

Book Reviews

Martin Duberman, ed. *Naomi Weisstein: Brain Scientist, Rock Band Leader, Feminist Rebel (Her Collected Essays)*. Amherst, MA: Off the Common Books, 2020. 348 pp.

A title as audacious as *Naomi Weisstein: Brain Scientist, Rock Band Leader, Feminist Rebel* may tease and overpromise when written by the wrong hands. However, Martin Duberman's edited collection of Weisstein's nonscientific essays convinced me that she may be one of the most fascinating, groundbreaking, and multifaceted twentieth-century individuals I have encountered. If anything, the title may be an understatement. Before reading this volume, though, I was staggeringly unaware of her existence, which may be the case for many of us. As an early adolescent, I pilfered and read my older sister's feminist magazines and books but somehow had missed Weisstein's contributions, just as I had also missed her pioneering feminist activism when I launched my own paler version a generation later. Often the only woman in my college science classes, I did not know she had already broken down significant gendered barriers in some of these fields. And as a woman who has plucked a string or two in public, I had never heard of Weisstein's wonderfully disruptive band, a notable precursor to a later proliferation of women's boundary-crossing music performances.

Now, though, Duberman, the polymathic American Historical Association Lifetime Achievement Award-winning scholar, beloved teacher, and notably out writer since at least 1972, has brought Weisstein's life and words to us all.¹ He knew Weisstein for over fifty years and they were dear friends, which he movingly recounts in his powerful introduction, "Remembering Naomi." To prepare this work, he also mined the public record for meaningful traces, studied her papers and incomplete memoir at Harvard's Schlesinger Library, and spoke extensively with her husband, also a dear friend, and others in their broad network of common friends/activists. He carefully curated her essays from across her adult life, placing them richly in the contexts of larger social change and academic movements. Beyond Duberman's obvious historical craft, though, he has rendered this book with love. I was most powerfully struck by this on the last page. Here he describes how during her final decades, while she

¹Martin Duberman, "Homosexual Literature," *New York Times* (Dec. 10, 1972), section BR, 6.

suffered from a debilitating illness, “When Naomi was well enough to have visitors, I’d crawl up next to her in bed and we’d hold hands, giggle, tell each other how wonderful we were, and giggle some more. Her loss is unimaginably awful” (p. 348). He has helped me understand why.

From the 1960s to the early 1980s, Weisstein defiantly walked in several restricted worlds at once. While studying at Wellesley, the brazen and scrappy daughter of “committed socialists” (ix) carved out a unique niche among her peers as a brilliant stand-up comic, nearly joining Chicago’s Second City comedy improv troupe in later years. As a doctoral student in Harvard’s male-dominated experimental psychology program, she shamelessly played her clarinet and danced outside the library that refused women access because they might distract men. When Harvard psychologist Jerome Bruner denied her the use of equipment needed for her dissertation research—ostensibly because she might break it—she slipped down the road to use Yale’s facilities instead. Then she graduated early, in 1964, at the top of her class. During the course of her academic career, other scientists tried to bury, steal, or denigrate her innovative research on how the brain makes sense of visual stimuli. Although this research threatened the behaviorist hegemony of the time, she deftly navigated these dangers to publish not just one career-making article in the prestigious journal *Science*, but five. Later, she co-founded Division 35 of the American Psychological Association (APA), the Society for the Psychology of Women, to support feminist teaching, research, and practice in the field. In 1967, while she and her husband worked at the University of Chicago, Weisstein and several other women formed the Chicago West Side Group, an early second-wave radical feminist organization that deployed direct confrontation in pursuit of women’s liberation and that inspired the proliferation of other such groups around the country. A popular speaker for the cause, she also frequently contributed daring, impeccably well-argued, and biting funny essays to help shake up the world. She co-founded and led the Chicago Women’s Liberation Rock Band as an outgrowth of this activism. The band, with Weisstein on bass, keyboard, and vocals, comedically deconstructed multiple sexist dimensions of the rebellious, then popular rock genre as the short-lived group toured extensively, arguably seeding much greater risk-taking among later women musicians.

Weisstein drew from her multiple gifts in drafting her wide-ranging essays. Among these, she wrote “Psychology Constructs the Female or, The Fantasy Life of the Male Psychologist (with Some Attention to the Fantasies of His Friends, the Male Biologist and the Male Anthropologist)” in 1968 when she was 29. In this breakthrough essay, she adroitly dismantled then prevailing male-centric

assumptions in psychology by using a combination of precision logic, encyclopedic understanding, and perfectly delivered comedic jabs. She essentially argued that the field's dominant sexist views were not supported by rationally examined, empirical evidence. As many have since contended, this piece was a thunderclap that catalyzed the study of the psychology of women. It was anthologized over forty-two times. Also drawing on her fierce humor, activism, and incredulity at the shameless hurdles placed in women's paths in academia, she penned "How can a little girl like you teach a great big class of men?" the Chairman Said, and Other Adventures of a Woman in Science" (1968-74). Though she was a Guggenheim Fellow, as well as a fellow of the APA and the American Association for the Advancement of Science, she experienced wide-ranging professional cheats, put-downs, sabotage, unfair hiring practices, and demeaning statements like the essay's title. She courageously described how she averted the blatant theft of her work by researchers, for example, who told her that she needed their help to run the gear for her experiments.

Beyond her professional scientific pursuits, she wrote an impressive range of essays on feminist activism. In "The Chicago Women's Liberation Rock Band, 1970-1973," for example, she described the origins of her early women's rock band, its foibles, its exhilarating breakthroughs, and its commitment to smashing assumptions about the male-centeredness of popular music. She also unsparingly examined the frustrations of keeping such an activist project going, as many members of new left groups like this tended to deride leaders as sell-outs and attack each other unnecessarily. With her essay, "The Hite Reports: Charting an Ideological Revolution in Progress," she applauded Shere Hite's meticulously researched, empirically grounded 1976 study of women's sexuality because it was the first such research to ask women directly about their sexual experiences. Weisstein also speculated about what she perceived as a dangerous winding down of the second-wave feminist movement in "Will the Women's Movement Survive?" (1975). Here, she helpfully analyzed some of the forces that inevitably surface in leftist social movements that, if left unexamined and unaddressed, can erode advances and even cause regression.

Weisstein's writing largely ceased in the mid-1980s when she suffered the onset of myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue and immune dysfunction syndrome, which left her bedridden for the rest of her life, overly sensitive to light and sound, and prone to piercing headaches and incapacitating vertigo. Somehow, though, she managed to write "The House of Love, or, My Dangerous Hospital Adventure," during her final years, in which she described her frustrations during a complicated hospital visit. She examined the possibilities for sweet,

enduring interactions when so many hospital workers drift in and out of the structures that hold them in a tight, impersonal hierarchy, too often abandoning the altruism present “everywhere, in nature, in human society.” She concludes, “We can do better than this” (346).

Duberman’s edited collection of Weisstein’s essays is not a secondary analysis like those typically reviewed in *HEQ*. However, I believe that it tells us a great deal about the history of higher education in the mid to late twentieth century. Weisstein’s compelling words flesh out conditions women routinely experienced in academia as students and as scientists, researchers, teachers, and members of professional associations. Beyond her recollections, Duberman helps us understand just how significant her activism was in changing so many of those entrenched forms of gender oppression, though she was never satisfied that enough had shifted. The stories of her activism—as well as that of others—deserve to be told. Weisstein’s essays also speak with uncanny resonance to today’s activists in and around academia. She dares new generations to draw on their unique gifts, to confront injustices, and, where possible, to leaven this important work with humor, one of her most potent tools. Though my own writing is sadly lacking in humor, I am grateful to have encountered her through Duberman’s book.

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Donovan Moore. *What Stars Are Made Of: The Life of Cecilia Payne-Gaposchkin*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020. 320 pp.

Despite Cecilia Payne-Gaposchkin’s fame as one of the most influential women in science in the twentieth century, Donovan Moore’s work is the first full-length biography of the scientist. Payne-Gaposchkin has multiple claims to fame, perhaps the biggest her discovery that stars are primarily composed of hydrogen. They are not simply, as had been previously thought, very large hot Earths. Payne-Gaposchkin was the first female science professor at Harvard University and the first female professor in any field at Harvard to be promoted to full professorship rather than hired from outside into a chaired position.