

WOMEN *of* CRISIS II

*Lives of Work
and Dreams*

Robert Coles and
Jane Hallowell Coles

RADCLIFFE BIOGRAPHY SERIES

WOMEN OF CRISIS II

Lives of Work and Dreams

**Robert Coles and
Jane Hallowell Coles**



A Merloyd Lawrence Book

DELTA/SEYMOUR LAWRENCE

A MERLOYD LAWRENCE BOOK

Delta/Seymour Lawrence Edition

Published by

Dell Publishing Co., Inc.

1 Dag Hammarskjold Plaza

New York, New York 10017

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For information address Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence,
New York, New York.

Delta ® TM 755118, Dell Publishing Co., Inc.

ISBN: 0-440-59401-4

Reprinted by arrangement with Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence.

Printed in the United States of America

First Delta printing—August 1981

To the Memory of Lillian Smith
To Dorothy Day

RADCLIFFE BIOGRAPHY SERIES

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foreword

Radcliffe College is pleased and proud to sponsor the Radcliffe Biographies, a series of lives of extraordinary American women.

Each volume of the Radcliffe Biographies serves to remind us of two of the values of biographical writing. A fine biography is first of all a work of scholarship, grounded in the virtues of diligent and scrupulous research, judicious evaluation of information, and a fresh vision of the connections between persons, places, and events.

Beyond this, fine biographies give us both a glimpse of ourselves and a reflection of the human spirit. Biography illuminates history, inspires by example, and fires the imagination to life's possibilities. Good biography can create for us lifelong models. Reading about others' experiences encourages us to persist, to face hardship, and to feel less alone. Biography tells us about choice, steadfastness, and chance.

The women whose lives are told in the Radcliffe Biographies have been teachers, adventurers, writers, scholars. The lives of some of them were hard pressed by poverty, cultural heritage, or physical handicap. Some of the women achieved fame; the vic-

Foreword

tories and defeats of others have been unsung. Some of the women lived and died years ago; others are our contemporaries. We can learn from all of them something of ourselves. In sponsoring this series, Radcliffe College is responding to the renewed interest of our society in exploring and understanding the experience of women.

The Radcliffe Biographies project found its inspiration in the publication in 1971 of *Notable American Women*, a scholarly encyclopedia sponsored by Radcliffe's Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America. We became convinced that some of the encyclopedia's essays should be expanded into full-length biographies, so that a wider audience could grasp the many contributions women have made to American life—an awareness of which is as yet by no means universal. It seemed appropriate that an institution dedicated to the higher education of women should initiate such a project, to hold a mirror up to the lives of particular women, to pay tribute to them, and so to deepen our understanding of them and of ourselves.

We have been joined in this project by two distinguished publishing houses and by a remarkable group of writers. I am grateful to them and to the editorial board—and particularly to Deane Lord, who first proposed the series, both in concept and in detail. Finally, I am happy to present this volume of the Radcliffe Biographies.

MATINA S. HORNER
President

Radcliffe College
Cambridge, Massachusetts

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introduction

We have described in the *Children of Crisis* books, and in the first volume of *Women of Crisis*, how we established contact with the first families we visited, in Louisiana and Georgia, and how, later on, we met other families—parents quite inclined to permit their children to tell us what was on their minds, and parents also not loath, usually, to add a few adult observations, a bonus of sorts.

This second volume of *Women of Crisis* draws upon these visits with families begun twenty years ago for *Children of Crisis* and continues the narrative of a segment of that work begun in the first volume. We have not been trying to extract statements from American citizens in order to construct self-important theories. Our nation's cultural landscape—yes, from “sea to shining sea”—is already cluttered, if not badly contaminated, by a large and constantly increasing mass of “findings”: the “data” of various social science research projects. Everyone's “attitudes” about everything have been, continue to be, “surveyed.” We have been declared a bundle of reflexes, organisms that respond to “drives,” a tangle of hidden and not-so-hidden psycho-

pathology. We have heard our poor called "culturally deprived" and "culturally disadvantaged," our ordinary working people described as "one-dimensional," as in possession of a "false consciousness," and dozens of other not-so-friendly labels, by critics who are more sparing with themselves and their own kind. The last thing we want to do is come up with a few more pushy, overwrought, wordy generalizations about America's people, and specifically, its women, who have been getting a good deal of attention lately—not always discerning or appropriate.

We have constantly been visiting one kind of home, then another kind. In Albuquerque, as in the Mississippi Delta or the metropolitan Boston area, we moved back and forth, from black homes to white ones, from Indian homes to Anglo ones, from poor and hardly well-off homes, to comfortable ones, indeed. Within the limits of our mode of work—quite decided limits, because we spend weeks, months, with individual families, whom we try to end up knowing fairly well—we hoped to gain some sense of how different children grow up in America, and also, how their mothers and fathers and various relatives fare. We have done what might be called cross-cultural, naturalistic observation. This book remains loyal to that mode of work.

A black teacher we knew in Alabama told us this in 1965—her reaction to the burgeoning literature about blacks: "I read all those articles and reports, and I wonder what's going on. The Negro is this, and the Negro is that. Who are the Negroes those experts are talking about? What did those experts do—go and hand their questions to some people: yes or no maybe? I shouldn't be so 'defensive,' I know. But I'm afraid of this: we'll get ourselves clear of the Klan and the White Citizens Councils, and pretty soon we'll find out there's another crowd of people after us, and this new crowd won't get everything right, either, and some of what they call us may even be worse than the swear words of the red-necks.

"To me, each person is different, and that holds for our colored as well as for the white. When I hear someone describing us, all of us, as brave and courageous, I'm almost as upset as

when I hear us called all the bad names we've been called here in Anniston, and everywhere else in my home state of Alabama. My daddy is a minister, and he says that every person is good and bad, though the percentages of each are different. Now, I don't like a lot of the preaching I used to hear from him; he's too kind to the white man, and he's always telling his congregation to be patient, to pray and wait for the Lord's answer. The 'answer' for us is to make our own answer—to say no to segregation and yes to our people's struggle for equality. But I'll say this: I'll stick with my father when he says that you should look at the person first, and only then should you think of his skin color or his name or his place of residence or his job or his birthplace. And what goes for 'his,' goes for 'hers.' After we've won a victory for our civil rights movement, we can start fighting for a lot of other people who don't get a good deal here in this country. These 'poor white' folk—I feel sorry for them sometimes: a diet of hate, when they themselves need better food and work and better homes, just as we do. And the women all over: black women and white women, southern belles and southern factory women and those southern women sitting at their desks typing and running the switchboards—they've got a few complaints! You'll find all kinds among all kinds, my grandmother used to say—and she couldn't read and she couldn't write, and she was the daughter of a slave!"

No doubt there are valuable ways of pulling together life's variousness into compact, suggestive statements. The point is to move from the particular person to the broader arc of humanity without violating the kind of truth that daughter of a slave knew in her bones. One old-fashioned and still rather lively, penetrating, and illuminating way of doing so is through the medium of a life-history (not to be confused with a case-history). Biographers know that through a person's story they can shed light on the stories of others, too. And novelists know that even a person imagined can do likewise—make the "real" seem closer at hand and more sharply focused: a paradox, and one of many in a world full of small as well as large ambiguities, ironies, inconsistencies,

incongruities. Any psychological theory, any sociological scheme of interpretation had better do justice to all that—to the complexity of human affairs—if it is to pass the muster of a knowing daughter of a slave, and of her granddaughter. Amid all the structuring of life into “periods,” “stages” of human development, with psychosocial variables and sociocultural factors, there is room for plain biographical presentation, with a vivid moment or two—stories of humor, of regret and sadness, of aspirations retained or dashed, of fears banished or never let go.

We have tried to shape what we have seen and heard into a kind of story—a life presented, with all the subdued tension and drama, the dignity, and inevitably the moments of fear and sadness, that characterize most lives. We have, so doing, compressed drastically remarks made in leisure. We have moved comments around a bit, placing statements made one time with those made another—not in order to rip words out of context, but for the sake of coherence and containment of presentation. The essential thrust is toward a reasonably accessible and suggestive “reading” of a given person’s life. The writers become mediators; through them another life reaches toward the reader, and if the work has been successful, stays with the reader as a guest, a “spirit,” whose mind and heart and soul have been registered upon the consciousness of distant strangers.

In the first volume of *Women of Crisis* we called upon our working experiences with five women: a black migrant worker; an Appalachian woman who had left her native soil, loved dearly, for an Ohio industrial city; a Chicana; an Eskimo woman; and a maid who attends to the demands of another woman’s home. In this volume we have continued to call upon our past work, only different parts of it. We lived and worked with Pueblo and Hopi women long enough to be puzzled by them, unnerved even, challenged by them, and quite frankly, enamored of them. On the reservations we visited (north of Santa Fe, New Mexico, and in the northeast quadrant of Arizona), there were several especially strong-minded and discerning women who kept a close watch on us, and did not hesitate at certain moments to put us

firmly in our place. Their view of the world was not that of the Anglo population nearby—but rather a view one might describe as wryly meditative and introspective. The Pueblos, of course, have had ample opportunity over the centuries to take the measure of Anglos. For centuries it has been New Mexico's Pueblos who have accommodated themselves adroitly to the Spanish, the Americans—all the while holding on to a particular kind of Indian sensibility. We lived quite near one Pueblo reservation north of Albuquerque. We traveled twice a week to another reservation farther north. We became especially involved with five Pueblo women whose children were guides of sorts to us—willing to take us at least part of the way into a spiritual realm rather different from the one we have learned to call our own.

In New Mexico, among the Pueblos, whom we came to know during our residence there, the contrast of moral, psychological, and again, spiritual climates became even more pronounced. Some Pueblos have traditionally held themselves back (to the utmost extent possible) from the constantly assertive, if not expansionist, presence of the Americans, and as well, such fellow Indians as the Navahos. Among the Pueblos we met, two families were unforgettable; and one woman has, for us, been a powerful teacher. From her we learned not only about “the Pueblo way,” but about ourselves—what we thought of life, what we hoped for, very much feared, couldn't bear to consider, or regarded more intently, perhaps, than we realized. We have tried to bring this woman to the reader; we have drawn upon her words and thoughts, her memories and her dreams, her observations and her ruminations.

Two other portraits came out of our effort, a long and hard one, to get some sense of how ordinary working people—in factories and shops and offices—manage to come to terms with their lives. In *The Middle Americans* (1971) we tried to convey how it goes for a policeman, a gas station attendant, a fireman, a school-teacher, a steamfitter, a druggist, a clerk—how it goes for *men* caught in the middle: not exactly poor, and certainly far from being rich, or even well off. The wives, mothers, grandmothers,

sisters, daughters of the men figured in the text, and even more so in the accompanying photographs. But the predominant focus, if not bias, was masculine—reflecting the fact that American women did not yet stand up for their rights as noticeably as they have since. (The interviews that paved the way for *The Middle Americans* were, of course, done in the 1960's.) Even now, as a matter of fact, it is our impression that the women's movement has not scored the same political and ideological success among the blue- and white-collar women we have known as among their upper-middle-class contemporaries. Sometimes there has been a decided counterreaction: an insistence by women upon upholding the traditional "position" of their own sex. Here the issue of class comes in—a perception by working-class women that a number of well-to-do women are talking to themselves, rather than considering how others feel, far removed in "background," in assumptions or concerns.

In the seminars we have held with college women, we have observed constantly the distance of those women, psychologically and sociologically and culturally, from the working-class women of the country. Often it seems easier for an undergraduate, or indeed, an active member of the women's movement, to feel closer to black women in a ghetto, or Chicano women in a distant barrio, than to women living nearer at home—in a so-called streetcar suburb, or in a factory town not far away. Needless to say, any number of women activists have known the problem all along and all too well—the reluctance of many other women to see things in the way their would-be political or ideological advocates have come to regard as desirable. We felt it important to go back for additional conversations with certain working-class families—with the women who have, as a matter of fact, always talked to us the most in those families. We were, a decade ago, rather too anxious to heed the recommendations of those women. The woman who appears in Part Five of this book told us this in 1969: "We're just average housewives on this street. I don't think we have any opinions, one way or the other. All we try to do is take care of the home. If you want to know what we think here, you'll

have to come on the weekend, when my husband is around. It's the men who sound off, after they have some beer in them. I'm not even curious about the news most of the time, to be honest. I have so much to do, from six in the morning to ten or eleven at night, that I can't stop to listen to those politicians, or those know-it-all commentators. Maybe it will change when my kids get older. I don't know. But right now all I dream of is sitting in the sun, listening to some soft, relaxing music!"

Actually, she became considerably more "political" a few years on, much to her own surprise. She and others very much like her make up the majority of American women—married, with or without children, of "average means," and with no more than a high school education. We've tried here to indicate some of the dilemmas such women face as they go through one day, then another. The bank teller who appears in Part Two and the self-described "typical suburban housewife" have turned out to be, in our experience, both *sui generis* and as "typical," perhaps, as anyone can be of an entire class of people. Each of us survives that tension—the particularity of our selves as against the attributes we share with others who live much as we do. We have not, we hope, tried to ignore the distinctive personal characteristics in the two women just mentioned. They deserve better than sociological labels such as "middle Americans," a feminine version, or women of "the lower-middle" or "middle-middle" class. They deserve better than membership in categories such as "executive woman" or "political activist" or "white-collar worker" or "housewife." The woman who has been going to a bank for years, and (while there) taking in money and handing it out, minute after minute, hours each day, five days a week, has something to tell us about her situation as a bank teller. But she also is a woman with her very own road to walk—with family, friends, and quite definitely, the men she has met. The suburban woman would be the first to admit that she isn't (who *is*, once one looks hard enough?) the completely unremarkable ("average," "ordinary," "plain") person she will sometimes claim to be. She also has a lot to tell us—about what, most

likely, obtains in ranch house homes that belong to communities where factory workers and civil servants overwhelmingly predominate. But she also is a woman who has cherished reveries of her very own.

The Pueblo woman in Part Four once told us to stop asking about habits and customs and rituals and beliefs, and instead ask about the "pictures" that occasionally came across her mind. In a quite typical suburb a woman hurrying from the refrigerator to the table, thence to the washing machine, thence to the station wagon, and back to another electrical gadget, the vacuum cleaner—with a break or two at the television—is not without some of those "pictures," however different from the ones mentioned by someone standing on an Arizona mesa. "Oh, you want to hear what's on my mind!" we once heard the suburban woman who appears in Part Five say—her statement a mixture of surprise and wry self-effacement and decided pleasure, and, not least, a touch of suspicion. She would, thereafter, demur—tell us that she had no time at all to have anything on her mind. But she was annoyed with herself for saying that, and was quite willing to turn around, see herself differently, and perhaps give us, the writers and readers of this world, a bit of sanction: "I guess there's no one who doesn't have her thoughts, while she's rushing about, keeping the home in shape, and watching over the kids and getting ready for the mister's return home. I don't have much time to think. I don't read much of anything. The paper comes, but do I have a chance to read it? No! I have to admit, though—I'll daydream. In the car, I will think about how it's going for everyone in the family—myself included. I always tell myself that I shouldn't ever think of myself at all, considering all the others in the family who need attention. But I'll slip up every once in a while. Maybe we should know it about each other—that everyone has a dream or two in the heart that she carries around!"

Her dreams are part of the stuff of her life—a larger part than she would sometimes admit. So with other women more involved with the world outside the twentieth-century suburban landscape—the world of business, of finance, of advertising and com-

munications. There is no one type of “executive woman”; as with the other women we have chosen, one thinks of the various kindred spirits. The phrase “executive woman” costs a good deal, because it categorizes women on the basis of the level of employment attained—only one theme, of course, in their respective lives. Businesswomen most certainly face special problems, and with one portrait we can only begin to suggest them. The particular woman we have “written up” knew we were, at the same time, talking with other women, whose lives had a rather different momentum than hers. She was herself interested in the contrasts she knew we were seeing. At rock bottom, however, there are certain issues that *women* struggle with, no matter their class or race—especially when many of today’s women executives have risen rather rapidly from working-class backgrounds. Similar experiences connect women destined eventually to be separated by the circumstances of life. The social and economic rise described in Part One had characteristics which even rather poor women would find familiar: the continuing conflict between feminist ideals and the “reality” of living with and working with particular men.

With the increasing momentum of the women’s movement in recent years, businesses of all kinds began to look twice at their records, their responsibilities and obligations—or maybe, alas, at the risks entailed by discrimination on the basis of sex as well as race. For banks an obvious move was to select a few tellers of long service and groom them for managerial positions. The bank teller in our book might have been one such candidate, had she not worked in a downtown or central bank (which started hiring women graduates of business schools nearby) and had she not, also, through a marriage, cemented (in a strange way) her relationship to her own background. She may never have become a bank manager, but she knew how to appraise the other two women who, out of nowhere, it seemed, arrived upon “her” scene. She understood them as “different” in certain respects—but also as “fellow women.”

Perhaps she has best put our case for individual portraits,