

The Group

M. McCarthy

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The novel was a bestseller in the early 60's. Why? One obvious explanation is that it is a bit *risque* meaning sexually explicit which may have titillated contemporary sensibilities, but of course compared to what would come later, it is fairly tame in this regard.

It depicts a group of eight Vassar women of the class of '33, following them for seven years. It starts with a marriage that of Kay Strong to the theater man Harald Petersen of Scandinavian descent. And its end with the funeral of Kay, where her divorced husband shows up, shunned by everyone in the group.

The novel shows life in New York City during the depression. The remarkable thing is that this life is not that much different from the life in the 60's or the 70's for that matter. Sexual license may have been more rampant after the 'social revolution' of the 60's, and leftist sympathies more widespread and deeper based during the depression, when the New Deal had a more leftist slant than would ever be allowed in American politics after Joseph McCarthy and the Cold War. As Hobsbawm has noted: one of the charms of a city like New York is that it basically has not changed during the 20th century.

The novel is not literary, at least not in any conventional sense. The prose does not make you linger, instead it pushes you ahead. Another word for that is 'page-turner'. This might go a long way in explaining its success. One is reminded of Updike, another chronicler of the contemporary scene from the point of view of the average suburban reader. A direct comparison shows Updike as the superior writer. His prose is more artful and his composition far more professional and deliberate. McCarthy is in this regard somewhat of an amateur. She falls into many of the common traps of a beginning writer of fiction. One of them is verbosity. Using far too many words, and engaging in too elaborate descriptions. It is supposed to be artful and convey local color, but it does not work this way.

Her greatest failing is her depiction of characters. The eight women are hard to tell apart. She tries her best, as already noted, but that is not enough. The ability to create believable characters is one of the secrets of successful fiction. It is not always necessary, but in most cases it is, especially in an enterprise such as that of McCarthy's. It is simply very hard to tell the girls apart. The names do not stick at first, which may be forgivable, but even when they finally stick, there is a tendency to mix them up. This makes the unfolding drama much less effective. Of course in a serialization or in a film, this is not that serious, because of the personalities of the actors coming through. This is why mediocre novels may turn out to be rather successful and engaging movies or serials. It is not too surprising that the modern take on 'The Group' resulted in 'The Sex and the City', which thus is its proper comparison.

The most gripping story, and supposedly the one intended to be the central, is that of stage-struck Kay Strong and her husband the Scandinavian director and playwright - Harald Petersen. Kay is supposedly in awe of her husband, whom she considers a genius. What a match for her, and would it not make her group-mates jealous? Petersen has had

much experience with women, which of course only adds to his allure. That he continues his philandering after the marriage, even with friends of her, is something quite different. He brags about being able to keep it a secret from his wife, but surely she suspects something, if not else at least through her instinctive jealousy. Petersen is presented as a caricature. Not only self-indulgent, but positively egoistical. He thinks of himself as a genius, but his attempts to get his play produced fail, of course through no fault of his own. He is also periodically out of work, obviously because he is so much better and people are envious of him, or as the case may be simply vindictive, because their sexual advances have not been accepted. Towards the end of the novel he commits his wife to a mental hospital, pretends to be contrite about his act, agrees to release her only to renege on his promise. As a result her reputation is permanently damaged. In the final scene of the novel he is trying to make it with one of the group, a Lesbian, referring to their common superiority over the other lot, while they are speeding to the cemetery. Needless to say he is very dismissive about his former wife and takes for granted that she committed suicide and that the story with the fall out of the window was only an elaborate charade. Eventually he is thrown out of the car.

Why should the novel have been of interest to contemporary readers? Apart from the sex, there are discussions of the role of contraceptives, replete with an extended survey, supposedly provided by Petersen, about the logistics of pessaries. How the experienced woman farms them out to her lovers, thus leaving everyone (not to mention the husband) convinced of their exclusivity. Breastfeeding as opposed to the bottle? Strict regimes, or a policy of *laissez faire*? How to provide potty-training? Very important or something that will take care of itself? Furthermore all the women are educated, a liberal arts education that does not translate well into the actual labor market. One of the women - Libby, tries to make it in the publishing world, but with scant success. It is 'mans world' her boss, tells her. A boss who is recycled by the author for another role, namely that of a lover to one of the eight. Here he strikes a rather pitiful figure, torn between his lover and his wife, not being able to decide on a divorce, and as a result, prompted by his beau, to return to the fold, even if his wife has been straying. The jilted lover, who works as a technician in a medical lab, soon finds compensation in a stunning doctor, who promises on very short notice to be everything for her. Just as in a trashy novel. In the end, regretfully or not, it is marriage that makes or breaks a woman. A message which might make the novel less appreciated by modern readers.

One may read a novel for a variety of reasons. One is historical and sociological, to get a sense of the mores of the times. For such purposes literary excellence is not a requirement, as it could even be an impediment. As noted, life as it emerges from the novel, is not that different from later years, and few things seem to be distinctive for the period. In fact the only thing I note is the predominance of smoking. Everyone smokes, and young women smoking at the time, was considered a sign of emancipation, actually an attitude ('You have gone a long way baby') which survived into the early seventies.