

HOW ABORTION BECAME FEMINISM'S HOLY GRAIL

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Sue Ellen Browder, *Subverted: How I Helped the Sexual Revolution Hijack the Women's Movement* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015)

Over the years, others have noted the hypocrisies of the so-called women's movement, as its self-appointed leaders abandoned broad principles of equality for a radical feminist ideology. Now Sue Ellen Browder offers a compelling first-hand account of how that movement allowed itself to be hijacked by the sexual revolution and the abortion lobby, in the process turning its back on legions of mainstream American women who still valued motherhood and family.

This is really two parallel stories, or perhaps one story told on two levels. At the same time Browder witnesses for us the struggle within the feminist movement broadly, she also chronicles her own personal struggles, as her values and family life clashed with her professional role as a propagandist for radical feminism and the sexual revolution.

We see how, even when she was most deeply immersed in that world, some deeper part of Browder was always in conflict with it, even when she did not realize it. And that, in the end, would be her saving grace, and that of her husband, as well.

Determined to leave behind what she regarded as the sheltered provincialism of her small town Midwestern upbringing, Browder aspired to a career in journalism—and got her big break when she landed a position at Helen Gurley Brown's *Cosmopolitan* magazine.

She soon got her first taste of the cynicism her career

pursuits would require. At the University of Missouri, she had been scandalized to realize that among the articles she was called upon to analyze as a journalism student, were instances of professional reporters clearly inventing sources and quotes out of thin air. Now, she was told at *Cosmo* to do the same thing—indeed, Helen Gurley Brown had written guidelines for when, how and why to insert such fictionalized accounts into an article. Browder complied. It was the first of many compromises of principle she would make in order to advance her career, leaving her to conclude later in life that “I had betrayed everything a real journalist should be.”

She found herself working not as a serious journalist, but as a propagandist for the sexual revolution. Under Helen Gurley Brown, *Cosmopolitan's* contribution to feminism was the idea that women could and should be just as self-centered, hedonistic and materialistic as the worst examples of men. This was the sexual revolution's definition of equality between the sexes.

It was not Betty Friedan's concept of feminism. “The mother of the feminist movement” wanted to use the women's movement “to broaden and deepen women's lives,” Browder writes. As such, Friedan labeled *Cosmo* “quite obscene and quite horrible,” promoting “the idea that woman is nothing but a sex object, that (she) is nothing without a man.”

Yet unable to stem the tide of the sexual revolution, Friedan and other leaders of the women's movement seemed to accommodate themselves to the exploitation of feminism by those who—like Brown and Playboy's Hugh Hefner—valued it not as a movement for women's equality, but as a tool for making their promotion of sexual hedonism seem somehow high-minded.

Certainly, this was the case with abortion.

“At *Cosmo*, the one assumption I never thought to question was whether or not abortion and contraception were good for

women," Browder writes. "In Helen Gurley Brown territory, it was an automatic given that separating women from children (through abortion and contraception) was required for women to be free." Yet Browder shows that Friedan at first dismissed the significance of abortion in women's fight for equality.

Ironically, given Friedan's insistence that women should free themselves from any dependency on men, Browder shows that it was Lawrence Lader, a self-appointed male crusader for abortion, who led Friedan to embrace it as central to the feminist cause.

Employing the investigative journalism skills she never got to use at *Cosmo*, Browder takes us inside the event that placed abortion advocacy permanently front-and-center in the feminist movement: a small gathering in the Chinese Room of the Mayflower Hotel in Washington D.C., during the National Organization for Women's second annual convention in 1967. A fierce debate ensued, as a number of women with impeccable feminist credentials argued fervently against including a pro-abortion plank in NOW's platform—some, to be sure, for strategic reasons, fearing such a radical proposal back in 1967 could derail mainstream support for the women's movement; but others opposing the plank on philosophical or moral grounds, believing that advocating for the right to kill unborn children was hardly consistent with the women's movement's demand of equality for all.

But those voices were stifled, as Friedan combined her personal belligerence with parliamentary abuses to strong arm the pro-abortion plank through. Browder notes that the final vote of 57-14 left more than 30 registered members of the convention unaccounted for. Thus did "the 57" as she calls them, dictate that the women's movement would henceforth be not just associated with, but defined by, its unrelenting support for the mass destruction of innocent human life. Moreover, she reviews what has been documented before, by such as the late Dr. Bernard Nathanson, the pro-abortion leader and

abortionist turned pro-life crusader and Catholic convert whom she cites. Abortion was sold, to this gathering, to the American media, and to the U.S. Supreme Court, through Lader's strategy of disseminating deliberately falsified information regarding such things as the prevalence of illegal abortion, the history of abortion, and the level of public support for legalized abortion. She notes that Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun, author of the infamous 1973 *Roe v. Wade* ruling mandating virtually unrestricted abortion, "relied 'heavily and uncritically'" on such false information, citing "Lader's *Abortion* book no less than seven times"—though Lader had absolutely no credentials as either a historian or a medical expert.

With its embrace of abortion and the sexual revolution, feminism also turned its back on the family values important to many mainstream American women. Friedan, Browder contends, had early on "insisted the new women's movement must be pro-family." But again, she caved—and years later was left to lament that "The women's movement...has come to a dead end. ... Our failure was our blind spot about the family."

Browder's personal story gives powerful witness to how the radical feminist movement, despite its propaganda successes, failed to really connect with many American women at the level of their individual, everyday lives. Professionally, Browder bought into radical feminism's philosophy and buried any qualms about the contradiction between its embrace of the sexual revolution and its stated opposition to reducing women to sex objects. But in their personal lives, she and her husband Walter were a living contradiction to the anti-family attitudes that the sexual revolution devotees had foisted upon the women's movement. When Browder left *Cosmo's* staff to become a freelance writer, it was in large part so she could spend full time at home with her children—the direct opposite of what Helen Gurley Brown was preaching about putting career ahead of children. Walter also worked from home writing, but

whenever hard financial times hit, he would take the kind of office or factory jobs he hated, not to advance his career but to support his family! And always, their marriage came first, and they were pillars of love and support for each other—contradicting the sexual revolution's denigration of married love, and the feminist article of faith that a woman did not need, and should not seek, to have a man permanently in her life.

Predictably, it was radical feminism's promotion of abortion that had the greatest impact on Sue Ellen Browder's personal life, and that would ultimately convince her of its terribly damaging effects on women and families. Having become pregnant with a third child at a time when they were struggling financially, "Abortion, which was after all my right as a liberated woman, seemed to me to be an easy escape hatch out of an impossible situation," Browder recalls. So with her husband's apparent support, she availed herself of that "rational option."

"After my abortion, somehow the story inside me changed," she writes. "I had done the unspeakable, and I had done it rashly and boldly, almost without a moment's hesitation or doubt." Her marriage, too, was affected, because "At a pivotal moment in our lives, when we most needed to embrace the freedom born only of hope and trust in God, Walter and I had succumbed to mind-shrinking fear"—embracing instead a "freedom of choice" which did not liberate them.

For years, Sue Ellen did not realize that Walter too was troubled by the abortion, because it was something they never talked about. She got a clue when, after she was one day moved to buy a new crib and donate it to a pro-life crisis pregnancy center (an attempt at "atonement," she calls it), Walter said he wished he had known, because he would have liked to have gone with her. Then years later, when their spiritual journey had led them to explore the Catholic faith, it was Walter who blurted out to a priest, "We've had an abortion."

“Until that time,” Sue Ellen writes, “it had never occurred to me that all these years he had been silently grieving right along with me.”

Spiritually, Browder found her embrace of feminism creating in her a deep hostility toward the Catholic faith. Seeking a new church after they had relocated far from their Episcopal Church, Walter suggested they try the local Catholic Church. “I’m not going to join that patriarchal old Church,” Sue Ellen responded in full feminist voice.

But when she subsequently opened herself to the idea, she found within the Catholic Church “the wholeness and unity I had sought all my life.

“I suddenly saw that to live in the fullness and joy of the Catholic faith, to follow Christ’s way, is to be united in love with all of mankind: friends and enemies, rich and poor, saints and sinners—from the most powerful billionaire to the weakest boy or girl in the womb.” And so, “when Walter and I receive God on our lips for the first time, I only know in the depths of my heart that, after all my searching, I have at last found the Truth who promises to make me free.”

And so a story that at first seems one of despair becomes a story of hope, thanks to Sue Ellen Browder’s sharing with us her personal experience. We are inspired by her and her husband’s enduring love for each other; by their devotion to their marriage and children in the face of many personal and societal pressures; and by their never-ending search for truth—even, as in the case of their abortion, when that truth is profoundly uncomfortable for them.

Their long search, amid many struggles, that finally led them to the Truth in Christ and His Church, calls to mind the words in the Gospel of John that should be the hope of every pro-life person: “In Him was life, and the life was the light of men; the light (of life) shines through the darkness, and the

darkness has not overcome it." It never will.

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