

'Sexing the Single Girl: Adapting Helen Gurley Brown without reading her book

Helen Gurley Brown published *Sex and the Single Girl* in 1962, its enormous success prefiguring her role in reshaping *Cosmopolitan* in the 1960s. Since her recent death aged 90 her impact as the author of this famous bestseller and as Editor-in-chief of *Cosmopolitan* has been the subject of further attention. Most obviously, her self-help manual is seen as a foundational text for *Sex and the City* and a celebration of the single girl as anticipating the abundant portrayals of the urban singleton.

My paper today is focused on how her status as author of *Sex and the Single Girl* is positioned in the 1964 film of the same name, starring Natalie Wood and Tony Curtis and directed by Richard Quine. This is a direct and conscious adaptation in the sense that film rights were secured and writers were commissioned to produce a script; but the resulting rom com has only two obvious links to the text – a bestselling book and the author's name (with the addition of a PhD). Unlike some of the classic Doris Day rom coms, Helen is forced to acknowledge the fact of her virginity by the attempts of men who pressurize her into announcing and accepting its symbolic implications.

The story in brief is that Dr Brown, a researcher at the 'Institute of Pre-Marital and Marital Studies', has written a bestselling book (*Sex and the Single Girl*), which, like Brown's, advocates acceptance that single women can have a healthy sex life. Her professional life as a sex expert is being compromised in a magazine that claims she is a virgin; the subsequent plot centres on her deception by Bob Weston, a ruthless investigative journalist who aims to follow up this expose by seducing

her in order to force her to admit her virginity. My interest in this film was prompted by the general acceptance that this film has nothing to do with the bestselling self-help manual – how could it have, given the shift to fiction? But then why buy the rights to something that you don't or can't exploit? The simple answer has always been that Warner Brothers bought the *title*. Helen Gurley Brown (and her husband film producer David Brown who she credited with coming up with the title), the author of one of the most memorable and scandalous nonfiction books of her time successfully sells on the 'brand', with a view to extending it over as many platforms as possible.

This paper explores what happens to an adaptation where the author evinces little interest in the fate of the 'original' on screen, and whose views on marriage as 'good insurance for the worst years of your life' suggests the antithesis of the film romance which the adaptation becomes. I will spend the rest of this paper discussing Helen Gurley Brown (and David Brown's) considerable skills as self-promoter, the ways in which the book stars in the film, and how Helen Gurley Brown is remodelled in fictional terms to become a distinctly bourgeois conception of the successful woman – a qualified psychologist (*Dr* Helen Gurley Brown), but only 23 and single. In relation to the portrayal of Brown 'herself' the film uses the rom com as a vehicle to open discussion about single girls' sexuality only to rapidly foreclose on the notion that most 'nice' single girls are having sex. In this way, ironically, Helen Gurley Brown's own observations about the life of the single girl are themselves 'fictionalized' in the process of adaptation; and the glamorous life she argues is in the gift of this new class of young professionals is substituted by the traditional glamour invested in the desire for romance. The film dramatises contemporary moral fears

about the sexually self-defined woman and utilises the classic romantic comedy formula to demonise her.

Sex and the Single Girl was conceived of and published after Brown had married at an unfashionably late age. Yet she always maintained it was a celebration of single life rather than a marriage manual. Her approach to the book was similar to her approach to her professional life as an advertising copywriter: she was aware of her ready audience, she had skills and experience to speak with authority on the matter, and a disarming talent for uttering taboos; most of all, she wanted to make money. She had observed that office life and sexual liaisons are inextricably linked and she wrote encouraging women to exploit their sexuality, both as a bargaining chip and as a pathway to pleasure for its own sake. Accused with creating this new empowered single girl by writing the book, Brown insisted that she didn't create this situation or liberate women into sexual freedom, but that rather she was honestly describing an existing situation. Perhaps Brown's uniqueness lay in her particularly pragmatic way of dealing with the perils of the single career girl (a term I use as HGB's word of choice) and from her celebration of the 'ordinary' working-class girl whose life depends utterly on her powers to shape it by exploiting the highly gendered demarcations of the workplace.

By the time she took over as editor-in-chief of *Cosmopolitan* in 1965 Gurley's bestseller more than qualified her to become the spokesperson for a generation of women a generation younger than her, and under her care *Cosmo* became the definitive women's glossy magazine offering a power feminism without politics, even when it chimed with feminism's ideological projects. *Sex and the Single Girl* was the

blueprint for the future *Cosmo* reader - the average young single female office worker who sought career satisfaction as well as sexual and romantic conquests and whose ambitions were played out in an era where the office was still perceived as the space where young women eked out a living until they married (possibly finding a husband at work). The magazine's emphasis on careers and financial management was Brown's particular and unusual contribution to the development of the women's magazine.

While Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female* (1953) had raised people's consciousness about women's sex lives, Brown promoted sex as a natural and healthy part of single women's lives, and that might even include affairs with married men. According to Brown sexual desirability was something women could and even should exploit as currency in all their social dealings with men. She was 40 by the time the book was published and made no secret that her advice is substantially based on her and her friends' own experiences. As a working-class woman who for some considerable part of her life was supporting a widowed mother and an invalid sister, she writes as someone for whom well-paid work was necessary rather than a luxury, and someone, who as a self proclaimed 'mouseburger' felt that she had less than an average chance of getting married: 'I had no money, no college degree, I had wall-to-wall acne, and my family were hillbillies. I had an average IQ' ¹

The mouseburger portrayal is extraordinarily disingenuous in that there is nothing of the shrinking violet in Brown's successful purposeful move from job to job in search of a raise, and the final leap from secretary to copywriter, soon to become one of the highest paid in the profession.

This success story is underpinned, importantly, by Brown's experiences of being constantly passed over, marginalized and discredited in the workplace by men: this made her generous to other women trying to pursue a career when she herself was the boss. *Sex and the Single Girl* is also the story of her own makeover and a tribute to her enormous personal self-discipline. She didn't really slow down her exercise and diet regime until well into her seventies and her book communicates a strong aversion to excessive consumption of all kinds.

She found it difficult to get a publisher for the book with such racy subject matter, but eventually got a \$6000 advance from Bernard Geis (founded 1958) who had experience of negotiating media and other promotional tie-ins. His list was shamelessly popular and commercial, and another of his successes was Jacqueline Susann's *Valley of the Dolls* (1966). Joan Didion was deeply sceptical about Geis' attitudes to book promotion, arguing that he 'seems to like his authors to fit their typewriter time around the *Tonight Show's* schedule'.² Helen Gurley Brown, with no delusions about the highbrow quality of her work, but knowing she was onto a winning formula, was Bernard Geis' ideal author.

On its release some newspapers and journals wouldn't even advertise the book: this posed no problems to the highly-experienced Brown, who embarked on a massive book tour and appeared on radio and TV as much as she could. A petite soft-spoken woman, her self-presentation was in contrast with the shockingness of the message she was promoting, and her refusal to accept that she or the behaviours she described were in any way morally reprehensible surely helped the sales of her book. Chapter 3 of *Sex and the Single Girl* argues that one

strategy to court the interest of the passing male is to 'carry a controversial book at all times' (63): She suggests *Das Kapital* or *Lady's Chatterley's Lover* ('It's a perfectly simple way of saying "I'm open to conversation" without having to start one' (63)) but for the single girl, Brown's book is the most controversial choice of all. It was an instant bestseller reaching the top ten of *New York Times* list (to no. 6), but Brown didn't realize her aim to get it banned, to further bolster sales.

Brown openly admitted that she loved money, and according to biographer Jennifer Scanlon her husband 'urged Helen to explore every commercial venue he could think of: additional books, television sitcoms, television talk shows, even an adult board game.'³ When psychologist Albert Ellis published a book called *Sex and The Single Man* in 1963 he was immediately sued by the Browns. They sold the film rights for \$200,000, the biggest sum paid out for a non-fiction book at that time: all that was left was for Warner Brothers to confront the difficulties of turning the book into a film. Finally Joseph Heller produced a workable script said to be based on Joseph Hoffman's *How to Make Love and Like It*, apparently 'the tale of a thirty-five year old virgin anthropologist who had written a bestseller on sex.'⁴

In selling the rights Brown had achieved what she wanted from the adaptation – an extension of brand Brown. But I disagree with Scanlon's assertion that 'other than its title and the fact that the main character was called Helen Gurley Brown, the film had *nothing* in common with the book'⁵ At the heart of the film the legitimacy of the female author is held up for scrutiny: Dr Brown is perceived by her male colleagues to have undermined their work first by producing a commercial product and secondly because of *Stop!* Magazine's claims

that she is actually a virgin. The first most powerful message at the film's opening is that the world of work is the world of men: we encounter a boardroom full of men as the investigative magazine plans its next attack on Brown. Later we see Tony Curtis as top journalist Bob Weston planning his next expose with his secretary sitting on his lap. The opening credits (strikingly reminiscent of those for TV series *Bewitched* was aired for the first time in the same year) set the scene of a battle of the sexes with animated images of the characters morphing from the symbols use to denote male and female. On matters of sex Scanlon believes that Helen Gurley Brown was 'preaching more than she practiced'⁶ and certainly Natalie Wood is portrayed in a similar fashion - her practical and unshockable professional exterior purposefully represented as concealing her own romantic longings for the right man.

Bob poses as his friend Frank Broderick (Henry Fonda) whose explosive relationship with wife Sylvia (Lauren Bacall) gives him a persona to build on and provides the comic subplot. The sexual attraction between Bob and Helen is mutual from the start and makes for the standard comedic sexual tensions, so that Helen must learn to value her virginity as a powerful talisman against would-be seducers. Only Helen's virginity can transform Bob from heartless bastard to romantic fool. On the other hand Bob's current girlfriend Gretchen (Fran Jefferies) appears to be living Helen Gurley Brown's model of single girl life: it's clear that she stays in his apartment and on the surface the relationship seems casual. Gretchen, a fan of Helen's, embraces her philosophy: however, in order to utter the sentiments that women, like men, need and enjoy sex she needs to break in to song. This is diegetically logical as she is a singer and dancer, but strengthens the view that her convictions are an

act and that her inevitable fate is to end up romantically partnered. Meanwhile the song, 'Sex and the Single Girl', released as a single, further extends the Brown brand...

Bob (posing as Frank) visits Helen as a would-be client, claiming that conflicts with his wife make him 'inadequate' (impotent); Helen undertakes his therapy by encouraging him to be sexually confident, interpreting his evident attraction to her as healthy 'transference'. A comedy of errors ensues which allows her to mend Frank and Sylvia's marriage while falling in love with someone she supposes to be Frank, and therefore married. For Helen Gurley Brown the occasional affair with a married man is not a deeply moral issue, but a problem for his wife to handle. But for the film's Dr Brown it necessitates an urgent phone call to her mother, which prompts her visit to Sylvia. Helen encourages Sylvia back to work, it being suggested that as a stay-at-home housewife Sylvia is suffering from Betty Friedan's 'the Problem that has no Name'. She goes back to work with Frank (because of course that's where she met him!) at his stocking factory; the rather labored joke being that because Frank is a stocking manufacturer he's always looking at women's legs with a professional eye, whereas Sylvia thinks he is an incurable flirt. Meanwhile, while Helen is coming to terms with what she believes is a strong attraction to a married man, her colleague Rudy becomes powerfully sexually attracted to her because of *Stop's* revelations that she is a virgin.

Virginity, as I hinted earlier, is represented in the film as a powerful tool in a woman's arsenal, clearly the reverse of Brown's thinking. There is a tension, however, in that the visible presence of *Sex and the Single Girl* being read by numerous women offers a subversive potential never

enacted in the main plot. Helen's acknowledgement of her virginity announces the end of her career, her status as psychologist in the Freudian tradition confirming for her that biology is destiny. Bob, in love and refusing to deliver his expose to the magazine, is sacked but assumes the role of protective breadwinner, announcing his plan to set up a competitor magazine and therefore be in a position to marry Helen. [The comedy ends with most of the most ludicrous and drawn out dash-to-airport scenes I have ever seen in a rom com.]

This is scarcely the most memorable or significant romantic comedy, yet it ranks creditably at 14th in the list of top grossing films of the year netting over \$6million (but a far cry from the \$72 million grossed by *My Fair Lady* at number one slot or \$51 million for *Goldfinger* at number two.⁷ I would argue it is an adaptation that reverses the ideological thrust of Brown's book to reenact the sexual politics of the romantic comedy, while the presence of Brown's book in the film allows an alternative message to lurk at the level of subtext. This film certainly explores the ways men are depicted as threatened by sexually self-confident women. This is played for laughs visually, by Curtis reprising his *Some like it Hot* drag performance and exiting Brown's apartment in her negligee (and being mistaken for Jack Lemmon), and by the fact that Frank enters his workplace by means of a door flanked by two gigantic stockinged legs.

The presence of women in the workplace is defused by their sexualisation – particularly in the portrayal of secretaries as a commodity – a 'perk' of the job. When Bob is sacked, he returns to his office only to find his secretary in the arms of his successor. Gretchen's song remains a performance out of kilter with the rest of the narrative:

a promise of sexual equality which will not be delivered.

Brown, I am sure, remained blissfully unconcerned about the uses to which her book is put to in adaptation. Helen Gurley Brown as author attaches no special significance to that designation and certainly does not think it accords her any status. She is the shameless self-promoter that Joan Didion targets in her critique of Bernard Geis' stable of authors. Yet she was also, as Erica Jong notes, particularly kind and supportive of other women writers and often found space for them in *Cosmopolitan*.

Her relationship to feminism was indeed complicated, though she had made contact with Betty Friedan⁸ and it is well known that *Sex and the Single Girl* preceded *The Feminine Mystique* by a year. It was Brown that broke the ice between them, writing to Friedan to say she admired her book; when Friedan wrote back one of the things *she* wanted was advice in getting a movie dramatization made of the *Feminine Mystique*.⁹ As Marcia Cohen says, ' Betty wasn't "cool"; her personality was not tailor-made for television. Often, in impatient, enthusiastic pursuit of an idea, she would talk so fast that hardly anyone could understand her.'¹⁰ In August 1970 Brown marched down Fifth Avenue New York city with Steinem, Friedan, Millett and Atkinson in the Women Strike for Equality march, but even today her support of feminist causes remains the untold story – incompatible with Brand Brown. One might of course argue that in adaptations such as *Up the Sandbox!* And *The Diary of a Mad Housewife* Friedan's ideas were also adapted; but whereas Friedan took her own role as author very seriously indeed, the only aspect of authorship sacred to Brown was that of copyright.

Most feminist commentators in recent years understand the contribution of Helen Gurley Brown to the shaping of contemporary woman and *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Sex and the City* are the most famous literary and filmic expressions of her legacy as both a writer and magazine editor. It's easy to try to backtrack the chick lit brand, as Stephanie Harzewski has recently argued, but this can create a skewed sense of continuity as well as the undoubtedly compelling idea that feminism and neoliberal feminism ran in two parallel trajectories from the 1960s to the present day, with Friedan and Brown as their foremothers, respectively. Harzewski notes that 'Brown's mixed take on the status of living single parallels the chick lit genre's tug-of-war between liberal feminism – its tenet of autonomy, choice, and control – and the desire for conventionality, security, and routine.'¹¹ Certainly in the wake of *Mad Men*, some key texts from the late 50s and early 60s such as *The Best of Everything* and *Sex and the Single Girl* are being reanimated in a highly lucrative retosexist reenactment.

¹ qtd Scanlan pl 15 from an interview in 1980

² 'Bosses Make Lousy Lovers' by Joan Didion *Saturday Evening Post*, January 30,

² 'Bosses Make Lousy Lovers' by Joan Didion *Saturday Evening Post*, January 30, 1965, 36; qtd Scanlon 81

³ Scanlan, 112

⁴ Scanlon 113.

⁵ Scanlon, 113.

⁶ Scanlon, 73

⁷ Other films of the year include *Mary Poppins*, *Hard Day's Night* and *The Pink Panther*.

⁸ Scanlon considers her work 'an untold element of the second wave and a clear antecedent of the third' (xiv)

⁹ Brown's biographer Jennifer Scanlon cites this anecdote clearly with the reason to expose Betty Friedan as just as hungry for fame and fortune as Brown but unable to manipulate the mass media to her own ends.

¹⁰ Marcia Cohen. *The Sisterhood: The true story of the women who changed the world*. New York: Simon And Schuster, 1988. 98.

¹¹ Stephanie Harzewski. *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011.143.