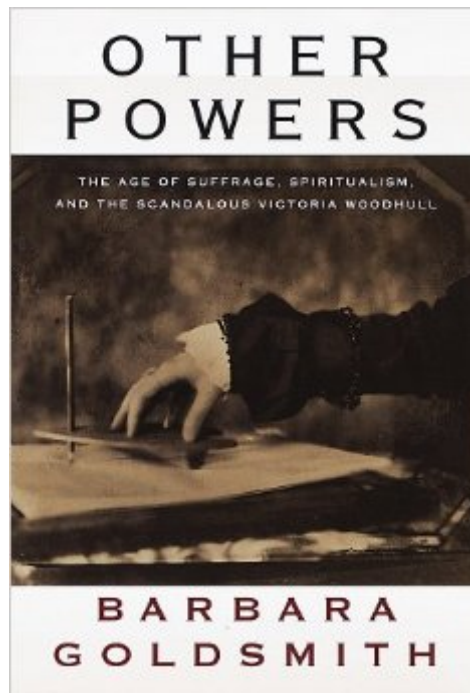


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Other Powers: The Age Of Suffrage, Spiritualism, And The Scandalous Victoria Woodhull



Synopsis

From the author of *Little Gloria . . . Happy at Last*, a stunning combination of history and biography that interweaves the stories of some of the most important social, political, and religious figures of America's Victorian era with the courageous and notorious life of Victoria Woodhull, to tell the story of her astonishing rise and fall and rise again. This is history at its most vivid, set amid the battle for woman suffrage, the Spiritualist movement that swept across the nation (10 million strong by midcentury) in the age of Radical Reconstruction following the Civil War, and the bitter fight that pitted black men against white women in the struggle to win the right to vote. The cast includes: Victoria Woodhull, billed as a clairvoyant and magnetic healer--a devotee and priestess of those "other powers" that were gaining acceptance across America--in her father's traveling medicine show . . . spiritual and financial advisor to Commodore Vanderbilt . . . the first woman to address a joint session of Congress, where--backed by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony--she presents an argument that women, as citizens, should have the right to vote . . . becoming the "high priestess" of free love in America (fiercely believing the then-heretical idea that women should have complete sexual equality with men) . . . making a run for the presidency of the United States against Horace Greeley and Ulysses S. Grant, and felled when her past career as a prostitute finally catches up with her. Tennessee Claflin, sister of Victoria, also a clairvoyant, mistress to Commodore Vanderbilt . . . indicted for manslaughter in connection with the death of a woman in a bogus cancer clinic run by her father during the Civil War. Henry Ward Beecher, the great preacher of Brooklyn's Plymouth Church--the most influential church in the country . . . brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe . . . caught up in the scandal of the century (first revealed in Victoria Woodhull's own newspaper): his affair with Lib Tilton, the wife of his parishioner and best friend. Lib Tilton, angelic, obedient wife of Theodore Tilton who believed her philandering husband's insistence that she was sexless and arid--until Henry Ward Beecher fell under her thrall and their affair exploded into the shocking Tilton-Beecher Scandal Trial that dominated the headlines for two years, made radical inroads toward the idea of acceptable sexual relations between men and women, and inspired the first questioning of the sanctity of the middle-class American Victorian home. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a discontented housewife who, bolstered by the great black activist Frederick Douglass, put forth a Declaration of Rights and Sentiments to empower women at the first woman's rights convention in Seneca Falls. Anna Dickinson, lecturer extraordinaire, feminist heroine to thousands of women across the country, the model for Verena Tarrant in Henry James's *The Bostonians*. Horace Greeley, editor of the *Tribune*, whose campaign for the presidency of the United States was centered on his opposition to the policies of

Reconstruction . . . who helped to undermine the suffrage movement by writing editorials denouncing Victoria Woodhull. Anthony Comstock, U.S. special postal agent, enthusiastically in charge of stamping out obscenity and pornography (he compared erotic feelings to "electrical wires connected to the inner dynamite of obscene thoughts"), who arrested Victoria Woodhull and Tennessee Claflin on charges of sending obscene material through the mail and was determined to bring his crusade against vice to the forefront of American thought, and to be hailed as a "paladin of American purity." All of these people play major roles in this compelling book. Barbara Goldsmith draws on ten years of research and letters, diaries, newspaper clippings, and court transcripts to tell the story of a woman who embodied--and lived--the tumults that were shaping the America of her time.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Goldsmith has done a real service with this book. It is more or less the history of the 19th-century women's suffrage movement, with special emphasis on the influence of Spiritualism and on the life of Victoria Woodhull (of whom I had never before heard, even though I regard myself as fairly well-versed in American history). The book is full of fascinating characters and events, most of which are given unconscionably short shrift in our educational system. Goldsmith fleshes out the stories and personalities of many people who were previously just vague images in my mind, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Henry Ward Beecher. It seems from this book that female suffrage could have occurred as much as 50 years earlier than it did, if it hadn't been for a couple of missteps on the part of the supporters of suffrage. For one thing, there was a bitter division among

the suffragettes about whether the female right to vote should be part of the movement for enfranchising the recently freed slaves. Sadly, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, despite her many wonderful and even heroic contributions to the movement, comes across as an out-and-out racist on this issue, and probably damaged the very cause to which she devoted her life. Secondly, some of the foremost spokespeople for female suffrage got caught up in unrelated, controversial issues, and even in personal sexual scandals. If you have an interest in American history, you may very well have the same reaction I did while reading this book. Almost every other page, I found myself exclaiming, "Hey, I didn't know that! How come that's not in any of the history books?" The only reason I gave this book four stars instead of five is that I think the organization and focus could be a little better.

This book is huge at 560 pgs; of course, I guess that's nothing compared to these past couple Harry Potters so perhaps I should just say, "substantial." It covers literally Woodhull's entire life (and a good deal of her sister's, Tennessee Claflin), as well as offering an in-depth view of the political and social climate at the time. It devotes a particular amount of time to the changing nuances of her "free love" doctrine and other participants in that movement (one which was, most certainly, ahead of its time--we don't generally think of Victorian times and Free Love in the same boat these days), and the Beecher-Tilton adultery trial. I found the book to be fascinating from a suffrage-history POV, contrasting events depicted/documentated within with my memories of the "women's movement" from history classes. Goldsmith isn't afraid to throw stones (mostly by quoting their own less than tolerant words) at suffrage icons Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B Anthony, and others, in the course of depicting an unbiased view of the debate that raged for both women's and black men's suffrage at the time. She is both sympathetic to Victoria and Tennessee (she does a very good job in depicting the bizarre, abusive, nomadic carnival-like nature of their childhoods and family life while growing up), and willing to point out their flaws and transgressions (both women engaged in prostitution, blackmail, and other acts of "questionable ethics"). There's not as much focus on the Spiritualism movement, though the overview is thorough and the author depicts in great detail the ways in which Victoria and Tennessee were involved in it as trance speakers and predictors of the future, both from a very young age.

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