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In Work and Life, Helen Gurley Brown Practiced What She Preached – For Better or For Worse

BY SARAH KRICHEFF | AUGUST 15, 2012

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Helen Gurley Brown and her husband David Brown. The couple was married for more than 50 years (1984).
(Courtesy Hearst Corporation)

Say what you will about Helen Gurley Brown, the legendary, divisive editor of *Cosmopolitan* who died Monday at 90, but one thing cannot be disputed: she knew how to move magazines off the newsstand. The iconic, sexually provocative covers produced under Brown's 32-year reign at *Cosmo* – and the content that fell in the pages beyond that first glossy photo – incited both scathing criticism and effusive praise during her tenure, which began in an era when readers were accustomed to seeing images of prim, buttoned-up models in the media.

And so it's not surprising that in the past 48 hours, a plethora of strongly worded pieces have been published about the woman who helmed the publication – growing its circulation from around 800,000 to nearly three million – between 1965 and 1997.

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In a [smart piece](#) for the Daily Beast, Robin Givhan notes that Brown was not concerned with fashion trends but, rather, “was more interested in the way fashion played out in popular culture, [the] way it could arouse, empower, and provoke. In short, fashion was the conduit of a woman’s sexuality.”

[Writing for Forbes](#), Helaine Olen rails – convincingly – against Brown’s legacy and the “failure of do-me feminism,” stopping short of blaming Brown for the gender wage gap and high birth rates among working class, single women. Olen correctly states: “There is no true and long-lasting sexual equality without economic equality.”

But one of the more puzzling things I’ve read about Brown was a factoid in a [press release](#) sent out by Hearst, announcing her death. The note – which was reiterated as an aside in a number of obituaries, including one that ran in [the New York Times](#) – mentioned that Brown’s husband of 51 years, David Brown (a well-known movie producer and a former managing editor at Cosmo), wrote all of the sensational cover lines on Cosmopolitan during his wife’s tenure as editor.

The revelation seemed like a betrayal by a woman who was a self-proclaimed advocate for professional, independent, financially and sexually savvy women during the mid-’60s and the ’70s – a very delicate era indeed. The perceptions of millions of devoted Cosmo subscribers were shaped by this magazine, and through its girly attitude and intimate tone, Cosmo suggested to its readers that it was written for women, *by* women.

In retrospect, cover lines like “13 Ways to feminine satisfaction. At last—an article that tells how women can feel what they should” (January 1969); “42 Ways to Win Liberation Now—By Cosmo’s Own Liberated Editors” (October 1972); and “The Undiscovered Joys of Having a Chinese Lover” (October 1972) seem strange and quaint. But the fact that they came from a man, in this context, begs the question: Was Brown’s ambition so fierce that she deceived her readers and promoted regressive roles for women – letting a man dictate how they should feel and what they should read – under the guise of sexual liberation?

Brown claimed to be a “devout feminist” and she also loved men – two things that are, of course, not mutually exclusive. And as it turns out, she was cheerfully candid about her husband’s role in her work at Cosmo. She once famously said: “My success was not based so much on any great intelligence but on great common sense.” It was through this common sense – her savvy, her wit, her understanding of the needs of her audience – that Brown did her job: she sold magazines to women. In her career and in her success, she unabashedly lived the brand of feminism that she preached – you don’t have to agree with her philosophy to admire that.

Click on [the slide show](#) to see images of Cosmopolitan covers produced during Helen Gurley Brown’s tenure as editor.

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