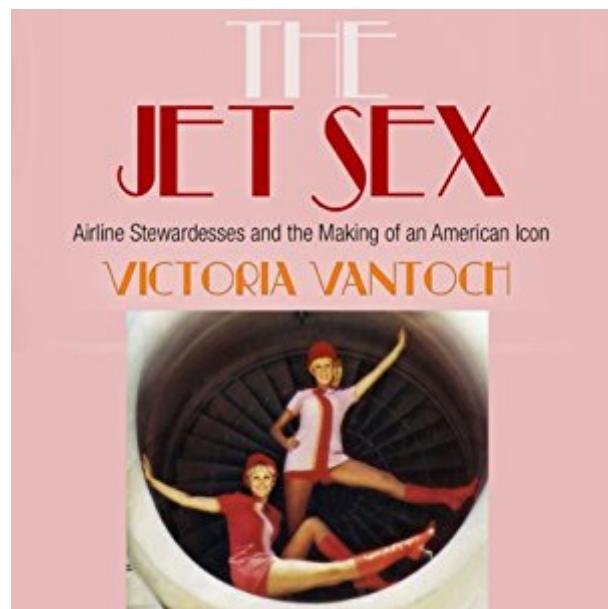


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The Jet Sex: Airline Stewardesses And The Making Of An American Icon



Synopsis

In the years after World War II, the airline stewardess became one of the most celebrated symbols of American womanhood. Stewardesses appeared on magazine covers, on lecture circuits, and in ad campaigns for everything from milk to cigarettes. Airlines enlisted them to pose for publicity shots, mingle with international dignitaries, and even serve (in sequined minidresses) as the official hostesses at Richard Nixon's inaugural ball. Embodying mainstream America's perfect woman, the stewardess was an ambassador of femininity and the American way both at home and abroad. Young, beautiful, unmarried, intelligent, charming, and nurturing, she inspired young girls everywhere to set their sights on the sky. In *The Jet Sex*, Victoria Vantoch explores in rich detail how multiple forces-business strategy, advertising, race, sexuality, and Cold War politics-cultivated an image of the stewardess that reflected America's vision of itself, from the wholesome girl-next-door of the 1940s to the cosmopolitan glamour girl of the Jet Age to the sexy playmate of the 1960s. Though airlines marketed her as the consummate hostess-an expert at pampering her mostly male passengers, while mixing martinis and allaying their fears of flying-she bridged the gap between the idealized 1950s housewife and the emerging "working woman." On the international stage, this select cadre of women served as ambassadors of their nation in the propaganda clashes of the Cold War. The stylish Pucci-clad American stewardess represented the United States as middle class and consumer oriented-hallmarks of capitalism's success and a stark contrast to her counterpart at Aeroflot, the Soviet national airline. As the apotheosis of feminine charm and American careerism, the stewardess subtly bucked traditional gender roles and paved the way for the women's movement. Drawing on industry archives and hundreds of interviews, this vibrant cultural history offers a fresh perspective on the sweeping changes in twentieth-century American life. The book is published by University of Pennsylvania Press.

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Customer Reviews

I realized I wrote a review on my blog but failed to do so here! I'm sorry but my review will be rather long and full of details I found interesting! While in college, I focused primarily on my own specific studies, namely British Romantic, Victorian, and Gothic literature. Within these subjects, I developed an interest in women writers and a revision of canon that includes works written by people who aren't white men. I have an interest in feminism today, too, but I am woefully less knowledgeable about more recent history and perhaps my distaste for how second wave feminist figures have reacted to broader issues and the inclusion of women outside of their strict definitions. I feel like reading this book has reminded me that it is still important to know the progression of the feminist movement while still maintaining my own particular beliefs and hopes for the movement as it currently exists. One of the first things the book did that I immediately loved was address how "pretty" women (the interest in beautifying and using cosmetics, especially) aren't typically associated with "serious history" (7). They aren't. I'm glad it was stated so bluntly because it forces the reader to confront biases immediately and it already begins a discussion about how beauty might be read as superficiality. And the writer does not merely let the reader come to the conclusion that this is unfair; Vantoch says, "Beauty, gender, and sex are not frivolous sidebars to 'real history' - they are major forces that have framed global debates and shaped the nation's past" (7). I especially appreciated the stories included in the text that added a personal touch to the broader history of stewardesses from Ellen Church to Mildred Jackson and others.

When passenger flights started to become common in the 1930s, the co-pilot was the one who helped carry luggage and passed out blankets. As the number of flights and passengers increased, the airlines realized they needed a dedicated employee in the cabin to assist with passengers. The turbulent nature of early flight meant many passengers became airsick and so the first flight attendants were trained nurses. Since nurses were almost all women at the time, so were flight attendants. This quirk of history has created a fascinating test tube in which to observe how the job evolved and how we look at the person doing the job. Victoria Vantoch has examined the social history of flight attendants through interviews, advertising, newspaper and magazine articles, and

found that how flight attendants have been perceived and how they've been used, reveals a lot about America in the mid 20th century. The job morphed from nurse/hostess to waitress in the sky to ambassador to the world. During the Cold War, American stewardesses represented our superiority over the Russians by being more attractive than Aeroflot stewardesses. They could have their equality, what was it worth if their women weren't as good looking as ours? With the 1960s came youth culture and miniskirts and ads that featured stewardesses inviting customers to "Fly me!" Another ad at the time assured the public that the stewardesses (or perhaps the planes themselves) "really move our tail for you!" At the same time, flight attendants were beginning to organize and protest the sexist rules that required them to quit by age 32, be fired if they became pregnant, resign if they married, be fired if they missed their required weight standards. Something had to give.

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