

JILL KER CONWAY. *A Woman's Education (The road from Coorain leads to Smith College)*. New York: Vintage Books (2001). 143 pp. C\$18.00. (ISBN: 0-679-74462-2).

This most reflective, insightful autobiography is an account of the author's decade as the first woman president of Smith College, in Northampton, Mass. What is significant about this memoir is the telling of all the challenges a woman faced in reinventing women's education while at the same time having to balance the demands of her own personal life. Jill Ker Conway had to battle "conservative faculty, ossified traditions, and doubtful funders to turn Smith into a place committed to preparing young women for the new realities of the future." Her efforts appear all the more valiant when we read that, while she worked diligently toward the value of single-sex education, she had to cope with all the pressures of her husband's bipolar disorder.

The eight chapters of "A Woman's Education" trace the author's journey from the moment she chooses to become the President of Smith College, to the end of her tenure. In the engaging Prelude of her book, she begins by stating "If we're lucky, the places and people that can give our lives an aura of magic potential enter our experience at the right moment to sustain our dreams. One generation can give another that sustenance, not so much by what they say as by how they live." Indeed, Jill Ker Conway's life as a committed educator is inspirational to future generations.

In the chapter entitled "Beside Paradise", she recounts her initial settling in at Smith College and how she had to deal with some of the divisive questions amongst faculty, students, and alumnae. "Most older faculty found it hard to take African-American Studies or Women's Studies seriously. Most younger faculty were passionately committed to both. White students and black students tried warily to befriend one another in an environment overheated by strong feelings on sexual, cultural, and racial politics." In her own quiet, determined, just way, Ms. Conway would inevitably find the right balance.

As an historian on women's institutions, the author reflects that no matter how much she may have known theoretically about them, nothing had prepared her from the actual experience. She quickly had to realize that there was a range of alternatives in women's institutions and that these had to be sustained even in the face of "strongly disapproving social pressure."

Because of her own struggle in deciding what the definition of "real achievement" for women was, Ms Conway was determined "to see women create their own knowledge . . . that women should direct their own abstraction from experience," even in the face of societal and academic conventions. She was passionate about her desire to build an educational system that allowed for the intellectual maturity of all women.

She aptly chooses to call one chapter “Energy Field” to describe faculty meetings and how they were a perfect example of the “interplay of all the competing ideological positions about women and their lives at Smith and its mission that played out in the simplest academic decisions.” The meetings showed “an entrenched senior male faculty determined to enforce their conservative view of learning. The dinosaurs managed to say ‘Madam President’ in tones that made it sound like an insult. The male feminists looked astonished at their older colleagues’ behavior. The ‘ladies’ were soothingly ladylike, and the faces of the younger women faculty shone with joy that the time of reckoning with their older male colleagues was at hand” (p.47).

Undaunted by all the strong polarities she faced, “Madam President” forged ahead and introduced attractive incentives for research on women with the help of the president of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. This newly funded research program was known as the Project on Women and Social Change. It even held its first summer conference on the subject of Women’s Autobiography.

One can truly say that Ms. Conway “walked her talk.” Her every effort in strengthening Smith College reflected her belief that “a college for women should model an intellectual life that recognized that human beings had a reproductive life; it should not set intellectual effort in opposition to generativity” (p.72).

Another strong theme she added to the student culture was through the Ada Comstock Scholars Program, an admission program for older women that opened in 1975. In a moving, personal statement, the author reveals that “I’d always promised myself that I’d honor my mother’s memory someday, somewhere, by making academic institutions take older women seriously as students, instead of seeing them as over-the-hill fee payers without serious intellectual goals” (p.75). Further to that mission, was also her goal that Smith would prepare women graduates for the world of work.

Her last chapters describe some of the tensions she experienced in balancing her personal and professional life. She does tell us, however, that there was a bright side to her saga in that she certainly had a sense that all her hard work at Smith bore fruit. The world of Women’s Education was indelibly marked by her vision of what it should be.

In a rare glimpse of her personal life, there is a moving passage that describes her feelings about her husband, John Conway. She recounts the way he lived his medical condition “my admiration for the way he handled illness and the unremitting courage with which he fought for life and health made worldly success seem useful but not emotionally of great resonance. I knew there were things never to be recorded on any curriculum vitae, that undergirded a whole life” (p.116).

When at last, the author decides not to renew her term as President of Smith College, she addresses the issue of the Politics of Women's Education. Her cynicism reveals itself in her biting remarks "the subtext of the question was that women could not possibly have any intellectual reason for being together. The life of the mind was a male activity to which women were lucky to be admitted." These words seem quite discouraging, given the fact that she had spent much of her professional life fighting that very attitude. In her closing remarks of that chapter, she voices her concern over the shifting political forces which did not allow for the current generation of young women to truly understand the fragility of the gains made by women of her own generation. She urges all educators to renew their efforts in that direction.

The book ends on a note she refers to as "Sostenuto." The author shares her hopes of a life beyond Smith with her readers. Her plan is to divide that life into thirds. In part of it, she would learn to become a writer and work on creating a counter record to those feminist ideas she thought mistaken. Part of her time would be spent learning how to think about the environmental issues that had personal meaning for her from her childhood in semi-arid Australia. The last third would be spent helping to govern institutions she wasn't responsible for running – such as corporations, foundations, hospitals, schools and colleges.

As she settles into a tranquil life of reading, gardening, and moments shared with her husband, Ms Conway is still thinking about a future, and there is a profound resonance to her closing remarks: "I was accustomed to thinking about life in the language of music. . . . Whatever it was, I knew I had to concentrate on getting the opening chords right, because those are the ones one never gets to play a second time" (p.143).

Unquestionably, sounds of the symphony Jill Ker Conway created with her life as an educator will be heard for years to come in many institutions dedicated to a "Woman's Education," for it has been indelibly marked by her participation in it.

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