



# BookMarks

Women's League for Conservative Judaism  
Summer 2013

## Special Mishpachah Edition MOTHERS

**FROM: Ellen Kaner Bresnick, Books Chair**

What better way to describe this Fall 2013 edition of **BookMarks** than an embarrassment of riches? But first, let me introduce myself. I am Ellen Kaner Bresnick, the new Women's League Books Chair. I am thrilled to be attempting to fill the shoes of the incredibly creative former chair, Illene Rubin, who was one of the original creators of **BookMarks**. In my previous life as a high school English teacher, books and teaching eager students how to read them allowed me to indulge a life-long passion. Now, I will be able to engage with the thousands Women's League members who share this love of reading. I am available to all of you, whether reading by yourself or in a book club.

We are immensely proud of this edition of **BookMarks** which is in consonance with the new Women's League project, **Mishpachah: The Modern Jewish Family**. Its focus is a subject near and hopefully dear to all of us: *mothers*. Many of us are mothers, we all had or have mothers, and we each know hundreds, if not thousands of them. The Mishpachah initiative will be talking about diversity in modern families and how prescribed roles and expectations have changed dramatically.

### IN THIS ISSUE

- Our featured interview is with the renowned feminist scholar Dr. Joyce Antler of Brandeis University. Her recent book, *You Never Call! You Never Write! A History of the Jewish Mothers*, helps frame our discussion.
- A review of Antler's book, as well retrospectives on the radically diverse images of Jewish mothers found in *Imitation of Life* and *Portnoy's Complaint*.
- For the first time, we are offering study guides for short stories by female Jewish authors whose characterizations of mothers may – or may not – diverge from those written by men.
- The study guide for the Orpah's List 2103 selection, *The Mothers* by Jennifer Gilmore, will be available at [www.wlcj.org](http://www.wlcj.org). See box on page 3.
- Another innovation: Orpah's Kids 2013: *The Purim Superhero* by Elisabeth Kushner. This controversial story book – ironically introduced in this issue devoted to mothers – focuses on young Nate and has two fathers. See box on page 3.
- Finally, we have included an eclectic list of books, both old and new, about mothers.

I would love to hear from you about this material. We welcome discussion with our readers – it enables us to better serve you, guide you, and encourage you. Happy reading!

## Interview with Dr. Joyce Antler

### Author of *You Never Call! You Never Write! A History of the Jewish Mother*

*Joyce Antler (Ph.D.) is the Samuel Lane Professor of American Jewish History and Culture at Brandeis University. Antler, the recipient of numerous scholarly awards and the author or editor of a dozen books, is a founder of the Brandeis Women's and Gender Studies program and the Graduate Consortium of Women Studies at M.I.T. She is also a founding member and chair of the Academic Advisory Committee of Jewish Women's Archive.*

#### What attracted you to the study of Jewish mothers?

There is a disconnect between the incredible contributions of Jewish mothers to all realms of culture, society and politics and the fact that they are usually mocked rather than thanked for their accomplishments. I wanted to find out why and when Jewish mothers became laughing-stocks and scapegoats, often as stand-ins for any overbearing possessive mother

#### Do you find that this topic is of interest primarily to women?

Women have most at stake since they are targets of this often hostile humor; but they are also the daughters who become mothers. Every time we harshly and unfairly criticize Jewish mothers, even with humor, we send the message that this is not the sort of person you want in your family, thus making it harder for women to model themselves after Jewish mothers and for men to respect, even to marry, such a person. So men as well as women have a stake in the construction and re-invention of the Jewish mother

**Paula Hyman writes in *Gender and Assimilation* that the image of the Jewish mother underwent a transformation from the early to mid-20th century, from the nurturing mother of *My Yiddische Mama* to the controlling harridan of *Portnoy's Complaint* in 1968. What factors contributed to this?**

Positive and negative images of the Jewish mother have existed simultaneously in American culture from the turn of the last century. But the ending of mass emigration in the 1920s tended to coalesce the type within American culture. In contrast to the previous generation's appreciation of her toughness, considered to have ensured her family's survival in hostile ghetto environments, increasingly after World War II she was portrayed as threatening, meddling, suffocating, guilt-inducing. This caricature reflected Jews' anxieties about their place in American society. In the transition to modernity, the Jewish mother became a foil for the self-doubts and insecurities of her children.

#### Who are some of the most powerful and/or influential maternal images – both positive and negative – in Jewish literature and culture?

Most of the most negative stereotypes came from the pens of male writers like Philip Roth, Woody Allen, Dan Greenburg, and Bruce Jay Friedman. Their one-note portraits of suffocating maternalism resonated with mother-blaming in the general society, but was often accomplished with comic inventiveness that brought them wide influence. The negative stereotype was used by social and behavioral scientists as well as by writers and comedians. To give one example, a research group led by anthropologists Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict identified a negative "stereotype" of the Jewish mother ("nagging," "whining," etc.), promulgated in several landmark publications of the 1950s.

Some of my favorite positive images come from Gertrude Berg's wonderful character, Molly Goldberg, a fixture of radio and television for decades, who despite her old-fashioned appearance and malapropisms, demonstrated a keen understanding of human nature, providing a moral compass for her family and community. I love the work of feminists like Wendy Wasserstein, who began to identify, and then embrace, their connection to Jewish mothers. In "The Sisters Rosensweig," Wasserstein paints Gorgeous Teitelbaum (a talk-show host, consummate shopper and president of her temple) not as a joke, but as a sympathetic, if eccentric, Jewish mother. Many positive images emerge in daughters' memoirs of their mothers: to name only one, *Sala's Gift: My Mother's Holocaust Story*, by Ann Kirschner, uses letters her mother kept hidden for decades to tell the story of her endurance and bravery. A torrent of new writing about Jewish women and mothers from novelists and scholars, as well as oral histories and memoirs, reveal many stories of strong Jewish mothers, heroines of their own lives.

Surprisingly, we can even add Philip Roth to this list, for he created a quite wonderful Jewish mother in his 2004 novel *The Plot Against America*. No Sophie

*Continued on next page*

Portnoy, Bess Roth is the bedrock of her family – authoritative, courageous, kind.

In the introduction to *You Never Call, You Never Write* you say:

“...despite the numerous positive threads throughout the history of the Jewish mother, it is the most unflattering aspects of the Jewish mother that have endured and are most familiar.” What accounts for this?

Once the negative images congealed into a familiar stereotype it became easy to pass on its main features, reinventing the caricature from generation to

generation. In some ways, despite and because of their excess, these images acknowledged Jewish distinctiveness within the dominant society, and many Jews embraced them without realizing their destructive power. Even when the conditions that led to the creation of the stereotype had long since disappeared, it proved resilient. Most recently, however, daughters and Jewish mothers themselves are appropriating the stereotype, resisting its confines and using it to bolster their own authority and create their own authentic portraits.

## BookMarks Reviews

### You Never Call! You Never Write! A History of the Jewish Mother

Reviewed by Lisa Kogen

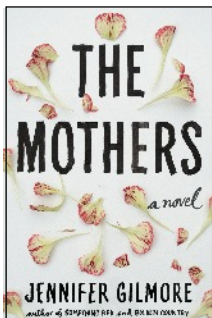
Joyce Antler’s book, *You Never Call! You Never Write!* (Oxford University Press, 2007) is great beach reading. Remarkable, actually, since it is a serious work of scholarship, and the topic is dead serious. But in this, one in a long list of her scholarly works devoted to feminist history, women’s literature and cultural contributions, Antler focuses on an important question: why are Jewish mothers in particular – not Scottish or Polish mothers – the butt of trans-cultural humor, and more insidious, negative stereotyping and scathing invective?

Antler traces the Jewish mother’s trajectory from adulation to vilification. She begins with earlier 20th century models of maternal love, compassion and wisdom as exemplified by the Sophie Tucker’s *Yiddishe Mama* and the beloved Gertrude Berg – to Jennie Grossinger, mother/hostess to the world – and then to the controlling, manipulative and intrusive

Sophie Portnoy and the anti-mothers, such as Roseanne and *The Nanny*.

Antler concludes, however, with a redemptive message for all Jewish women who despair of being, or becoming “Jewish mothers.” She suggests that the feminist movement, the prevalence of working mothers, new social realities about marriage, family, child-bearing and parenting have reoriented the modern family. As a result of older parents, interfaith marriages, interracial marriages, or single mothers by choice (or situation), the Jewish mother type has been replaced with a more diverse, pluralistic and universal model.

Antler’s book, awash with humor and pathos, part social history, part cultural history, part literary history, is a must read for Jewish women everywhere. The book, chapter by chapter, could occupy a book club for an entire year.



### Orpah’s Selection 2013

*The Mothers*

by Jennifer Gilmore

A harrowing world of adoption agencies, intrusive questionnaires and manipulative biological mothers.

Discounts will be available from the publisher.



### Orpah’s Kids

*The Purim Superhero*

by Elisabeth Kushner

illustrated by Mike Byrne

Ages 4-8

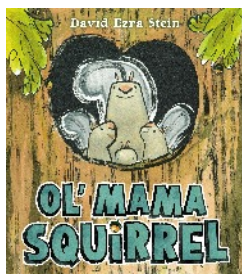
Nate, who has an Abba and a Daddy, wants to dress as a super-alien for Purim but is ridiculed by his friends. This morality tale for young children about tolerance is sensitively presented and beautifully illustrated.

Discounts will be available from the publisher.

## BEA AND SOPHIE Mothers and Other Monsters

For anyone who ever read *Portnoy's Complaint*, the image of Sophie Portnoy brandishing a knife, forcing her impressionable young son to eat, is forever burned in the reader's eye. In Philip Roth's shocking break-out novel about the complicated relationship between the neurotic and obsessive Alexander Portnoy and his mother, the calculating, manipulative, controlling, smothering, infantilizing Sophie Portnoy, Roth, the uber talented young novelist from Newark, New Jersey, brought the Yiddische mama of nostalgic veneration crashing down from her pedestal.

*Portnoy's Complaint*, which in 1969 sped meteorically to the top of the best seller list, received both critical acclaim and profuse derogation. In taking on the mythic Jewish mother – one of unconditional love, piety and emotional strength and stability – Roth ushered in an open season on Jewish mothers. By his own admission and in many interviews, Roth maintained the novel's comedic intent – and indeed it was – following in the rich tradition of the insulting banter of Catskills comedians rather than autobiographical reflection. Nevertheless, for many who read *Portnoy's Complaint*, it was the revisionist's ideal of Jewish motherhood. For Jewish mothers, for Jewish women, including the much beleaguered princesses, it was downhill from there.



### Ol' Mama Squirrel

by David Ezra Stein  
Nancy Paulsen Books (2013)  
For children ages 3-5

Stein, a Caldecott Honor winner, focuses his story telling gifts, liberally laced with the kind of humor that

children love, on overly protective mothers – no, not Jewish .... Squirrel!

The protective Ol' Mama Squirrel shelters her babies from all manner of intruders. While most are only mildly irksome, when a grizzly bear threatens, she becomes ferocious.

Stein's illustrations will easily engage readers, young and old.

Roth's Sophie can be seen in stark contrast to Bea Pullman and Delilah Johnson, the central maternal characters of Fannie Hurst's *Imitation of Life*. First appearing in 1933, Hurst's once wildly popular novel of two single mothers rearing their daughters and building an international restaurant empire, was shocking for its representation of single mothers living successfully (and well) without men. At the same time it transcended a profound racial divide and social convention. Delilah, Bea's southern maid, who, with her Aunt Jemima-like image and talent for creating comfort food, was the black Yiddische mama. Bea, with her urbane demeanor, hard business head and no-nonsense mothering, was the New Woman. Bea moves beyond the suffocating limitations of a socially prescribed gendered role and finds her true home in her restaurants. Her personal freedom enables her daughter – and ultimately Delilah's as well – to determine, for better or for worse, her own future.

Looking at these dueling images of motherhood by two of America's most celebrated novelists, we can only speculate about the role of historical context (one written in the '30s, the other at the end of the '60s) and how gender influences literary characterizations.

This topic could also sustain a book club for a year ... and beyond.

### Program Ideas

- Sponsor a year-long focus on mothers with friends or in your book clubs, using the books discussed in this issue.
- Create a year-long study group focusing on each chapter of *You Never Call! Your Never Write!*
- *The Purim Superhero* can be read on two-levels: as an adult study session – while the presentation is for children, the themes are appropriate for all ages.
- Sponsor an intergenerational story hour, reading *The Purim Superhero*. A study guide and further programming suggestions will be available at [www.wlcj.org](http://www.wlcj.org).

## THE SHORTS...

*The short story is a rich literary genre. In this new feature, we look at four short stories written by female Jewish authors. We selected the short story for this issue of BookMarks because female authors seem to excel in this genre, creating insightful portrayals of the complex relationships between mothers and daughters, mothers and sons.*

### **“Apples from the Desert” by Savyon Liebrecht (1986) translated from Hebrew by Barbara Harshav**

*Victoria Abravanel’s journey from the Orthodox quarter of Sha’arei Hesed in Jerusalem to the kibbutz where her daughter Rivka lives is one that transcends the eight hour bus ride. On the journey she confronts harsh realizations about herself, her marriage and her relationship with her daughter.*

- How does Liebrecht portray the different women? Do any of them fit the conventional maternal stereotype as depicted in Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint*? Why or why not?
- Is the essence of the mother-daughter relationship between the Orthodox Victoria and the kibbutznik Rivka unique to Israel or does this kind of relationship exist elsewhere? What other relationships in the story might be particular to Israel and its society? Why?
- Liebrecht uses a lot of strong imagery, e.g. the apples, the yellowing landscape, Rivka’s short hair, the silver and gold and precious stones. How do these images unlock what is happening between Victoria and Rivka as well as between Victoria and Dubi, and later between Victoria and her sister and Victoria and her husband? How do these images help us to understand the ending of the story?
- The author alludes to the Garden of Eden throughout the story. How does the biblical story relate to this story, and in particular to Victoria?
- What does Victoria learn from Rivka, and what does Rivka learn from Victoria? What does each woman want from the other? Are they successful in communicating these expectations?

### **“The Shawl” by Cynthia Ozick (1980)**

*During the Holocaust, Rosa struggles to keep her child alive.*

- What is Rosa’s relationship with Stella? Describe her feelings toward Stella. How do you know? Is Rosa justified?
- At different points Rosa seems to be worshipping the shawl by giving it magical powers when she

says “it could nourish an infant for three days and three nights.” How does this approach toward the shawl both reflect and change some of the core values in Judaism? Why does Rosa relate so strongly to the shawl and its seeming power?

- Ozick once said that she “didn’t want to make art out of the Holocaust... to tamper or imagine,” yet this is what she does in this fictionalized story. Why do you think that she needed to tell this story despite the fact that it is invented?
- This story has a sequel called “Rosa” that takes place in a rundown hotel in Miami where Rosa now lives. Thirty years later she is unable to cope with what happened during the war and she is emotionally battered. Why do you think Ozick wrote this second story?

### **“Second Blood: A Rosh Hashonoh Story” by Jo Sinclair (1944)**

*Dave’s mother’s death signaled the end of his obligatory attendance at synagogue, even on Rosh Hashanah. He never knew why he felt that way but this story explores those feelings and his feelings toward his mother.*

- What role does Dave’s mother play in this story? What is so ironic about her presence and his reaction to her?
- Why does giving blood take the place of attending services as a way to observe the holiday? What is significant about Rosh Hashanah? Why was Dave so adamant that he be squeezed in to give blood on that day? Why does he think “everything was familiar” at the blood donor center?
- What are the primary lessons his mother taught him and how does he feel about them? How does he feel about his mother? At what important moments does he think about or “see” her?
- What are the differences between his relationship with Cathy and his relationship with his mother?
- The last sentence of the story reads, “He had come home at last.” What is home for Dave?

## “I Stand Here Ironing” by Tillie Olsen (1956)

*The narrator struggles to understand what has happened to her relationship with her daughter.*

- To whom is the narrator speaking when she says at the beginning, “and what you asked me moves tormented back and forth with the iron”? What does she mean?
- To whom is the narrator speaking at the very end when she says, “Only help her to know – help make it so there is cause for her to know...”? What does she mean?
- What is happening to her when she irons? Why is it ironing that does this?

- How does the narrator feel about her daughter? Why does it take a while before we learn the daughter’s name? Do the narrator’s feelings about her daughter ever change? Why? Why not?
- Whose story is this?
- How does the narrator feel about herself? How do you know this?

### Join our Short Story Reading Circle

Ellen Kaner Bresnick will be leading a short story discussion group throughout the year based on the short stories in this issue of BookMarks.

Dates to be announced.

## THE POETRY CORNER

*Poet Marge Piercy (b. 1936) casts her eye on mothers of a bygone era. This “small woman of large longings” contends with life’s challenges and transformations from poverty to middle class comforts. She is resolutely energetic, but her dreams will be realized only in the next generation, through her daughter. From The Moon Is Always Female by Marge Piercy (1980)*

### My Mother’s Novel

Married academic woman ten  
years younger holding that microphone  
like a bazooka, forgive  
me that I do some number of things  
that you fantasize but frame  
impossible. Understand:  
I am my mother’s daughter,  
a small woman of large longings.

Energy hurled through her  
confined and fierce as in a wind  
tunnel. Born to a mean  
harried poverty crosshatched  
by spidery fears and fitfully  
lit by the explosions  
of politics, she married her way  
at length into the solid workingclass:  
a box of house, a car she could  
not drive, a TV set kept turned  
to the blare of football,  
terrifying power tools, used wall  
to wall carpeting protected  
by scatter rugs.

Out of backyard posies  
permitted to fringe  
the proud hanky law  
her imagination hummed  
and made honey,  
occasionally exploding  
in mad queen swarms.

I am her only novel.  
The plot is melodramatic,  
hot lovers leap out of  
thickets, it makes you cry  
a lot, in between the revolutionary  
heroics and making good  
home-cooked soup.  
Understand: I am my mother’s  
novel daughter: I  
have my duty to perform

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What images does Piercy use to describe her mother?
- To whom is the poet speaking?
- What is the mother’s “duty” to her daughter and visa versa?

## RECOMMENDED FICTION: Mothers, Mothers, Mothers

### **THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MY MOTHER**

by *Rosellen Brown (1976)*

Although Gerda Stein is a successful professional, she cannot understand her daughter Renate who is a single mother unable to root herself in one place. When Renate returns to Gerda's house in an attempt to make peace, both mother and daughter must overcome the need to punish the other for the sake of the small child who stands between them.

### **FANNY HERSELF** by *Edna Ferber (1917)*

This intensely personal chronicle of a young girl growing up Jewish in a small mid-western town charts her emotional growth through her relationship with her mother, the shrewd, sympathetic Molly.

### **MAZEL** by *Rebecca Goldstein (2002)*

Spanning three generations of women in one Jewish family, this novel, whose title means *luck*, focuses on Sasha Saunders, her daughter Chloe, and her granddaughter Phoebe who try to live their lives according to choices and values that personify who they are, even if those traits conflict with those of other family members.

### **INVENTING MEMORY A NOVEL OF MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS** by *Erica Jong (1997)*

Four generations of extraordinary Jewish-American women from the same family confront triumphs, tragedies, scandals, and love affairs with strength and perseverance as told by Sara Solomon, the youngest.

### **HEARTWOOD** By *Belva Plain (2011)*

In her final novel, Belva Plain returns to the dilemmas of previous works through the struggles of Iris Stern and her daughter Laura, both of whom consider themselves modern, yet each confronts issues in her own way, causing significant conflicts as they struggle toward reconciliation.

### **LOVINGKINDNESS** by *Anne Roiphe (1997)*

Focused on the strained relationship between Annie Johnson, a feminist writer and her daughter, Andrea, who has just joined an Orthodox Israeli community, this novel traces their attempts to confront the significant changes in their lives and in their relationship with each other.

### **DISTURBANCES IN THE FIELD** by *Lynne Sharon Schwartz (1983)*

Lydia Rowe has always felt that she has a most harmonious life – in her personal life, in her professional life, and in the world around her. All changes dramatically when two policemen arrive at her door and she is forced to confront significant events that shatter her harmony.

### **GOODNIGHT NOBODY** by *Jennifer Weiner (2006)*

Kate Klein is not a woman who finds much that is interesting or different in her somewhat prescribed environment until one of her acquaintances is murdered and Kate finds herself examining the façade behind which the victim lived. For Kate, the journey to solving the mystery provides a significant realization about her own life.

## RECOMMENDED MEMOIRS

### **IN MY MOTHER'S HOUSE** by *Kim Chernin (2003)*

Chernin devoted seven years to writing this memoir about her mother's life when she was active in the Communist Party. Through writing the memoir, Chernin and her mother accept their differences and come to terms with how they live their lives.

### **A GOOD ENOUGH DAUGHTER** by *Alix Kates Shulman (2000)*

At 20, Alix Kates Shulman began to defy the expectations of her middle-class family. Eventually she relinquishes her long sought independence when she returns to care for her aging parents. Through her

care-giving, she becomes reconciled to their expectations by understanding what it means to be a daughter

### **JEWISH MOTHERS TELL THEIR STORIES:**

**ACTS OF LOVE AND COURAGE** by *Rachel Josefowitz Siegel, Ellen Cole, Susan Steinberg-Oren (2000)*

This collection of thought-provoking stories and essays from and about Jewish women asks important questions that resonate with all of us – questions about motherhood and its impact on Jewish identity, family, spirituality, tradition, and history.

## COMPLEX RELATIONSHIPS

### **Non Fiction Mothers: At Home, In Conversation, In the Workplace**

#### **YOU'RE WEARING THAT? UNDERSTANDING MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS IN CONVERSATION** by Deborah Tannen (2006)

Georgetown professor of linguistics Deborah Tannen examines that most complex of all relationships. Why do daughters complain that their mothers always criticize while mothers feel hurt that their daughters shut them out? Why do they critique each other on the Big Three – hair, clothes and weight – while longing for approval? And why do they scrutinize each other for reflections of themselves?

#### **THE MERCY PAPERS: A MEMOIR OF THREE WEEKS** by Robin Romm (2009)

In the final stage of her mother's life, with a mix of humor and honesty, the author ushers us into a world where an obstinate hospice nurse tries to heal through pamphlets and family and friends mill about, engaged in a variety of unhelpful activities. Interspersed with musings about God, the mundane and spiritual melt together as Romm reveals the truths that lurk around every corner and captures, with great passion, the awe, fear and fury of a daughter losing her mother.

#### **OUR MOTHERS' WAR: AMERICAN WOMEN AT HOME AND AT THE FRONT DURING WORLD WAR II** by Emily Yellin (2008)

This is a portrait of women during World War II, the war that forever transformed the role of women in American society. These heartwarming and sometimes heartbreaking accounts of mothers, aunts and grandmothers reveal facets of their lives that have been unmentioned and unappreciated.

**RUTH NEMZOFF**, a leading expert in family dynamics, provides insight into relationships between adults and their grown children in two insightful and helpful guides.

#### **DON'T BITE YOUR TONGUE: HOW TO FOSTER REWARDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUR ADULT CHILDREN** (2008)

Parents make great sacrifices helping children become healthy and autonomous adults. And when children are older, popular wisdom advises parents to let go and disconnect. But increasing life spans means that parents and children can spend as many as five or six decades as adults together.

#### **DON'T ROLL YOUR EYES: MAKING IN-LAWS INTO FAMILY** (2012)

With new members added to the family structure, new relationships can create friction. They might include the hard to please mother-in-law, the father-in-law who expects the family every week for dinner, or a spouse who gets shellshock visiting the in-laws. How do families handle the inevitable friction and make sense of evolving relationships?

#### **MOTHERS AND CHILDREN: JEWISH FAMILY LIFE IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE: JEWS, CHRISTIANS, AND MUSLIMS FROM THE ANCIENT TO THE MODERN WORLD**, by Elisheva Baumgarten (2007)

Medieval historian Baumgarten draws on a rich trove of sources that focus on family roles in the Middle Ages. Her analysis covers nearly every aspect of home life, including pregnancy, birth and initiation rituals, nursing, sterility, infanticide, remarriage, gender hierarchies, divorce, widowhood, and the place of children in the home, synagogue and community.

#### **LEAN IN: WOMEN, WORK, AND THE WILL TO LEAD** by Sheryl Sandberg (2013)

The focus of this recent best-seller is the problems that women face in the workplace – why they still don't hold leadership positions and what they can do about it. One of her most controversial chapters, "The Myth of Doing It All," takes on the question of working mothers:

*"Instead of pondering the question 'Can we have it all?' we should be asking the more practical question 'Can we do it all?' ... the answer is no. ... Trying to do it all and expecting that it all can be done exactly right is a recipe for disappointment ... Gloria Steinem said it best: .... 'Superwoman is the adversary of the women's movement.'*

### **BookMarks**

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