Grace Murray Hopper

WOMEN OF WISDOM
COMPUTER SCIENCE
MATHEMATICS
SCIENCE & TECH

BY LYNN GILBERT

WOMEN OF WISDOM SERIES:
PORTRAITS AND STORIES
OF TRAILBLAZERS WHO
TRANSFORMED OUR WORLD

Women of Wisdom

Grace Murray Hopper

By
LYNN GILBERT

Published by
LYNN GILBERT

Excerpted from *Particular Passions: Talks With Women Who Have Shaped Our Times*

DEDICATION

To the women of the past, who made a difference,
the women of today, who keep the goal of equality aloft,
and the women of tomorrow, in whom we entrust our future.

— Lynn Gilbert

Contents

Preface

BY LYNN GILBERT

In 1976, when I was asked to photograph Louise Nevelson for the Pace Gallery, I went to her studio to meet her and was dazzled. Her house on Spring Street was very spare but very ordered. One could see the disciplined structure that dictated the way she lives. Surrounded by the amazing work of her own hands, she created her own atmosphere, her own environment. That day, she had an extraordinary outfit on—a Chinese robe over an American couture gown. A silver African necklace around her neck, a black velvet riding hat, those clodhopper space shoes. The effect was bizarre, yet right. Feeling the tremendous energy and focus of her personality, I was deeply moved.

Back home after the session, I said to myself: There are other women like her who have created something extraordinary and enriched life for themselves and others. Who are they? How were they able to develop themselves and make their astonishing contributions to society? The idea of photographing them and doing brief profiles took form in my mind.

My first task was deciding whom I would include. *Who's Who* was the logical place to start, but I found that the entries only provided information on positions held and awards won; it was impossible to assess the real contributions and far-reaching effects of the subjects. I knew I was in for a lot of research. Plunging in, I used the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* and began reading any and every article on a woman or women I could lay my hands on. When an article mentioned a woman who I thought might be considered, I would follow up on that.

Eventually, I found lists of outstanding women that had been compiled in popular magazines, and realized that the lists themselves were new to arrive on the scene. Only in the early seventies did the almanacs, of which there are many, begin to compile lists of distinguished women. In the mid-1970s, *Fortune* magazine wrote its first full-scale article on women in finance and industry, followed by one in *BusinessWeek*. The most thoroughly researched list to appear in any of the women's magazines was published in 1971 by the *Ladies' Home Journal*. According to the author, the 75 Most Important Women were the "women who had made the greatest impact on our civilization within the last five years and would continue to affect us significantly for the next five years." The author added that it is a "representative list that speaks highly for the quality of feminine leadership in America." But it was interesting to see that the positions of a number of women on this list were predicated on their relationships to men of national or international importance. Included were Rose

Mary Woods, "Executive Secretary to President Nixon since he became senator," Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, "widow of President Kennedy and wife of a Greek near-billionaire—the woman most other women would like to be," and Rose Kennedy. I wanted my list, in contrast, to include only women whose contributions had come from their own energies and endeavors. My criterion would be women who had done pioneering work in their field that had significantly changed society and/or opened up a new field for women.

When I had exhausted the *Readers' Guide*, I consulted experts in the fields of art, medicine, science, law, and so forth, and asked them for their recommendations. I finally created a master list of women, with a second column consisting of the writers, editors, and experts who could help me assess the subjects' contributions. I decided that each subject would need at least three referrals by solid sources in order to be included.

Throughout the selection process, I tried to be receptive to the information I was being given. When I was compiling a list of Black women, for instance, the women who were repeatedly suggested to me were almost exclusively in the field of civil rights. I checked my own impulse to find a Black writer, a Black scientist. Any list is necessarily somewhat arbitrary. But by feeling my way, I tried to be true to the names that continued to emerge with the most insistence. I finally arrived at a list of over fifty women.

Several of the women, among them Marian Anderson, Martha Graham, Susan Sontag, and Susan Langer, who indisputably should have been included in such a book, preferred not to be. There were several others, including Jane Jacobs, the architect and city planner, whom I was not able to reach. Lillian Hellman agreed to be photographed for the book, but not interviewed. I photographed three women—Margaret Mead, Cecelia Payne-Gaposchkin, and Aileen Osborn Webb—who were not interviewed before their deaths. Dorothy Height and Dede Allen could not be included for reasons beyond our control. Therefore, the forty-six women included here do not represent a definitive list, but rather a sampling of the scope and significance of women's contributions to American society over the last fifty years.

At this point, I envisioned the book as portraits of the women, each accompanied by a brief text. I hoped my photographs could portray each woman with dignity, and hoped to catch a gesture, a glint in the eye, or some small detail that would enable me to go beyond their public and sometimes well-known image and capture an essential inner quality. To put my subjects at ease during the photography sessions, I prepared by reading published interviews and profiles and their own books and articles, and as we talked, many of the women told me stories I had not seen in print. I went home and wrote down everything I could remember, but it was not long before I realized that these stories were more compelling than the primarily visual book

I had planned. I felt that if I could understand these women, how they function in our society, it would not only help me understand my own life, but perhaps help others.

I wanted the text accompanying the photographs to reflect the style of my portraits: to be revealing, yet written with honesty, dignity, and kindness. As the book evolved, I needed a writer who would go back to the women, gain their trust, listen to the stories I had heard, and go beyond. Again, I relied on research—interviews and profiles—to find a journalist with a sensibility compatible with mine.

Particular Passions turned into a collaboration when I read an interview of Elsa Peretti by Gaylen Moore for the *New York Times Magazine*. I said to myself: This is the first writer of profiles who knows what a person is really about. We proceeded slowly and surely, coping with the difficult logistics of interviews, writing, and editing. This idea of mine took five years to fulfill, and with the collaboration of Gaylen Moore, it has resulted in a book far richer than any I could have imagined.

I hope that our book will not only add to the feminist literature of our time, but will inspire women everywhere to pursue their own particular passions.

Introduction

BY LYNN GILBERT

As the author of *Particular Passions*, I am updating what I feel has been overlooked. This is a historic book. In 1981, when *Particular Passions* was at last published after five years of work, it was presented as a book that would inspire.

More than 40 years later, I realize this book is much more. Because women are being stripped of their rights today, the record of the time when this book was published is much more significant.

In the mid-1970s, a group of pioneering women in diverse disciplines emerged to reshape the American landscape. Some gained fame and recognition; most were overlooked. As time passed, more and more women were incorporated into the mainstream. Unfortunately, we are going backward.

I created this book hoping the record of these pioneering women, who collectively were largely overlooked, would be preserved for history. I did not realize that it would be so important in 2022.

I hope you enjoy this brief chapter. Please check out the others that are available.

Lynn Gilbert

NOVEMBER 12, 2022

Acknowledgments

There are many people I wish to acknowledge for having made this book possible.

Thanks to Arne Glimcher, founder of the Pace Gallery, who entrusted me with photographing Louise Nevelson after I photographed his children. My experience with Nevelson was the pivotal moment that shaped the direction of my life and the inspiration for this book.

I would like to thank the subjects, who gave of their time, and shared the previously unpublished stories of their lives that make this book so rich.

Without the encouragement of my husband, Ronnie, our sons, Paul and George, and my beloved housekeeper, Lessie Freeman, I'm not sure I could have tolerated the endless roadblocks during the five years that it took to complete this book.

My aunt and uncle, Red and Pick Heller, jump-started the book by arranging my first subjects.

To Gaylen Moore, my writer, I owe my deepest gratitude. After firing the first writer during a search that lasted a year and a half, I interviewed thirty writers before I found the person who would share my vision. I wanted the shared stories to be the basis of my book. Gaylen returned to interview and record their voices, to let you feel as if you were in each person's presence.

The editor, Carol Southern at Clarkson Potter, did a superb job. Her faith, and that of publisher Jane West, enabled me, against all odds, to get this book published. Anne Goldstein, assistant editor, was so moved by the book that it enabled her to leave publishing to follow her own "particular passion."

I received encouragement in the book's early stages from Audrey Adler, a literary agent. Among the most helpful in finding a writer were Michael and Ann Loeb and their friend Dick Brickner; Arthur Loeb of the Madison Avenue Bookshop; Harriet Lyons of *Ms.*; and Richard De Combray, who kept the project going when it might have come to a dead end.

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Critical to the book's credibility was the rigorous process of selecting the women. More than a hundred people shaped the selection. Thanks to the three experts in each discipline who helped make the final selection. I would like to acknowledge the following:

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Finally, thanks to Loni Efron of Ilon Art Gallery, editor, curator, and archivist, who organizes and supervises my work, and has brought this project up to date.

Grace Murray Hopper

Grace Murray Hopper

Grace Murray Hopper (born 1906, New York City–died 1992, Arlington County, Virginia) was a computer scientist, mathematician, US Naval officer, and educator.

Hopper, known as the "Queen of Code," was a trailblazer in the field of computer technology. In 1952, she developed the first computer compiler, a program that translated written instructions into code.

She served as director of the Navy's Programming Languages Group, and attained the rank of rear admiral. When she retired at age 79, she was the oldest active-duty commissioned officer in the Navy.

Her extraordinary achievements in both the computer industry and the Navy led to long and successful careers in both fields.

Yale University's Grace Hopper College is named in her honor. She was awarded the Defense Distinguished Service Medal by the US Department of Defense, and the Navy destroyer USS Hopper *bears her name.*

I WAS BORN WITH CURIOSITY. I always claim that I had a strong resemblance to the elephant's child in Kipling's Just So Stories who pokes his nose into everybody's business. Finally, the alligator latches onto his nose, and the elephant's child is pulled away and his nose gets stretched.

I remember when I was about seven, we had seven bedrooms up at our summer home for all the cousins to come visiting. Each room had an alarm clock, one of those round ones with two feet and a bell up on top that rings like crazy when the alarm goes off. When we were going on a trip, Mother would always go around at night and set all the alarm clocks. One night, she went around to set them and they had all been taken apart. What had happened was that I'd taken the first one apart and I couldn't get it together, so I opened the next one. I ended up with all seven of them apart. After that, I was restricted to one clock. It's that kind of curiosity: How do things work?

I was very fortunate in that my father believed his daughters should be given the same opportunities as his son, so my sister and I both went to Vassar. It was a little unusual back in those days. I was class of '28 and my sister was class of '30. Mostly the only people who went to college then were going to be schoolteachers. But my father had seen the panics of 1893 and 1907, and he said he might or might not be able to leave us any money, but he could see that we were trained.

I loved mathematics all the way through school, especially geometry. I used to draw pretty pictures with it. It's not really unusual for a woman to have an interest in mathematics. Actually, I think you'll find an equal number of girls have it as boys. They just get discouraged when they're younger. They hit a hard problem and somebody's apt to say, "Oh, girls can't understand that." They're not encouraged by teachers or parents. That didn't happen to me. As a matter of fact, my sister made all A's in math, too, though she was an economics major.

During World War II, and right after the war, when the men came back, they were all busy going to college and getting their degrees, so the women got in on the very beginning of the computer field and they've stayed there. It's probably one of the best fields there is for women to move up in. Women turn out to be very good programmers for one very good

reason: They tend to finish up things, and men don't very often finish. After men think they've solved a problem, they want to go off and get a new one, whereas a woman will always wrap it up in a neat package and document it. I think that's because you don't half-cook a dinner—you finish it and put it on the table, or you put the snappers and buttons on a dress. We're sort of used to finishing things.

I was an associate professor of mathematics at Vassar when I went into the Navy. I joined the Navy because there was a war on and everybody was going into something. I'd had a grandfather who was a rear admiral, and I would have loved to have been in the Navy from the beginning, but at the time when I was growing up, they didn't take women.

The Navy assigned me to the Bureau of Ordnance Computation Project and sent me to Harvard to work on the first computer in the United States, the Mark I. Nobody knew anything about computers then. That was the first one. The Mark I computer was fifty-one feet long; today, a computer with similar powers is about three-eighths of an inch—a chip, an integrated circuit.

When we started programming computers, we had to write all the programs in octal code—that's base eight instead of base ten. When you start doing that, you can sure make mistakes. So, what I had done over time was to collect pieces of code to compute a sine or a logarithm, or some such function that I knew was checked out and knew was correct, so that I could use them again in another program. I kept them in a notebook. But to put them in a new program, I still had to copy them and add them to all the addresses. Copying and adding them to addresses is a very dull occupation and I found I made mistakes. And there sat the big computer. It would do it. So, I decided to make a library of all these pieces of code, and I'd give them each a name, and then I'd tell the computer to put them together, copy them, and add them to the addresses.

So, I built the first compiler. It was a mathematical compiler. It translated mathematical notation into machine code. Manipulating symbols was fine for mathematicians, but it was no good for data processors who were not symbol manipulators. Very few people are really symbol manipulators. If they are, they become professional mathematicians, not data processors. It's much easier for most people to write an English statement than it is

to use symbols. So, I decided data processors ought to be able to write their programs in English, and the computers would translate them into machine code. That was the beginning of COBOL, a computer language for data processors. I could say, "Subtract income tax from pay," instead of trying to write that in octal code or using all kinds of symbols. COBOL is the major language used today in data processing.

No one thought of that earlier because they weren't as lazy as I was. A lot of our programmers liked to play with the bits. I wanted to get jobs done. That's what the computer was there for. When I started with the first compiler, nobody really believed it; I went to a meeting and gave a paper on it, but nobody said, "You can't do that." It took two years before they began to accept that concept. They had to because it worked.

Right after the war, there was a tremendous surge of innovative development in computers. Everything was changing. In weaponry, where you used to fire shells, you now fired rockets and missiles. We were talking about guided missiles, about airplanes, and they all needed a tremendous amount in the way of design and computation. The need for computers was very great.

Then, when we started with the space effort, it became even greater because you had to plot the courses for things and you had to put computers on board. They had to be smaller and lighter. There was tremendous support for innovation in all areas.

I think one of the reasons we're not getting those kinds of innovations today is that government support has almost totally disappeared, and with inflation, companies themselves have cut back on the amount they spend on research. They may spend the same amount, but because of inflation, it doesn't have as much effect. You'll notice that much of the equipment we're using today is the result of the work done right after World War II—the '40s and early '50s.

That hasn't affected my work because I'm concerned with using the computers to do things. Most people don't know much about the microcomputers, the chips; they don't quite understand them, and it's hard to believe that what used to be in a big blue box can all be on one chip. It's a little hard to explain it to people. Sometimes, you have to prove it.

What we're up against is people's resistance to change. I have a clock on the wall in my office that runs counterclockwise. That's so nobody in the office can ever say we've always done it this way. It tells perfectly good time. It just shows there was never any good reason why clocks had to go clockwise. What bothers me is the number of people who can't change, who say, "We've always done it this way, don't make waves."

When I was young, I was already on my way to take off. I don't know why, I just was. My family had a lot of confidence in me. After the war, I worked for UNIVAC from 1949 until 1967, when I became a senior staff scientist. I can remember once I went to the general manager of UNIVAC to get some money or people, I've forgotten what I was trying to get. He said "No," and I said, "OK, I'll quit, I'll clean out my desk and leave this afternoon." He beckoned me to come back and said, "Wait a minute, Grace, you've already done that once this year, you can't do it again." I always figured I could get a job as a waitress. It would have been temporary. You must stand on your own two feet. That's half the fun.

The contemporary malaise is the unwillingness to take chances. Everybody is playing it safe. We've lost our guts. It's much more fun to stick your neck out and take chances. But you see, we've provided for everything. Everybody's wrapped in cotton batting. It used to be if you lost your job, you went out and got another one or you didn't eat. Now, you get unemployment insurance. Don't eat saccharin, don't do this, take care of that, fasten your seat belt. The whole attitude is, protect yourself against everything, don't take chances. But we built this country on taking chances. Instead of going to higher echelons and saying, "Can I try this on my computer?" I do it. If it works, I get a pat on the back; if it doesn't work, I try to explain why it didn't—but I don't wait for somebody to tell me to do it.

Safety, security, no change—that's what a lot of people have been taught to value. It's the old pioneer spirit that's lacking. I had an ancestor who lived in Newbury, Massachusetts and got tired of it. There were about three hundred families and he thought it was getting too crowded, so he piled his family and possessions into a wagon and went up and founded Boscawen, New Hampshire. How about the people who came over here in the beginning, who were dissatisfied with things the way they were in Europe? They embarked on little tiny boats and came three months across the North Atlantic looking

for something better. How many people would do that today? We could start settling in space, couldn't we? There were people in Europe when the early ones set sail who said the same thing: "Really, is that possible?"

The most important thing I've accomplished, other than building the compiler, is training young people. They come to me, you know, and say, "Do you think we can do this?" I say, "Try it." And I back 'em up. They need that. I keep track of them as they get older and I stir 'em up at intervals so they don't forget to take chances. Once in a while, I've had to tell somebody that they were falling into a rut, that they had greater capabilities than that and why didn't they get a move on … you know, hold a small conference and give 'em a little boot in the rear. People, in a way, are very much waiting for someone to express confidence in them, and once you do it, they'll take off.

I never thought about what I wanted to accomplish in life. I had too many things to do. I was so deeply involved in things, I just kept on going. Then something came along and changed the direction. I went off with it. I didn't know where it was going to lead me. It just keeps on leading me.

I'm still on the CODASYL committee that monitors the COBOL language, but I've gone off into this business of trying to build systems of computers instead of one big computer. Now that we have the chips, instead of using one big computer to do all the jobs, we can use separate computers for each job and have them all running parallel and talking to each other.

I've gotten away from the mathematical side of computers. I'm over on the data processing side, the business side, because that's more exciting. You don't have equations—you're dealing with people and they don't obey equations. I'm working with computers to run the Navy now. We use computers to supply petroleum, ammunition, people-send orders for training—move 'em around the country. You don't do anything in the Navy without a piece of paper, and they all come out of computers. Same thing's true of your big companies. If those computers stopped, this whole country would come to a screeching halt. If we didn't have computers, we'd be solving these problems on paper, and some that we do in an hour would take three hundred years.

Computers are tools; they can be misused by people. If I have a wrench in the garage to fix the kitchen sink, someone can come and hit someone over the head with it, but it wouldn't be the wrench that did it, it would be the person. So, when we write laws, they shouldn't be laws about computers, but laws about the people who use them. We're developing very good techniques for keeping unauthorized people from plugging into the computer system.

My vision of a world with computers is a world in which people have a lot more time to do what they like, to do what they want to do, and read the books they want to read. It won't make books obsolete; it's too tiring to read on computers. Playing tennis, jogging … they'll have plenty of time to go to the shore. I'd go over to the library and start digging through books. I could do my work at home. I could have a computer at home and talk to my office. I could live up on top of a nice mountain in New Hampshire and smell pine trees and it would be the same as if I were here in the sub-sub-subbasement of the Pentagon. I think that would be much better. I'm not afraid to live in a world like that. I would hate to go back to wearing cotton knitted stockings; I like nylon. I wouldn't go back for anything. Change is slow. You have to see the contrast. I think you have to live seventy years before you get to see it.

The Navy retired me from the reserves on December 31,1966, and recalled me to full active duty on August 1, 1967. I'm seventy-three years old. Now, I'm very much interested in genealogy. When I can sneak a few minutes, I go to the library. My interest in genealogy started with my own family because when Mother died, I'd found she'd gotten partway, and I thought I'd finish it, but now I'm ending up studying early American history. My mother's family goes way back to before the American Revolution. When I started tracing these things, I realized that in school they taught us that the Pilgrims landed in 1620 and in 1773 we had a Boston Tea Party, and I discovered I didn't know anything that had happened in between, which was the time of the development of town meetings and our political system. So, I started finding out how our system developed.

I told you, I have insatiable curiosity. It's solving problems. Every time you solve a problem, another one shows up immediately behind it. That's the challenge. Nothing ever stays the same, it's always new and different. Anybody who's been bitten by the computer bug

and had the fun of making those things do things in the fraction of the time you used to take doing them, and make them do all sorts of things you never had any chance to do otherwise, why, you can't let go of that, you want to keep on doing it. I'll never finish my work with computers, any more than I'll ever finish the genealogy, because the generations double with every step. Wouldn't it be dull to do things that ended? I'm having a heck of a good time and contributing a little bit here and there to solving problems.

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BY LYNN GILBERT

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Reviews

“

“One of those rare, rare books that pick your life up, turn it around, and point it in the right direction.”
— K.T. Maclay

“Every woman owes it to herself to look up *Particular Passions: Talks With Women Who Have Shaped Our Times*—borrow the volume from your public library. Or, better still, buy it and put it with your favorite novel or poetry collection to sustain you. Every story in the book is an inspiration. This book is a joy and a tonic.”
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