Summer 1974

Review of Women in America by Thomas Crowell

Laurie Olsen Johnson

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsqq

Part of the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsqq/107

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Archives and Special Collections at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Women's Studies Quarterly by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.
Books: New and Recommended

From time to time we will review at length some special books or series of note. This, the first of those longer reviews, will replace the usual short book reviews this quarter. *Women in America* is a Thomas Crowell series available in hardcover ($5.50 each). Dell plans to reprint those marked with an asterisk.

Mckown, Robin. *The World of Mary Cassatt.*
*• Meltzer, Milton. Tongue of Flame: the Life of Lydia Maria Child.*
*• Moore, Carman. Somebody’s Angel Child: the Story of Bessie Smith.*
Rogers, W. G. *Gertrude Stein is Gertrude Stein is Gertrude Stein.*
Scott, John Anthony. *Fanny Kemble’s America.*
*• Sterling, Philip. Sea and Earth: the Life of Rachel Carson.*

In the six years since the series called *Women in America* was developed for young readers, 18 biographies have appeared, 10 of which are reviewed here. The series is notable for its attention both to famous women and to those whose lives most of us do not know. Included are such reformers as Frances Wright, Lillian Wald, and Ida Tarbell; such revolutionaries as Emma Goldman and Mother Jones; politicians Margaret Chase Smith and Mayor Felisa Rincon de Gautier; and such writers and artists as Pearl Buck and Mary Cassatt. Still more unusual are biographies of the relatively unknown Mary Elizabeth Lease [late 19th century political lecturer and author] and Lydia Maria Child [19th century author and abolitionist]; as well as those on such women as Margaret Sanger and Gertrude Stein whose controversial lives may not (to some readers) seem suitable subjects for young people. But what makes this series especially noteworthy is its usefulness for young and adult readers both. This is the result of conscious editorial policy.

The editor and originator of the series, Milton Meltzer, known primarily for young adult books on black history and on the labor movement, objects to the conventional limitations of books created especially for young readers. The series reflects his belief that children’s books should be limited only in length and by the measure of historical and political knowledge that authors can take for granted. Hence, authors are careful to define terms and explain processes clearly and accurately, assuming that young readers will need introductions to complex ideas. Margaret Sanger’s biographers, Meltzer and Lawrence Lader, for example, define contraception in some detail:

The process of birth starts with the sexual act, when the penis of the father carries his sperm into the mother through her vagina. The sperm unites with the egg within the mother in a special place called the uterus. A cluster of cells grows in the uterus, developing into a baby within nine months. The vagina is the same passageway through which the baby is born after the nine month growing period in the mother’s womb. Contraception, therefore, depends on preventing the sperm from reaching the egg.

Even adults might welcome Alix Shulman’s clear explanation of anarchism, in her biography of Emma Goldman:

Very simply, anarchism is a political and social system opposed to all forms of government based on force. An anarchist society would have no laws, no lawmakers, no officials, no police, no armies, no institutions or even any customs or traditions that people would be forced to obey against their will. . . . Anarchists are not against order, as many people believe. They are only against imposing order by force or threat of force. They oppose the force used by governments against their own citizens through police and against the citizens of other nations through armies.

As a result of such care, the books that emerge are different from most biographies written for young people: they deal honestly and directly with sexuality, politics, political movements, and the events of women’s lives. Each life, moreover, is framed by the history and social conditions of the time. Mary Cassatt’s life story tells us a great deal about the impressionist movement; Pearl Buck’s about U. S. relationships with China; Bessie Smith’s about segregation in the South.

The Crowell authors are also sensitive to feminist issues in the lives of women. We learn, for example, about the social restrictions that prohibited women painters like Cassatt from participating in Parisian nightlife, thus affecting her relationships with other (male) impressionist painters and limiting her choice of models to women and children. When Sanger decides that she must leave her children in order to continue her work on birth control, the authors treat her with sympathy as they review the complex conflicts involved. Indeed, the series’ perspective appears truthfully on its book jackets: these are books about “women who refused to accept things as they were, who took great chances and offered bold challenges. Rebels, many of them, they were drawn to where the action was in whatever world they moved.”

For the adult reader as well as the younger one, the books offer an introduction to the richness of historical research. Authors in the series are respected scholars—some also knew the women about whom they write. Lawrence Lader, for example, knew Sanger well and his research into her life included hundreds of long interviews with her, as well as a study of her personal papers and collections of materials on the birth control movement. W. G. Rogers, a friend of Gertrude Stein, includes personal anecdotes throughout her biography. All the books begin with acknowledgements and descriptions of the way in which they were written; they end with bibliographies that encourage young people to read further.

Although the series professes to be written for those twelve years and older, several books may be too difficult for the average junior high school reader and more suitable for adults. Altogether, the series provides a major resource for all older students and an introduction for many adults as well.

Laurie Olsen Johnson

Women’s Studies and the Community (continued)

people in a women’s studies program might look at these continuing education programs and at community colleges—assuming that they are not already working there.

Catherine Stimpson
Department of English, Barnard College