

INTRODUCTION



by Gloria Steinem

When I look back on the fifteen years of *Ms.*, the letters from readers are what I remember best. More than reporting or short stories, poetry or humor (though the letters contain all of these), I look forward to our readers' continuing gift for putting helpful facts, personal stories, political alerts, article ideas, "clicks" of recognition, accurate criticisms, and sometimes whole life histories into envelopes and sending them to far-off editors as a gesture of faith.

Of course, I have always had an advantage; I get to see the letters there is no room to publish in regular letters columns—and that's a lot. Though we give more space to letters than any magazine I'm aware of—and publish special forums when there are many thoughtful responses on one subject—the real amount of our mail could never be represented in the magazine's pages. Altogether, our monthly mail total is far bigger than that received by magazines with ten times our circulation. That's why I'm grateful for the opportunity to share these letters that this book presents.

Perhaps it was this quantity and quality of letters over the years that allowed me to take them for granted. Like oxygen, much generous letter-writing had become a part of my life. Without the request for our voluminous Letters-to-the-Editors files from the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe, I might have continued to take these precious letters for granted.

Then six of us made a snowy, pre-Christmas trip to Cambridge to celebrate the library's acquisition of the first files, circa 1972–1980: seven big boxes of letters that archivists had culled from twice that volume by removing, as they explained to us, "routine and nonbiographical letters, photographs and resumes—and moving clippings, articles enclosed with letters and examples of sexist ads to the library's vertical files."

At a dinner given by Radcliffe President Matina Horner, questions about the letters from the feminist scholars and educators there began to turn the whole meal into a Proustian tea cake. I could remember, as I had not in years, the exact sensation of sitting up many late nights after the Preview Issue (Spring 1972),

reading at random from bulging mailbags that brought a total of twenty thousand letters into our one-room office.

I remembered a letter from a woman who said she had taken the Preview Issue to a much-feared job interview, carrying it like a badge of courage. The interviewer had been going to offer her less salary, he said. Seeing that she was into this "women's lib" thing, however, he reluctantly offered her the same salary as he gave men.

I remembered many, many women who said they had felt "crazy" or "alone" until they found *Ms.* on their newsstands; women who didn't have access to bookstores and the few feminist works that were there. Some said they had asked their husbands to read *Ms.* and felt it helped their marriage. Others said it had given them the courage to walk out the door.

I realized that those moving, thoughtful, intimate letters, much more than the statistical fact of the Preview Issue's success, had given us the courage to keep going. I remembered a seven-year-old who had written in crayon in careful block letters, that the boys got the big part of the playground at every recess, while the girls only got a corner for playing marbles and dolls. "We girls," she explained, "are angry as turnips." (I remember thinking: Turnips! That kid is going to be a writer.) There was a woman well past seventy who wrote that she had been married four times, didn't like any of her husbands very much, and wanted to know how she could get her birth name back legally. (Eventually that and other letters led to an article called, "Give Yourself Your Own Name for Christmas.")

Patricia King, Director of the Schlesinger Library, supplied reporters with a list of catalog entries. *Abortion. Childbirth. Secretaries. Women in Canada.* Each one brought up dozens of voices and personal stories in my memory. *Found Women:* that was a response to the *Ms.* feature of the same name. How many brave women were waiting in that file? Even *Crackpots* was there as a category, accompanied by a delicate note that letters had been "selected and given this designation by *Ms.* Magazine staff."

I had kept a copy of a model crackpot postcard above my desk for years; one that was like poetry in its economy of symbols. "Now that I have read your magazine," the writer explained, "I know for sure you are a witch bitch long-haired commie dyke slut—who dates negroids. Isn't that just like a jew?"

I hope the library included it. Such invention deserves reward.

One long letter from a young black woman in the Midwest explained that she had read many issues of *Ms.* in prison. The first thing she did was to break off with the lover who was also her pimp. The second was to ask why she had been arrested when he had not.

While trying to research her case, she discovered that libraries in women's prisons, unlike men's, had no law books. She made a formal complaint against the prison—and, ultimately, books arrived. After getting herself out on parole,

she went to work as a paralegal in a women's law firm and enrolled in law school at night. She had recently passed the bar. "I'm just writing you because I thought you'd like to know," she said.

A more recent letter came from a very active woman from Texas. "I think my feeling for Ms. is something like my feeling for my mother," she wrote. "I wanted her to be perfect, got angry when I perceived a (real or imagined) flaw, but never wanted to be really separated."

I never wanted to be separated from all those letters. I never wanted to stop reading the words of generous, time-giving readers who keep us connected, accountable, and on the cutting edge of change.

So far, whatever Ms. readers are doing at any given moment, a third to a half of American women are doing three to five years later. You can track change through these letters, and even predict the future.

The country couldn't have better leaders and teachers than these thoughtful, compassionate, intelligent letter writers—and neither could I.