

# Remembering Carolyn Heilbrun



Many readers of *The Women's Review of Books* were saddened to learn of the death of pioneering feminist scholar Carolyn Heilbrun. For us on the staff, losing her means losing a part of our history: She was instrumental in founding the *Women's Review* and served as one of our editorial advisers from the very beginning, putting us in touch with potential writers and subscribers, and writing often herself. We will miss her intelligence, her creativity, and her insight.

In July, Heilbrun contributed an article to our special issue about Women Aging. At 77, she was the oldest contributor to the issue, which she emphasized in our editorial discussions with her. In the article, she talked (not for the first time, as readers of her book *The Last Gift of Time* knew) about making the choice to continue living beyond age 70. She wrote of her constant awareness that she might at any moment fall victim to "a devastating, unanticipated assault from some bodily failure," saying, "If each day is a loan from eternity, one spends it with the joy known to gamblers betting everything on a last roll of the dice. The payoff is intensity." At some point, though, the intensity must have failed her. "I have always believed that, over 70, one should be as free to choose one's death as one must, earlier, be free to choose whether or not to give birth," she stated. In October, she committed suicide.

Her decision has shaken her community of admirers, many of whom wrote to us at the *Women's Review*. Anne Eggebroten, of the UCLA Center for the Study of Women, calls Heilbrun "the pre-eminent literary feminist of the latter 20th century, writing both fiction and feminist cultural analysis." She compares waking to Heilbrun's obituary in the newspaper to what it must have been like waking to Virginia Woolf's, although she points out that Heilbrun managed what Woolf could not "when she carved out for herself a place in the English department of Columbia University. Instead of retiring quietly in 1992, she left Columbia in a blaze of protest at the entrenched patriarchal values of the men she had worked with for 32 years, telling the *New York Times* in an interview, 'When I spoke up for women's issues, I was made to feel unwelcome in my own department, kept off crucial committees, ridiculed, ignored.'"

Heilbrun was born in East Orange, New Jersey, in 1926 and spent her childhood in Manhattan, "roller skating for hours or devouring biographies," as she told an interviewer from Wellesley College, from which she graduated in 1947. She met her husband, James Heilbrun, while he was a student at Harvard, and they married the evening before he left for service in World War II. They had three children. She received her doctorate in literature in 1959 and began teaching at Columbia in 1960, where she



© Photo courtesy of Columbia University

*Life Beyond Sixty* (1997). Only after receiving tenure from Columbia in 1972 did she reveal she was also the creator of Kate Fansler, the English professor-heroine of a series of mystery novels written under the pseudonym Amanda Cross.

"She was my literary idol," said Barbara Levy, a teacher of writing at Brandeis University and Harvard Extension. "Heilbrun began writing feminist criticism, mixing personal information with literary insights, at a time when her colleagues had been trained, as had she, in what was then called the New Criticism. The New Critics focused solely on text. Any context, even a knowledge of the author's life, was considered extraneous." Adds Susan McGee Bailey, executive director of the Wellesley Centers for Women, which Heilbrun supported enthusiastically, "For me, her books challenging prevailing notions of 'women's place' were beacons of sanity. Her understanding of our commitment to research that can touch the lives of all women was a source of inspiration and energy."

Heilbrun had an extraordinary influence even on those she had never met. As Murphy Henry, a *Women's Review* reader told us "with a sad heart,"

I subscribed to *The Women's Review of Books* years ago because I saw Carolyn Heilbrun occasionally wrote for you.... Her writings were crucial to my understanding of feminism and put me on a path leading to a master's in women's studies, a small newsletter called *Women in Bluegrass*—that would be bluegrass music—and finally to a book in progress about women in bluegrass for the University of Illinois Press. I had hoped to send her a copy, so she could know how far her influence reached. I understand her death was all about choice, and I respect that, or at least I'm trying to, but I so wish she were still around.

Back in August, Heilbrun contacted

natives of California offered only very sporadic organized resistance to white incursion. Most of the tribes were nomadic hunter-gatherers who lived in close alignment with their environment, and despite periodic clashes with other tribes, they were ill-equipped, both physically and spiritually, for any form of systematic warfare.

Interestingly enough, female ethnographers, among them Theodora Kroeber, the novelist Ursula LeGuin's mother, were often the ones to publicize the anthropological data that could preserve some memory of these dying cultures. Kroeber's wonderful small monograph, *Isi in Two Worlds: A Biography of the Last Wild Indian in North America* provides a wrenching portrait of the last remaining Yahi (Yana) Indian. And in my own small town of St. Helena, Yolande Beard wrote a slim volume on *The Wappo*, still one of the very few studies of this tiny indigenous tribe.

Such a rich and varied—and now nearly lost—culture should not be dismissed, even by accidental oversight or inattention to language.

Judith Rose  
St. Helena, California/  
Meadville, Pennsylvania

Rebecca Steinitz responds:

Ignorance is no excuse, but I must confess that I had never heard the term "Digger Indians," and so I simply followed Bird's usage without questioning it. Obviously this was a mistake, for which I apologize.

## **The Women's Review of Books welcomes letters to the editor.**

Mail your letters to Amy Hoffman,  
Editor in Chief, *Women's Review of  
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Back in August, Heilbrun contacted us with an idea for a review. As it turns out, her essay about *Beautiful Shadow: A Life of Patricia Highsmith* is probably one of the last things she wrote. Fittingly, it combines her interest in biography, particularly in writing women's lives, and in mystery novels. We publish it with pride and grief.

—Amy Hoffman  
Editor in Chief

