

Girls Like Us: Forty Extraordinary Women Celebrate Girlhood in Story Poetry and Song

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A truly impressive cast of women is assembled in this anthology. From well-knowns like former Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto and singer Joan Baez to the obscure, like writer Gish Jen and IBM executive Linda Stanford, these women have triumphed in every field of endeavor: from politics to education, athletics to business, the military to the movie screen.

Not every extraordinary woman is also an extraordinary author, though. Nearly a dozen contributions are excerpts from the women's autobiographies. Many more are not acknowledged as such, but read as if they were either that or transcribed speeches. Orally or originally they may have been better, but here they are somewhat stiff, compacted chronologies that include dutiful nods to the inspirations and influences that got the women where they are today. They seem rather forced into a book that claims to "celebrate" girlhood.

A notable exception is Stanford's piece, "Lessons From the Farm" in which she relates her years growing up on a Long Island farm and the attendant duties to her position within IBM. An original piece written specifically for Girls Like Us, it stands out because it fits the title so well.

Two other autobiography excerpts also rise above the rest as well chosen or well edited for this book—those belonging to actress Lauren Bacall and political activist Angela Davis. Both are included in the last chapter, titled "Irreplaceable Moments." The seven essays collected here are among the best reading in the book, since they concentrate on a specific event, avoiding the monotony of chronology.

Mixing poetry and song with the essays that dominate is pleasant for the reader. More poetry and songs would have been welcome, but not at the expense of choosing different women, many of whom did overcome racial prejudice, poverty and female stereotypes as girls to reach their present position. If adversity indeed reveals one's strengths, then perhaps the book does celebrate girlhood. That insight is usually gained only in retrospect, however, as the authors themselves would likely admit.

Inclusive title aside, Girls Like Us is not likely to provide much solace to girls going through the painful process of growing up, but can be a source of inspiration to them.

CARI NOGA (May / June 1999)

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