made those sections feel like they moved slower. Speed aside, it could've done with more chapters just from an organizational standpoint.

This book gives the reader the opportunity to learn quite a bit about women in comedy, specifically the ones that broke barriers and glass ceilings, paving the way for many of our favorite modern women. There was a pretty big discrepancy in the feel of the description compared to the actual book. The blurb lead me to believe it would be more of a lighthearted humorous book and it was definitely not that. It's much more analytical and almost academic at times. To say it is well researched would be a drastic understatement. Fields did her homework and did it well. I would've likely enjoyed it more had my expectations of what type of book I thought it would be had better lined up with the type of book it actually turned out to be. You'll walk away with a better understanding of comedienne-ballerinas of yesteryear and an appreciate for all that women still currently face in the comedy world today.

Disclaimer: I received a free advanced digital copy from the publisher via Netgalley in exchange for an honest review.

Kirsti says

Didn't finish. Too earnest. Totally has a right to exist but did not hold my attention.

Alexandra Michaelides says

I really, really, really wanted to like this book. I read the introduction and thought--this is the book for me. Discussions of I Love Lucy, The Mary Tyler Moore Show, SNL, along with learning about past great female comedians? I'm here for that. And yet...

It's a great concept, but the book was too scattered for me. Often chapters would have a loose structure around an issue--like telling dirty jokes or how women treat other women in the comedy industry--but, for whatever reason, this didn't work as a good structure. There was lots of overlap, and at the end hard to tell what the actual point of the book was.

Fields was able to complete or compile an impressive group of interviews, which made me think that this book may have been better served as an oral history.

Also, there was too much emphasis on SNL and the great Gilda Radner. While this is a show and a woman I'm very interested in, the constant discussion of them felt repetitive, and over-inflated the importance or universal appeal of SNL, and took time away from other comedic greats, especially women of color.

But, the book did ignite my interest to learn more about the history of women in comedy, especially Phyllis Diller, Elaine May, and the female writers who helped make I Love Lucy and other shows the masterpieces that they are. I'll also be revisiting Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con Women: The Female Trickster in American Culture, particularly the chapter "Liminal Lucy."

Lynn says

A very nice modern history of female comics from the early 20th century to the present. Anna Fields especially bases her book on her favorite comic Gilda Radner. Fields wasn't born yet when Gilda Radner became famous on Saturday Night Live but learned about her later. I was a teen when SNL first debuted and was the perfect audience for the show. I remember quite well many of the skits she talks about and have seen them recently on DVD. Gilda Live! I had forgotten about but Fields description jogged my memory with good thoughts. I loved that concert movie! Fields addresses the problems female comics and why there have been so few females in the business. While there are many more now in proportion to males, I still think they are not completely equal even now. The title is derived from a comment on the debut show of SNL when the male comics declare that they even have a "girl in the show!" meaning Gilda Radner. She was the standout female improv comic of the Not Ready for Primetime Players. Phyllis Diller, Joan Rivers and earlier comics such as Franny Brice as well as others are mentioned in a breezy manner that is endearing and enlightening. There is a chapter on rape and the taboo about discussing it especially with female comics but I was surprised that Fields didn't mention her idols skit on SNL in which Gilda plays a woman who has brought her rapist on trial and finds the trial is really about her and her sex life, Her daring to prosecute her rapist has resulted in her total humiliation. Lucille Ball and her influence on female comics and Gilda Radner is very moving. I had no idea that Lucille was brought up on charges of being a communist in front of the House of UnAmerican Activities. Her fame at the time kept her from being blacklisted. On the whole, this book was a very good read and very interesting. Touching and helped me connect with Gilda, Lucy, Joan and other female comics and writers that I had thought about in a long time.

Jill Jewell says

I wanted to love this, but I could not get through the rambling and often redundant way it was written.

Niamh says

Feminism + comedy + popular culture: it should be something that's completely up my alley, three things I love about the world. And though I did enjoy this book, I just thought it was OK, rather than something more revolutionary. If anything, it read like a history of some first/second wave feminisms comic heroes: Lucille Ball, Gilda Radnor, Moms Molsley, Joan Rivers etc, rather than analysing at length the presence of more recent comediennes. Though they're definitely mentioned, I was a little disappointed by how little Fields relied on them for analysis. I also wasn't so sure on the inclusion of a whole chapter on Roe vs Wade at the end, seeing as it had little to do with comediennes.

Well researched and put together, including interviews from some prolific comediennes and actresses, there were some very poignant moments in this book, particularly regarding how women put their own emotion and fears into their work. There was a lot about female comics with depression and how they channelled that into creating characters that made others feel better, which I really connected with. It's a good book, but not something that I'll return to anytime soon.

Manon says

I was provided an ARC via NetGalley in exchange for an honest review.

I seriously thought I'd never finish it.....

The Girl in the Show is a nonfiction about Comedy, women's place in it and how it reflects our society.

This was a very interesting book with captivating, funny and touching moments.

However, the chapters were so long I had trouble staying focused. it took me forever to finish this book.

Same problem within the chapters, some sentences were so long, they lost me from time to time...

Still, I learnt a bunch of stuff, it was kinda great.

Kelly says

I blurbed this! Here's what I said (in a nutshell -- I said a lot more because I had a lot of positive things to say!):

"A nuanced, thoughtful exploration of funny women past and present. An excellent addition to feminist bookshelves everywhere."

Also, there is so much talk about I Love Lucy and how at the forefront of feminism and women's rights she was, even if she didn't necessarily have the labels at hand for what it was she was really doing.
