

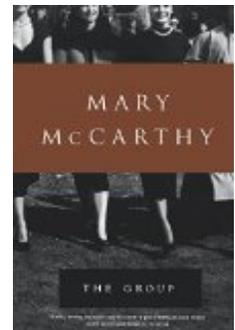
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The Bombshell

Mary McCarthy's *The Group*, Hilton Als's "The Women," and Bridesmaids

Mary McCarthy's *The Group* is a book I've always meant to read but never managed to pick up. McCarthy's name has never quite made it onto the essential American women writers hit list along with, say, Edith Wharton, Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers, and Eudora Welty. Perhaps this is because of McCarthy's reputation as "a viperously clever but minor writer" who had too many "indiscreet affairs," according to critic Larissa MacFarquhar. *The Group*, the story of the post-college decade of eight Vassar class of 1933 graduates, was published to abundant praise in 1963 and spent two years on the bestseller list. But it was also damned by Norman Podhoretz as "a trivial lady writer's novel" and Norman Mailer famously pilloried it in *The New York Review of Books*.



Mailer's essay is so vitriolic, so entertainingly virulent in its damnation, that he ends up making the book sound both extraordinary and groundbreaking. His greatest objection to McCarthy's "lady-book" was that it made no attempt to "comprehend a man." Ultimately, he does express hope for her future career: "If, at the highest level, she has failed and even failed miserably to do more than write the best novel the editors of the women's magazines ever conceived in their secret ambitions, it is nonetheless possible now to conceive that McCarthy may finally get tough enough to go with the boys." For Mailer, McCarthy's fatal literary sin is the unabashed femininity of her prose.

The Group, thus doomed by at least two of America's cultural elite, fell under the much contested rubric "chick lit." Candace Bushnell, author of *Sex and the City*, in her introduction to the recent Virago edition, insists the novel is not "chick lit," inadvertently confirming the idea that woman-created, woman-centric literature is inherently second-rate. Alas, I fear I, too, yielded to the sway of neurosexism (unconscious gender bias) with regard to *The Group*, and had dismissed the novel as lightweight.

Instead, *The Group* is easily a masterpiece, a satiric epic depicting in a nuanced, acute prose replete with uncommon wit, a great American tragedy: the unrelenting attack on female ambition. The novel's timeframe spans from the New Deal to the outbreak of World War II. Set

against a backdrop of political upheaval following the Russian Revolution and the Great Depression, in a New York delirious with the promise of Communism and Socialism, these eight middle- and upper-middle-class Vassar graduates with names like Kay, Dottie, Lakey, Polly, and Priss, set out into the brave new world armed with their education and privilege, firm in their belief that they will lead a life of freedom and accomplishment unfathomed by their mothers. Their mothers -- and McCarthy makes a point of including all eight -- do their best to blunt the inevitable blow.

In a brilliantly structured narrative that moves seamlessly forward in time while variously interweaving the lives of these eight women, McCarthy describes in rich and astonishing detail their mundane benchmarks: first love, first rejection, first job, first orgasm, first fight, first diaphragm fitting (which itself has to be a first in literature), first husband, first child, first breastfeeding (best thing I've ever read on the subject), first separation, first divorce, first death. There are no heroines. Each woman is flawed, a product of her particular time and place, striving to be her best, succumbing to her weaknesses with greater regularity. As we follow their overlapping trajectories, we witness each Vassar graduate have -- or deny -- the realization that the only voice she will ever have in the world is confined to denigrated female-identified domesticity. How successful a woman is must ultimately be measured by how content she is to dwell in a world apart. *The Group* recounts the everyman story of thwarted ambition from the female point of view and it is riveting stuff.

In his mind-blowing 1994 essay "The Women", about Truman Capote's fluid sexuality and the beguiling constellation of sex, power, and authorship, Hilton Als describes Norman Mailer and CBS chairman William Paley, who represented for Capote the entire heterosexual male cultural apparatus, as: "Men, who, by all accounts, did not want to be fucked by any idea of femininity that had fucked them up but to fuck their idea of femininity." In other words, men at society's helm are so terrified of the devouring-mother brand of femininity, they impose on women through cultural stereotyping a subservient femininity, one demanding women be passive and adoring, their sole ambition in life to look on intently with pride and desire whenever a man says, "Look at me, look at what I can do." (In film-theory, this phenomenon is called the "male gaze" where the viewer is assumed to be male, and femininity a male social construct.)

Furthermore, according to Capote, via Hilton Als, the real power of the "dark fat mouth-watering dick" lies not so much in its power as phallic symbol per se, but in women identifying that dick "to be the source of their power." Through examining Capote's ability as an author to identify both as female and male, Als provides a succinct, if inelegant, analysis of our society's psychosexual dynamic, or stalemate. In *The Group* Mary McCarthy challenged the dynamic and attempted to budge the stalemate. She did this by allowing the vagina -- sometimes quite literally -- to take center stage. She gives us a glimpse of femininity, often excruciating, that does not pander to the prevailing male fantasy of what a woman should be. For someone like Mailer this idea was so threatening as to be incomprehensible and his review of *The Group* flaccidly missed the point.

At the cinema recently, the comedian and writer Kristen Wiig also made a jab at the

entrenched male cultural apparatus with her film *Bridesmaids*. Like *The Group*, *Bridesmaids* is a portrait of femininity, and not very pretty, with limited concern for the male gaze. It is a hilarious, subtle satire of women's gullibility as represented by all the absurd trappings involved in the wedding ritual, traditionally conceived as the single best day in a woman's life. Each of the women portrayed, and primarily Wiig's character, is compelled by the impending wedding to face the fact of her derailment by squashed ambition, her confusion at her inability to be heard in the world, and her realization that the "mouth-watering dick" (excellently embodied by *Madmen*'s Don Draper aka John Hamm in a near-seditious casting decision) will not bring her any closer to power. And like *The Group*, though the underlying message is tragic, the telling is wrenchingly funny. When the robust ticket sales for *Bridesmaids* started rolling in (\$100 million in 23 days), proving that a "chick flick" could outsell comparable "dick flicks" (*Knocked Up*, *The Hangover*), there was much hopeful speculation on the blogosphere that things might now change in an overwhelmingly male-dominated Hollywood and more female-driven projects would get greenlighted. The same thing was said ten years ago after the huge success of *Thelma and Louise*. As Candace Bushnell poignantly writes in her introduction to *The Group*, the novel "reminds us that not much has really changed."

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