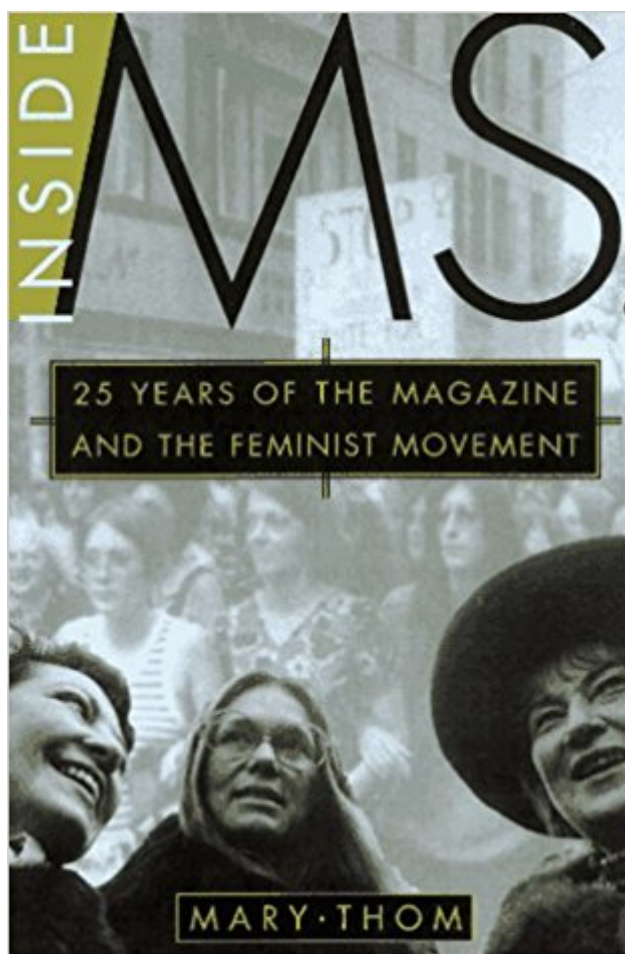


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# Inside Ms.: 25 Years Of The Magazine And The Feminist Movement



## Synopsis

Chronicles twenty-five years of Ms. magazine and its impact on women's publishing and the recent history of feminism in America and addresses such issues as battered women and the struggle for reproductive rights. 15,000 first printing."

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Ms., the American magazine that has reflected and whipped up feminist sentiment for a quarter of a century, is the subject of this absorbing insider account by Mary Thom, who worked her way up from researcher to executive editor. Thom dips into the feminist movement, focusing on events or trends that overlapped with the politics and interests of Ms. staffers. The magazine illuminated domestic abuse, sexual harassment, and violence against women and sparked acrimonious debates on issues where feminists disagreed, such as pornography, child rearing, and making the mainstream movement more palatable by cutting out certain groups. An undeniable partisan, Thom glosses over many fights, mistakes, and thick-headed actions, but turns in an engaging portrait of the personalities and times that shaped the magazine.

July 1997 marks the 25th anniversary of Ms. magazine. Thom attended the planning meetings that launched the magazine and is still listed as a contributing editor. Her personal experiences, combined with interviews of colleagues, form the basis of this history, which recounts how against the backdrop of the feminist activities of the early 1970s, a group of editors and writers led by

founding editors Gloria Steinem and Patricia Carbine strategized to create a radically different kind of magazine for women. Thom offers detailed portraits of the women involved, from Steinem to many lesser-known editors and writers. She covers the magazine's financial struggles, its role in the women's movement, and its relationship with readers. Although she mentions negative issues, such as accusations of middle-class bias and racism, Thom fails to take a critical look at Ms.'s role in the women's movement or in publishing history. Despite this drawback, libraries with women's studies collections will want to purchase. -?Judy Solberg, George Washington Univ., Washington, D.C. Copyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc.

very dense, but lots of interesting information

At the time this book was published in 1997, Mary Thom was the executive editor of Ms., after starting out as a researcher and then writer, and then senior editor; she also edited *Letters to Ms.*, 1972-1987. She wrote in the first chapter, *Ms.* "Gloria Steinem was backing her way into Ms. The idea of starting something as viable and substantial as a magazine---with staff and readers, financial backers, and quite possibly a movement relying on it---was terrifying to a freelance writer who had never really held a regular job. But while she was reaching for an audience as a speaker, she did need a comfortable vehicle for her writing---one that simply did not exist." (Pg. 8-9) About the name of the magazine, she recounts, "There had been a strong contingent that had favored *Sisters*, but Gloria Steinem held out for the more symbolic *Ms.* On that level, the name worked well. Ms. clearly broke with tradition, fairly screaming that this was more than just another women's magazine. The Ms. woman was independent. She would not be defined by her relationship, or lack of it, to a man, be it husband or father. She stood up for herself. The statement was a bold one at a time when, for example, women routinely were denied credit in their own names. Merely explaining what the name meant became an opportunity to change minds." (Pg. 14) After the first issue was published, "The elation of the staff could not be dimmed by the television news commentary that same evening by the late Harry Reasoner. I'll give it six months, Reasoner said of the new Ms., before they run out of things to say." Years later, on the occasion of the magazine's fifth anniversary, he was gracious enough to take it back. (Pg. 43) She points out, "Its agenda did make Ms. seem more

like a social movement than a national magazine, and both the staff and the watching world expected feminist principles to govern all levels of activity. And because the pressure of monthly deadlines did nothing to diminish the urgency of feminist goals, Ms. had to operate, for better or worse, both as a publishing enterprise and a center for activism. (Pg. 44-45) She chronicles the acrimonious relationship between Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan: “Friedan and Steinem had never been close colleagues or friends, although in the past year they had collaborated to found the National Women’s Political Caucus (NWPC). Friedan accused Steinem, and [Bella] Abzug as well, of female chauvinism that could make men slam the door in our faces. Friedan made the most of the publicity potential of her turning in Steinem by calling a press conference on July 18, 1972 she accused Steinem of making a woman feel apologetic for loving her husband or children. It’s a oversimplification to say that Betty Friedan was suffering from an acute case of hurt feelings because of the growing popularity of Gloria Steinem and Ms. Her subsequent writings, particularly in her book *The Second Stage*, demonstrate that she remained upset and embarrassed by what she saw as an antimale bias in feminism. But there is no doubt that she experienced rejection earlier in the year when a NWPC meeting was called to pick a spokeswoman for the Democratic National Convention. Steinem was chosen for the post even though she had not sought the position and Friedan had vigorously lobbied for it. (Pg. 50-52) Of the incident when the Redstockings published a press release accusing Gloria Steinem and Ms. of being agents of the CIA, she reports: “Steinem had years before worked for a foundation in Cambridge, Massachusetts, that encouraged young people from the United States to attend International Communist Youth Festivals. Some financing for students and young people attending those events came indirectly from the CIA. Steinem had made her role public after *Ramparts* magazine came out with an exposé in 1967 on how CIA money passed through foundations to the NSA and other groups. Steinem finally did, reluctantly and in anger answer the Redstockings indictment in an August 15 release to the feminist press. And she did acknowledge that working with a project that involved CIA funding was a mistake: “It’s painfully clear with hindsight that even indirect, control-free funding was a mistake if it couldn’t be publicized, but I didn’t realize that then.” (Pg. 74-79) She points out that after Alice Walker moved to California, she “remained a contributing editor

until the end of 1986 when she abruptly withdrew her name from the masthead. In her brief letter of resignation, she said she wanted Ms. to know of the alienation she and her daughter, Rebecca, felt when the magazine arrives with its determinedly [and to us grim] white cover. Joanne Edgar and Rosemary Bray, who had joined the Ms. staff in 1985 after editing for Essence, both told Alice Walker how upset they were at her letter. Walker wrote back with a longer explanation that she hoped... would be published. She said, among other things, that the reason she had stopped going to editorial meetings when she had been on staff all those years ago was that it became clear that what racial color there was to be in the magazine I was expected to provide or represent. (Pg. 89-90) Of the antipornography debates of the 1980s, she recalls, "I asked Andrea Dworkin an obvious question: If ordinances like these are passed, especially with right-wing antifeminist support, would Ms. not be among the first publications attacked? Her response was... perhaps that was something we would just have to live with. To her great credit, Dworkin recognized that her own, often sexually explicit fiction might also be in jeopardy if her statute was misused. But, characteristically, that risk would not stop her from standing firm on the front line of this battle. Whatever one's position, it was impossible not to admire Andrea Dworkin. (Pg. 94) She acknowledges, "Over the years, Ms. readers reserved their most serious and sustained criticism not for a particular ad campaign but for an entire category. Many readers did not want Ms. to carry cigarette advertising. Some hated the alcohol ads as well. Ms. explained the decision: "There is a clear warning on the package and in the ads that smoking is dangerous. After some consideration, it seemed to us that the reader had the right to make the choice. At the time, most of the Ms. editors smoked, and the explanations probably sounded more principles and less tortured than it does today. But tobacco advertising was such a large category for Ms. no one on the staff thought the magazine could survive without the income from cigarette ads. As Gloria Steinem wrote, the necessity of taking tobacco ads had become a kind of prison. (Pg. 135-136) After Steinem relinquished her editorship of the magazine, Suzanne Levine believes that Ms. suffered more from Steinem's absence than the editors knew at the time. When Steinem did not have a daily involvement with the magazine, there was a level of imagination and optimism and freshness that we

couldn't duplicate it. Just having her around, talking about perceptions of the day's events, coming back from trips with those little scraps of paper about people she'd met, her comments on articles, her ability to make us deal with each other in a different way. When those things were taken away it brought down the level of creativity and honesty at the magazine. (Pg. 170) Of the decision to go ad-free, she records, "perhaps many more of the core readership of Ms. would be willing to invest \$30 or more in an advertising-free revival of the magazine. That is what Gloria Steinem and Robin Morgan, who would edit the new version, asked of them early in 1990. Ms. readers responded once again. They would pay a premium for their magazine. Many readers were doubly generous and checked off a box on the subscription form to pay for the magazine to be sent to battered women shelters and to other women who could not afford the higher rate. (Pg. 217) One looking for a more critical perspective on the magazine will need to look elsewhere. But those of us who have been among Ms.'s loyal readership will delight in this "insider" account of the magazine.

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