



# The Fifties: A Women's Oral History

*By Brett Harvey*

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Harvey, a frequent Village Voice contributor, independent publicist, radio programmer, and active feminist, provides dramatic and revealing first-person stories from women growing up in the '50s--a time when lifestyle choices were narrow and second-class citizenship was all that was available for women.

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## **The Fifties: A Women's Oral History** By Brett Harvey Bibliography

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## **Editorial Review**

From Publishers Weekly

The women, aged 58 to 68 today, who reached maturity in the 1950s were more conflicted about becoming housewives than they let on, according to this colorful oral history. Harvey, a freelance journalist and children's book author, has organized the recollections of several very lively, articulate women into an exploration of sex, courtship, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, motherhood, "pocket-money" work, careers and lesbianism during the '50s. The evocative and illuminating material will jog many memories, tickle a few funny bones--remember "technical virgins"?--and perhaps even prompt a tear or two. There are wonderful descriptions of the training of a stewardess (over the hill at 35) and the fury of a New York City radical, kept at home by her husband after their baby was born. Harvey also, intriguingly, shows some women choosing marriage so they would not have to deal with the new possibilities that--albeit in a limited fashion--were beginning to open up for them.

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From Kirkus Reviews

Freelance journalist Harvey (The Village Voice, etc.) half- successfully orchestrates a number of women's ``coming of age" memories of the 50's, highlighting the restrictions and penalties these mostly middle-class, bright, urban, East Coast women endured. Drawing on interviews with 92 women aged 58-68, Harvey reconstructs the sexual values that shaped women's lives--the bizarre contradiction between their seductive appearance (red lipstick, pointy bras) and the repressive morality that made marriage the condition for sex, and the bearing of children and living in isolating, child-oriented suburban developments the norm. She discusses the brutality of childbirth dominated by male physicians; the naivet, of young mothers (one was advised to nurse while listening to Beethoven and smoking a cigarette); birth control; and the priority placed on ``perfect" children through whom mothers acquired their value. Lamenting that no man ever had to choose between having a family and a career, she examines the working lives of those who successfully entered male-dominated professions; those who cultivated low-level jobs ``to fall back on"; the experience of lesbians (especially the freedom they enjoyed in the military); the deterrent effect of the civil-rights movement and anti-Communist activities on women's liberation; and the displacement of women in radical politics. With the election of JFK in 1960, the introduction of the Pill, and the Redbook survey examining ``Why Young Mothers Feel Trapped"--to which 24,000 women replied--the women's movement, Harvey points out, gained direction: Women like those interviewed by Harvey went to school and to work, divorced their husbands, and protested against the war in Vietnam. Harvey is a talented writer with an eye for detail and anecdote, but her study is narrow, often stereotyped, and lacks the diversity, surprise, and range of oral history at its best. -- *Copyright ©1993, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

About the Author

Brett Harvey is a freelance journalist whose work has appeared in the Village Voice, Mother Jones, Mirabella, Ms., Cosmopolitan, and the New York Times Book Review

## **Users Review**

**From reader reviews:**

**Dominique Fletcher:**

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