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WHAT DO SMITH WOMEN WANT?

"What Do Women Want? -- Feminism and its Future" is the title of a 16-page article by Barbara Grizzuti Harrison in the October Harper's Magazine. It is important reading for anyone who seeks to understand modern trends among women.

Harrison posed some profound sociological questions about women's hopes and ambitions, and then spent a week on the campus of Smith College seeking the answers from the young, elite feminists there. She chose Smith, the country's the largest privately-endowed all-women's college, as a microcosm of the best feminism has to offer in terms of education and career aspirations.

This column is not about my views on Smith, as I have never been there. This column is a review of Harrison's commentary about Smith. Harrison's article is sympathetic to feminism and never challenges its assumption that its goals are the goals of all women.

Harrison tells us that Smith College, which was undisturbed by the turbulent 1960s, is today "no longer quite so ladylike." "There are still Friday afternoon teas," she says, "but few people are shocked -- and even fewer surprised -- when they become the occasion for 'lesbian workshops.'"

Smith women have rejected the career of homemaking. "In seven days on campus," Harrison writes, "not once did I see a woman wearing an engagement ring. ... I had yet to meet a student who thought of motherhood as a vocation." The figures record the change: in the class of 1960, 61% of graduates said they wanted to be homemakers; in the class of 1970, 15% said they would be homemakers; in the class of 1980, not even 1% chose homemaking.

Smith is located in the Connecticut River Valley 85 miles west of Boston. The 125-acre campus is a beautiful arboretum. By college standards, living is rather luxurious.

Smith was founded by Sophia Smith who bequeathed her wealth in 1871 to provide a "Christian education" for women. No one bothers to explain how the present residents dare to enjoy her bounty while ignoring her purpose.

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Throughout her 16-page article, Harrison refers again and again to the lesbian presence on campus. She tells of the lesbian residences on campus, the 200 who came to a lesbian dance, the cult of anti-male separatism, and the talk of "dismantling the family which they no longer see as a functioning unit." She is not judgmental, often using the phrase "women-identified women" as a euphemistic synonym.

Harrison asked Smith President Jill Ker Conway whether "the reportedly large number of 'women-identified women' in the Valley, and their claim to an exclusive culture, had any effect on the Smith population." After a long pause, Conway replied, "I don't define it as a problem because I think it's a private and personal preference with which the college should have no prying concern."

But Smith does, indeed, exert powerful pressures about personal careers. The one message the students receive loud and clear is that, "if you're not the head of a corporation, you're not a successful woman." Only among a few students did Harrison detect a yearning to have what their mothers had as well as a preferred place in the corporate world. As one student asked, "Why can't we have it all?"

Harrison wonders, who among Smith alumnae might serve as role models for young women who want to have it all? Alum Gloria Steinem has neither husband nor children; alum Betty Friedan is without husband. Alum Nancy Reagan is one of the most admired women in the world according to national polls; but feminists will not accept her as a role-model.

Harrison calls it a "paradox" that one has to go back before the birth of the feminist movement to find a famous Smith graduate who combined a successful marriage, six children, and a career of outstanding achievement: Anne Morrow Lindbergh.

A week at Smith left the author weary of "sexual politics." The most intense campus conversations involved whether "women's studies" should be a separate department. She did not find out what women want; she did not even find out what feminists want.

Harrison ended her article "with hope and sorrow so intimately braided I cannot tell them apart." It is easy to see why she is sorrowful at what she learned at Smith. But hope? Her article gives no clue as to where one could find hope for the future on the campus of Smith College.

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