

An Imperfect Champion of Equality

Review by Jeff Inman

Robin Green, *The Only Girl: My Life and Times on the Masthead of Rolling Stone*. Little, Brown and Company, 2018. ISBN 978-0316440028.

A Happening, Not a Revolt

In 1970, Lynn Povich was leading a revolution. She, along with 46 female staffers at *Newsweek*, sued the magazine for discrimination.

It's not surprising. The place was a bastion of testosterone. The writers and editors were all men. The women: they were relegated to the fact-checking and reporting pool. It was basically a boys' club, so much so that *Newsweek's* editors didn't even trust one of the women on staff to write the cover story about the burgeoning feminist movement. They hired a freelancer instead.

No wonder Povich and her compatriots filed their lawsuit on the same day that cover story hit newsstands.

If Robin Green knew about any of this when, that same year, Jann Wenner, *Rolling Stone's* founder and editor, gave Green her first assignment for the then-West Coast rock rag, it's not evident. While Green was the first woman to appear on the masthead of *Rolling Stone*, she wasn't leading a revolution; she was merely going with the flow – sometimes with questionable results.

And Green freely dishes the proof throughout *The Only Girl*. More a tell-all memoir than chronicle of the early days of rock journalism, the book spends most of its time on Green's hedonistic lifestyle – all the sex, drugs and more sex that seemed to permeate *Rolling Stone* in the early '70s. There's a recounting of the night she, Hunter S. Thompson, and Annie Lebowitz gobbled mescaline and went driving at ridiculous speeds around Big Sur. There's her on-again-off-again affair with her editor, David Felton... her tryst with a PR agent... and then later, with his brother... and her night with Wenner before he came out as gay.

When she talks about her actual work, though, it's like a case study in what not to do as a reporter. She heads to Taos, N.M., to interview Dennis Hopper without doing any research. She gets sent to Israel and never turns in a story. She sleeps with a source

– Robert Kennedy Jr., no less – and, as a result, when she refuses to turn in a piece about him to Wenner, he fires her.

It all makes Green an imperfect champion of equality. She absolutely cracked the magazine industry's glass ceiling, becoming the first female contributing writer to *Rolling Stone*. And she did work that mattered, most notably her cover story "Joe Conforte, Crusading Pimp," about a Nevada brothel owner that led to him going to prison for tax evasion. But unlike Povich's book, *The Good Girl Revolt*, about those heady days at *Newsweek*, *The Only Girl* is Green's whole life on the page.

And like any life, it's messy. There are bad choices and chance run-ins (see her interview with Warren Beatty). There are struggles (her chronicling of her friend Ronnie's mental illness). There are moments of serendipity (interviewing for a secretary job at *Rolling Stone* and coming out a writer). And there are obvious high points (winning an Emmy as a writer for *The Sopranos*).

As a result, *The Only Girl* isn't the kind of book you bring into the classroom. It's secondary research about a time in American journalism when magazines took bold risks and writers rode their biases like race horses, charging toward some greater good only they could see. And in that way, maybe it was a revolution after all.

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