



## Perfect Wives in Ideal Homes: The Story of Women in the 1950s

*Virginia Nicholson*

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## Perfect Wives in Ideal Homes: The Story of Women in the 1950s Virginia Nicholson

In Perfect Wives in Ideal Homes, Virginia Nicholson tells the story of women in the 1950s: a time before the Pill, when divorce spelled scandal and two-piece swimsuits caused mass alarm.

Turn the page back to the mid-twentieth century, and discover a world peopled by women with radiant smiles, clean pinafores and gleaming coiffures; a promised land of batch-baking, maraschino cherries and brightly hued plastic. A world where the darker side of the decade encompasses rampant prostitution, a notorious murder, and the threat of nuclear disaster.

Perfect Wives in Ideal Homes reconstructs the real 1950s, through the eyes of the women who lived it. Step back in time to where our grandmothers scrubbed their doorsteps, cared for their families, lived, laughed, loved and struggled.

This is their story.

## Perfect Wives in Ideal Homes: The Story of Women in the 1950s Details

Date : Published March 5th 2015 by Viking

ISBN : 9780670921317

Author : Virginia Nicholson

Format : Hardcover 384 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, History, Feminism



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Virginia Nicholson**

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## From Reader Review Perfect Wives in Ideal Homes: The Story of Women in the 1950s for online ebook

### Damaskcat says

This is a fascinating look at how women lived in the 1950s. If, like me, you were a child in this era the book is like a trip down memory lane and a wallow in nostalgia. But were the 1950s really the golden age that they seem to have been to many? I suspect that after the austerity of the years during and immediately after World War II, the increasing prosperity of the 1950s seemed like heaven. It seemed as though the weather was always sunny, people were always in a good mood and everyone was happy.

But how did some of the women living through that era see it? The author has taken the memories of women from all social classes and woven them into a multi coloured picture of daily life for women. Only a minority of married women worked and it was expected that women would hand in their resignations when they married. This situation still applied in the Civil Service for example until the 1970s, where a woman had to resign on marriage though she could be immediately re-employed in the same job.

Women were expected to find their fulfilment in the home and bringing up children and it was no good complaining you were bored and unfulfilled. As a consequence housework and home-making became an art form and women invested the whole of themselves in having the neatest, cleanest and most up to date home that they could possibly afford. With hire purchase being the way to buy those expensive items, many got into debt in order to 'keep up with the Joneses'.

Reading this book and remembering with a certain amount of nostalgia how it was then, I also thanked my lucky stars I had enlightened parents who took it for granted that I would have a career and not just a job and that even though I would probably marry I would always be able to support myself financially. I realise after reading this book how uncommon such an attitude was at the time.

It was interesting reading about the fashions of the times and how women always wore hats and gloves and aprons. My own mother appears to have been something of a maverick in all these respects. She hated aprons, never wore hats except to funerals and weddings and never wore gloves unless it was cold outside.

Whether you lived through the 1950s or are interested in social history this is a fascinating and well researched read with lots of notes on the text, a bibliography and an index and a selection of illustrations which truly bring this fascinating age to life.

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### Heather says

Intellectually, I know that women have made a huge amount of progress since the 1950s, but the interviews and case studies in this book really bring it home. Bonus: from a UK perspective! This was truly a good read.

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### Nancy Oakes says

A long, more fleshed-out look at this book can be found at my online reading journal here -- otherwise, carry

on.

Perfect Wives in Ideal Homes focuses on the lives of women in the UK from both working-class and privileged backgrounds during the 1950s. Using a number of different sources -- diaries, interviews, memoirs, archives, newspapers, periodicals, the web etc., -- Virginia Nicholson offers her readers a very up-close and personal look at how women dealt with "some of the conflicting pressures and strains under which they lived" during this decade. For some women, it was a time of "ambitions, dreams and fulfillment," while for others, their stories combine to present a "narrative of fears, frustrations and deep unhappiness." It is a spellbinding read; I hated having to put this book down for any reason.

Nicholson examines the "tug of war" that was the "daily reality" of life for women during this decade. As she notes, it was

"between society and the individual, prohibition and permissiveness, conformity and independence, passivity and ambition. Between identity -- and the empty shell."

It is through most of these stories of "fears, frustrations and deep unhappiness" that the author skillfully finds a connection between these women -- from factory workers to debutantes presented at court to Princess Margaret -- that of being hemmed in by their family backgrounds or the expectations of society. These women faced a number of "conflicting pressures and strains," encountered through sexism, class pressures, the reality of married life based mainly on the expectations of their spouses, and in the case of an immigrant from Jamaica, the realities of racial prejudice.

One of the most interesting sections in this book is on education: since "society had determined that woman's place was in the home," and that "getting your man" was mattered most, a great deal of emphasis in a young woman's education went into preparing them in skills appropriate to their married futures. For example, many girls had to take classes in such useful courses as "dairying, horticulture, cookery, dressmaking, mothercraft, and housecraft." Some girls from "segregated working-class communities" such as mining villages in the northeast, were lucky if they could overcome their parents' ideas that education was wasted on girls, since "They only get married." As the author notes, for these families,

"Educational deprivation was cyclical; stay-at-home mums lacked the vision or understanding to see how better schooling might advantage daughters otherwise fated to follow in their footsteps."

Yet, even for those who managed to make their way through university, the prevailing point of view was that educated women were "NOT sexy," or even perhaps "spinsters or (whisper it) lesbians."

And speaking of gay women, Nicholson also touches on these women who had to fly "under the radar" because of the "almost pathological fear of lesbianism" that existed during these times. In one case, a woman was committed to an "insane asylum" where after having confessed that she "had feelings for women," was sent for "aversion therapy," that "wrecked her for months."

Perfect Wives in Ideal Homes also reveals a decade full of women's angst and emotional turmoil from the highest echelons of British society on down the ladder. The author quotes widely from several women she interviewed (and from other sources, many of these interviews and diaries) and adds in her own commentary to build a picture of the decade. She makes it clear that while some women seemed happy with their marriages and their lives, there were plenty of others who were not. She also manages to incorporate how

communities were built among women for friendship and for support. But, as Nicholson also reminds us, the sixties were right around the corner, and things were on the verge of looking up -- and many of these same women laid the groundwork for a better life ahead for the next generation.

Perfect Wives in Ideal Homes is a captivating read. There are parts of this book where the author sort of rambles, and I felt several times that it could have been pared down quite a bit, but overall, it's a really good, well-written social/cultural history that I couldn't put down. I'm not from the UK, but the book certainly held my undivided attention and kept me turning pages.

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### **Frances says**

Interesting look at the lives of women in the 1950's and expectations both from and of them. It shows the lives of several women from the beginning of the decade to the end, accompanied by changes in wider society.

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### **Mills College Library says**

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### **Ruth Dipple says**

This is an interesting book based largely on anecdotes, but the world it describes will be familiar to any girl who grew up in the 50's or 60's. In fact there are traces of the same mindset still around: the choices facing women even today are much more circumscribed than those facing men and always will be as long as women produce the next generation.

I did think that the tone of this book was sometimes patronising - 'poor dears, allowing their lives to be dictated by others' expectations' - when most people experience this regardless of gender.

Still I would like to read this author's book about women in the 1940's.

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### **Melissa says**

This was great, like sitting down with a dozen old ladies to hear about their fascinating lives in the 50's

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### **Heidi says**

Absolutely Amazing, very well written and extremely enjoyable.

Was so interesting and covered an amazing range of topics, real peoples lives and there was never a dull moment.

I couldn't put this book down!!!

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### **Tracey says**

I stumbled across this in Waterstones a few months ago and couldn't resist the inviting front cover and, being partial to a dose of social history, its promise of "The story of women in the 1950s". Before buying this book, I had no knowledge of the author but on doing some research discovered to my delight that she is the great niece of Virginia Woolf. Having recently watched the excellent BBC dramatisation "Life in Squares" about the lives of the Bloomsbury Group, I had gained a great insight into Ms Nicholson's literary heritage and so had high hopes for her book.

Perfect Wives in Ideal Homes is Ms Nicholson's fourth social history work. It is divided into interesting subsections such as 'When I Grow Up', 'Queen of her Castle' and 'Paved with Gold' and draws from the recollections of women of the time. Ms Nicholson's easy writing style drew me in and I found myself laughing, crying and raging in equal measure. As an independent minded woman with feminist tendencies, I was shocked by some of the restrictions society imposed on women at that time. Whilst I realise that the serious study of history requires us to put aside personal judgement, I found this extremely difficult to do, especially when confronted with some of the stories of life at that time.

I was surprised too by just how many women entered marriage and motherhood believing that this was all that life had to offer them. My own grandmother who was a young wife and mother during this time has often talked of her life in that 'rose-tinted' way so many of us do when we recount days gone by. Whilst I don't doubt she and many other women were content and enjoyed the security that marriage brought them, the evidence in Ms Nicholson's book shows that for many others domestic life was a disappointment, and was far removed from that portrayed in the saccharine toned adverts of the day. Many were denied or persuaded out of pursuing academic careers as they were not thought the right environment for a woman.

There were of course benefits for many women of the decade. The shortages of the war years were coming to an end and shopping became a pastime, particularly for the more affluent who were able to purchase luxury items both for themselves and for the home. The advent of birth control meant that women were able to take control of their bodies and have a say in the number of children they gave birth to, a right denied to previous generations.

Perfect Wives in Ideal Homes is a hugely informative and thought provoking read. The author's use of women's experiences brings the decade vividly to life and if I have learnt anything from it, it is that I am grateful for the choices and freedoms that I have as a woman today. I can't recommend this book enough to anyone who has an interest in this period or in social history in general. An excellent read.

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### **Penny says**

Didn't know whether to laugh or cry at a lot of this book. Absolutely fascinating look at the life of women in the 1950's.

I admire Nicholson's research compiling this - she's clearly interviewed some of the women as well as using resources such as Mass Observation diaries. We have a whole range of women wanting to tell their stories, women as diverse as debutantes, Butlin's Red Coats, air hostesses, prostitutes and factory workers.

It's so hard to think how different things were for women not that long ago, but the stirrings of emancipation are definitely in the air.

There's quite a lot of repetition, but some women's stories are followed right through the book and if they haven't been mentioned for a while we get told who they are again. I found this slightly irritating. But overall it's a great read.

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### **Sue says**

I was born in the 1950s and enjoy reading about this period. The author follows the fortunes of a large cast of characters throughout the decade. She talks of their upbringing, their education, their opportunities (or lack of them), their careers and so on.

It is shocking to remember just how curtailed most women's lives were. Only 1% of girls went to university, and most of those were from middle class families. Working class girls were expected to take menial jobs for a couple of years until they married, then to stop work to run the home. Those working class girls who were bright enough, and who could obtain the permission of their families, might go to university but they often felt like fish out of water, not belonging to the class where family connections and knowing the right way to behave were everything.

However, upper class girls were not much better off. The author describes the debutante season vividly, with girls being primped and dressed and driven to the right parties at the right hotels with the right families, and they were expected to marry, or at least to be paired off with someone suitable, by the end of the season.

One interesting section, albeit a short one, was on gay women. Women knew very little about sex in the first place, but even less about how to deal with any lesbian feelings. This was the era where a woman could not have a bank loan or a mortgage in her own name. She could not even arrange Hire Purchase to buy a washing machine without her husband's signature. So how did female gay couples manage to set up a home?

It's interesting to think that this culture of women belonging in the home and the objection to women having a career was in part a backlash created when men came home from WW2. During the 1940s women were told that it was their patriotic duty to work in factories, on the farms, doing anything the men would have done. They were sold the idea that their children would be taken care of in state nurseries and of course would not suffer from being separated from their mother all day. Then the men came home and wanted their jobs back. So women were told All Change - your children need you at home - to go out to work is an abandonment of your natural duties as a mother. The myth of the perfect housewife in the ideal home was born. Propaganda to get women out of the home, then more propaganda to get them back inside again.

Don't be fooled by the pretty cover or the ironic title. This book will make you angry. And so you should be.

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### **Kirsty says**

Really enjoyed this. Fascinating, well-written account of women's lives in the 1950s with loads of social history and interviews. You think you know what it was like for women then but it's mind boggling to think that pretty much no women tried to go to university at that time and Oxbridge wouldn't award women degrees!

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**Erica Chambers says**

Not often I give five stars - but this is a marvellous book.

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**Carolyn Harris says**

In Perfect Wives in Ideal Homes: The Story Of Women In The 1950's, Virginia Nicholson, author of Millions Like Us: Women's Lives in the Second World War and Singled Out: How Two Million Women Survived without Men After the First World War, provides a social history of women's lives in Britain in the 1950s. Popular culture expected them to be Perfect Wives in Ideal Homes but whether the women profiled in Nicholson's book lived in palaces or council houses, their homes rarely conformed to ideals. Throughout the decade, the two most prominent women in Britain were Queen Elizabeth II, whose marriage and motherhood appeared to conform to 1950s expectations and Princess Margaret who struggled in the face of overwhelming pressure to "settle down" with a suitable husband.

For the full review, see <http://www.royalhistorian.com/friday-...>

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**Penny Hill says**

Really interesting and very enjoyable. Some surprising lessons included discovering I was married on anniversary of Queen's coronation!

The social history was fascinating. London was so very different as I guess were many cities. I loved the aspirations of so many of the women some achieving their dreams and fighting the system whilst others slipped into a more traditional way of life. What would we have done? I think women still have these dilemmas to some degree.

So much in this book, politics, education, social history, royalty.....a real step back in time. My reservations were that it is possibly longer than it needed to be and needed a bit more focus. I found it hard to keep up with so many different women. Had they been mentioned before etc and wanted to get to know some of them. As a result I picked it up and put it down rather than being enveloped by the book. Less is more I think but I guess she wanted to get all her hard research in and who can blame her! A good read.

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