

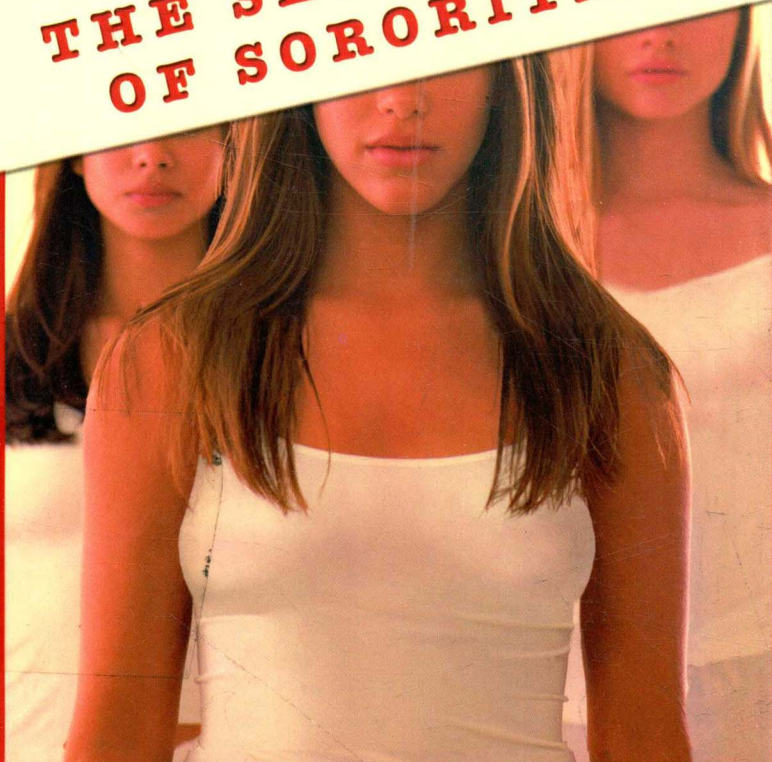
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PLEDGED

"Alexandra Robbins rips into the secret, sordid underbelly of sororities."

—*Vanity Fair*

THE SECRET LIFE
OF SORORITIES




Alexandra Robbins

PLEDGED

The Secret Life of Sororities

ALEXANDRA ROBBINS

 HYPERION

NEW YORK

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“We’ve all heard the sordid tales coming out of the Greek scene—the heavy drinking, the startlingly old-fashioned values, the exclusivity and racism, the date rapes, the hazing deaths. Robbins folds all of these weightier issues into her narrative, while also offering an often humorous snapshot of today’s college youth.”

—Salon

“A juicy read.”

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“Robbins grapples with a terrific amount of research on Greek life, and the book that results is fascinating and, in the end, highly alarming. *Pledged* is amazing in the same way that reality TV is amazing: It’s the car crash you can’t take your eyes off of... Every parent of a college-bound daughter should read this book. And Alexandra Robbins: You go girl.”

—The New Republic (online)

“Funny but alarming.”

—People

“Robbins’ account of life inside the sorority house... makes for fascinating reading... Where the author really scores is in her analysis of why otherwise intelligent and sensitive women would sacrifice their independence, and often self-respect, for the sake of an artificially engineered secret society.”

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“Robbins offers a titillating take on sisterhood gone mad.”

—Kirkus Reviews

“Astonishing.”

—Austin American Statesman

“A controversial new book on sorority life... [a] fascinating look at sororities.”

—People

“Racy.”

—Newsday

“Robbins’s book, both fascinating and eye opening, tells us a great deal about well-to-do young women in America and about the pressures on them... Robbins writes with empathy and affection for her college-age subjects.”

—Washington Monthly

“Robbins chronicles their catfights and love lives, the superficiality of rush and the cruelty that can take place during pledging, which makes for juicy reading.”

—Arizona Republic

“The narrative, which follows these girls through pledge hazing, hookups, sister drama, and date rape, is better than reality TV—it’s riveting.”

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“This book is a juicy exposé on one (unnamed) university’s Greek system. Alexandra spent a school year following four girls through two sororities, where everybody diets like crazy, has random hookups, and drinks a lot... You have to read these shocking true stories.”

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PLEG D E D

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AND DAVE

PREFACE TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION

It appears that readers and nonreaders of this book react to it in extremes. Since the initial release of *Pledged*, I have been inundated with by far the most vitriolic and, conversely, some of the most supportive e-mails I have ever received about one of my books.

Although they are in the minority, a still-significant number of the thousands of contacts I've had with sorority sisters have fallen in the vicious category. An e-mail, for instance, informed me that I have no right to be poking around Greek organizations because I myself am not Greek. A web site populated by self-proclaimed sorority sisters discussed burning me at the stake. Other outlets deemed me garbage (and other unprintable epithets) simply because I had undertaken this project. Some sorority sisters have launched personal attacks, making unfounded, cruel claims about my character and background.

At first, I had not anticipated this kind of sorority reaction to a book in which sorority sisters are the protagonists. The reason for these particular circles' vehemence toward a book that sympathizes with sisters, however, soon became clear.

They refuse to read it.

I have received scores of e-mails from sisters that say essentially the same

thing, along the lines of: I know for a fact—this being one of the more common phrases beginning these notes—that your book is made up of lies, and that none of what you have written actually goes on in sororities. You wrote it because you were rejected from a sorority, probably because you were a writer, which means you were a loser, and that's why you weren't sorority material (we would have rejected you too). Now you're bitter and jealous that you will never know what it is really like to be a sorority sister because we are privileged and exceptional. My sorority doesn't do any of the things you talk about, and therefore no sorority does. You must not have any friends and so you attack those of us who do, but you are not one of us. There are hundreds of thousands of us in powerful positions in this country so you had better watch out. I don't believe a single statement you write in your book. I have not read it, and I won't. Enough said.

As unbelievably ludicrous as the charges in the previous paragraph seem, they pretty much sum up many sorority sisters' notes to or about me. In addition, I hear that some sorority houses are boycotting this book; that others have apparently fought to keep it off the shelves; that groups have encouraged sisters, regardless of whether they have read *Pledged*, to mass-mail trashy reviews of it to other sisters and to online booksellers; and that sorority sisters caught reading *Pledged* in some houses have gotten into trouble. All of this, because people are unwilling to admit that Greek life isn't yet perfect. All of this, because many sisters are immersed so far over their heads that they believe the only reason a reporter would expose anything even remotely critical about sororities must be because she is a former rejectee.

Allow me to clear up the confusion.

I had virtually no interaction with sororities when I was officially an undergraduate between 1994 and 1998. This is because Greek life was so peripheral on my campus that I didn't even know the two or three sorority chapters so much as existed until I was nearly halfway done with my college career. Thus, I did not rush (as far as I know, there was no formal recruitment period) and was not aware of sorority events. Regardless, I was satisfied with the camaraderie in my dorm and on the college sports teams for which I played. When I was a junior, a younger friend on my hall joined one of the sororities, which was rather low-key and seemed a pleasant enough experience for her. A few friends of mine at other schools joined sororities, some with positive experiences, some with negative experiences, but the topic almost never came up among us. And that was the extent of my knowledge of and relationship with sororities until 2002, when I decided to write *Pledged*.

It is unfathomable to some (non)readers that I chose to write about sororities simply because the topic lends itself to engaging characters and quick-read narratives, rather than because I wished to act on some vague, vindictive hidden agenda. But such is the case. Most former, current, and future sorority sisters whom I encounter recognize that this book was written by an ally. I regularly hear from high school girls and college freshmen who say they will use what they learned from *Pledged* to make sure they join and promote a worthwhile chapter, instead of getting caught up in the groupthink of a house with less lofty ideals. I will also point out to the naysayers who are adamant that the stories in *Pledged* are fiction that I could write a full-length sequel based on the similar and more horrifying stories that current sisters have shared with me over the past year alone. Do the chapters committing atrocities accurately illustrate sorority life as a whole? No, of course not. There are enough bad seeds, however, that steps could be taken to improve the system—providing the system is willing to admit that there is need for improvement.

But to some members of the Greek community, the fact that I am not a part of it means that my observations are somehow not valid. According to them, as an outsider I have no business writing about sororities. To me this sounds like it conflicts with the job description of a journalist, the idea that you cannot adequately report on sororities unless you're in one. That's like saying a journalist can't report on terrorism if he is not a terrorist. Or that a woman can't write about an NFL team because she herself cannot play in the NFL.

I should note here that the vast majority of the e-mails I receive from sorority sisters express gratitude and praise for portraying their world accurately and with an unbiased eye. Most of the sorority sisters I hear from say that they personally lived or observed the stories in *Pledged* and easily related to one or more of its main characters; as one historically white national sorority member at a northern school wrote me recently, "I definitely knew Sabrina, Caitlin, Amy, and Vicki. They were at my school too, and at some points in my life I might have had a bit of them in me also." On a more literal level, dozens of girls in national sororities at dozens of schools across the country have told me that they are absolutely confident that their chapter is *Pledged's* Alpha Rho or Beta Pi and that I must have been undercover at their school.

Other Greeks, however, can be so fiercely protective that they can make the

system worse because they are unwilling to accept that certain aspects of sorority life can be bettered. That's why some Greeks have reacted so ferociously to a book that accurately illustrates that, while sororities can be great, not all chapters are exemplary. Many women in sororities are in denial, sauntering through their college years wearing blinders that peg the Greek system as flawless and any criticism of it as lies. Certainly, there are many wonderful chapters that consist of genuinely friendly sisters and laudable programs, sisterhoods that embrace a girl for who she is, rather than mold her into what they want her to represent. But there is a danger that in some of the less evolved houses, students can get so caught up in the idea of the group that their individual identities, opinions, and values get lost within the herd mentality created when cognitive dissonance intersects with the notion of us versus them.

It is not worth the time to try to convince these women that they ought to read a book rather than make baseless assumptions about it. But I believe it is important to share their reactions here, because the types of sisters who comprise the crux of the problems in today's sororities, those individuals currently devoted to maintaining an uncomfortable, superficial, overly image-conscious sorority atmosphere—the gung-ho girls who live such sorority-centric lives that they believe they have the authority to dictate even what other sisters can and cannot read—are exactly the ones who would, so to speak, judge a book by its cover. I do not mean to use this Preface as a rebuttal to a minority faction; a rebuttal isn't necessary. With their own statements, those sisters unwittingly prove my points.

Fortunately, those sisters seem to be outnumbered. When I did the reporting for *Pledged*, I chose Sabrina, Caitlin, Amy, and Vicki as the four main characters because, while some sororities can make some sisters do some shocking things, I wanted readers to see that most of the girls as individuals are normal people, not caricatures. And I hope that readers root for them, as I did, because they taught me that, even in a complex world full of assumptions and denials, in a system in which battles constantly wage over the image of the chapter, where Greeks often toe the lines between standards and stereotypes, it is still possible to find girlfriends to love.

Alexandra Robbins, 2005

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PROLOGUE

IT IS BID DAY at Southern Methodist University in the late 1990s, the January day when hopeful rushees find out which sorority has accepted them. As throngs of students, families, and alumnae line the quaint suburban Dallas streets outside the Hughes-Trigg Student Center, hundreds of girls fidget nervously inside, agonizing about the important but barely discernible item practically burning a hole beneath their jeans like the pea beneath the princess. An hour earlier, these underclassmen, wearing the required Bid Day uniform of white shirts and denim, were ushered into the auditorium and handed their bid envelopes, each containing a name that many in Texas believe will either carve or destroy the paths of a young woman's life. Since then, the girls have been sitting on the envelopes, as instructed, while enduring a series of lectures by administrators and guest speakers about the sorority system, women's issues, and how to become more involved at SMU—similar to the speech a varsity coach gives to his tryouts before announcing his final cuts.

After anxiously squirming and sweating through the speeches, knowing all the while that the product of a semester's worth of schmoozing and image-polishing is just under their behinds, they practically shoot out of their seats when a speaker announces that now, all at once, they are allowed to open their envelopes. For a few moments, the room is full of five hundred girls (most of

whom have been assigned a house, if not their house of preference) crying, laughing, and screaming, hugging each other in groups or slipping quietly away to a corner to weep alone. But there isn't time to linger.

Immediately, the girls are herded out of the auditorium, up the stairs, and out the student center doors for the SMU annual tradition called "Pigs' Run." Together, the girls (or "pigs"), squealing and cheering, must sprint from Hughes-Trigg to the newly revealed sorority house that has chosen them, through about five blocks' worth of car-less streets blockaded by police officers at every corner. On the way, they are jostled through an onslaught of fraternity brothers who line the paths with water guns and hoses, drenching the sisters until long after their mandatory white shirts turn transparent. The girls who do not get into the house of their choice run regardless, crushed and sobbing, through the gauntlet until they reach the houses, where the rushees are feted by cheering sorority sisters who slide a sorority jersey over their wet clothes and welcome them boisterously. The heartbroken girls must don their happiest face and adopt their most sycophantic tone—quickly, before their sisters spot their regret or reluctance.

The mothers, gathered with their families, friends, and, in many cases, their own sorority sisters, stand near the houses they expect their daughters to join. Many of these families are from Highland Park, the upscale neighborhood that hosts the ritzy SMU, which has been referred to as Southern Millionaires University and a "college in country club clothing." But others have traveled great distances to watch this event. An alumna of one sorority waits at her former house, draped in her sorority's colors and waving balloons and flowers as she scans the crowd for her daughter, whom she expects to continue the legacy. She stands with her family, anxiously searching the faces of the Pigs' Run participants flying by. And continues to wait. When the last of the stragglers careen toward the crowd, this legacy family rushes through Pigs' Run in reverse, clamoring into the student center, through the auditorium doors, where they find their baby-faced daughter bawling and refusing to leave the building because she has not been accepted at the sorority of her—and her mother's—choice. "Sororities are a completely different world," one of the Pigs' Run girls tells me. "But especially in the South, you don't even question the tradition. You just do it."

Pigs' Run, a custom carried out under different names (such as "Running of

the Bulls" or "Squeal Day") at many schools across the country, distributes the girls into distinct social networks they believe will inevitably determine the trajectories of their college careers and perhaps their lives beyond. It is a dash away from anonymity on a college campus and toward the optimistic embrace of a smaller, more intimate community. Many rushees believe that Pigs' Run or its various other epithets represents the end of a journey through which they have sought identity through association, the culmination of their arduous and intense quest to belong. But truly, the quest has only just begun.

INTRODUCTION

“Delta, Delta, Delta, Can We Help Ya, Help Ya, Help Ya?”
(or, So Do They Really Have Topless Pillow Fights?)

BECAUSE I'VE NEVER BEEN a member of any girl-only group other than sports teams, I didn't know much about sororities when I started researching this book. Actually, I was slightly afraid of them. We outsiders, who can only envision what goes on behind sorority house walls and inside sorority girls' heads, merely have movies such as *Revenge of the Nerds*, *Animal House*, and *Legally Blonde* to inform our views about sororities. Those of us with the more salacious of imaginations—or the more B-movie of tastes—might associate with sororities the topless pillow fights that must inevitably occur when fifty estrogen-laden creatures gather for a sleepover (or so men everywhere fervently pray). Or perhaps a *Heathers*-inspired coldness might come to mind as we visualize the vicious hair-tearing, earring-twisting catfights between sororities clamoring for the most popular fraternity to escort them to Homecoming. Or our image of sororities (as was mine) is the tamer, more relatable version: the popular group of girls from high school—cooler, prettier, wealthier, multiplied by ten, living under one roof, and recognized officially by their college as a clique.

I don't think I realized the extent to which I was an outsider, however, until I found myself smack in a bustling epicenter of sorority life—a “Greek boutique” at a conference for sorority and fraternity representatives. The room