

GAIL COLLINS SPEAKS AT THIRD SUCCESSFUL NYWBA FOUNDATION FUNDRAISING BREAKFAST

by Jennifer Aurora

Gail Collins was the keynote speaker at the NYWBA Foundation Breakfast on May 4, 2004, at the Harvard Club. The breakfast was the third event in a fundraising series featuring leading women authors. Ms. Collins, who is the first woman to serve as Editorial Page Editor for *The New York Times*, spoke about her latest book, *America's Women, 400 Years of Dolls, Drudges, Helpmates, and Heroines*. She has also written two other books: *Scorpion Tongues: Gossip, Celebrity, and American Politics*; and *The Millennium Book* (with husband Dan Collins).

Ms. Collins' publisher, Scribner Collins, generously donated copies of her latest book, which she graciously signed at the breakfast. All profits from the sale of the books went to the Foundation.

Ms. Collins presented an illuminating, lively, and good-humored account of the cultural history of American women. She chronicled lives of both celebrated and average women from the seventeenth century through modern times. Ms. Collins explained how norms for everyday issues, such as hygiene, dress fashions, and cooking, largely dictated women's roles. She elucidated the central tension that has plagued women for over four hundred years: "the yearning to create a home and the urge to get out of it."

She was at her best when she spoke about her favorite heroines: Margaret Brent, Clara Barton, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Elizabeth Blackwell. Margaret Brent was an active businesswoman who specialized in lending money to newly arrived settlers. When debtors failed to meet their obligations, she found herself drawn to the law, tenaciously representing herself in court to collect what was due. Besides being regarded as the nation's first female lawyer, Margaret was the first colonial woman to demand (unsuccessfully) the right to vote. Clara Barton was a restless nineteenth-century New Englander who took it upon herself to organize health care on Civil War battlefields and became known for her courage under fire: "Her face [had] turned blue from the gunpowder, and her skirts were so heavy with blood that she had to wring them out before she could walk under their weight." Harriet

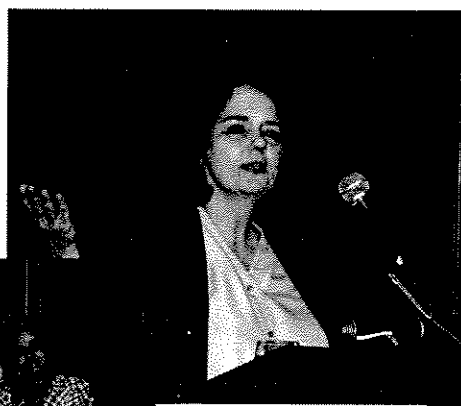
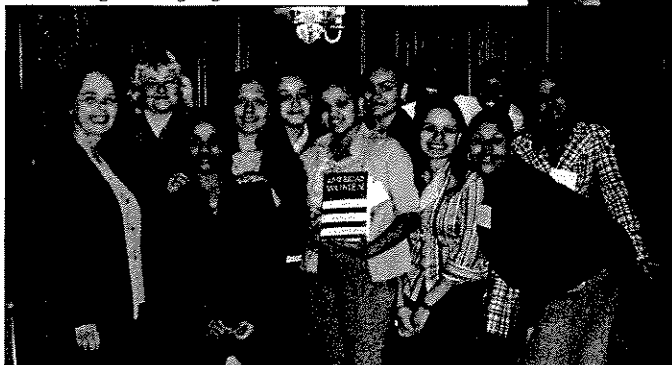
Beecher Stowe authored the anti-slavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Yet, when opportunities arose to lecture about the book, her husband took the podium while she sat by listening demurely. In later years, she began to present her own lectures nationwide, demonstrating her ability to handle what she had deferred to her husband. Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman to graduate from an American medical school, was inspired to apply when she realized that male physicians refused to look at their female patients' bodies during examinations. After dozens of medical schools turned her down, she was accepted by Geneva College, and she went on to graduate first in her class.

Ms. Collins urged attendees to focus their activist efforts on women's rights abroad and, in particular, on the deficiencies of healthcare for women in Third World countries. She left attendees to ponder the question, "Who are the women writing the next chapter?"

Attendee Danielle L. Sullivan summed up the audience's response to Collins: "Gail Collins did more than give a speech, she was a master storyteller with an exceptional ability to engage an audience and keep it entertained. She truly breathed life into the history of the struggles and successes of women throughout the past couple of centuries -- and not just famous women, but lesser known, behind-the-scenes women, who deserve recognition as well. My favorite part was when she described her own job as Editor-in-Chief of *The New York Times* editorial page -- an editorial page that once steered against suffrage for women -- and how now she can look up at the portraits of past Editors-in-Chief, all-male, and smile because she has their job."

Special guests at the event included a group of young women from Washington Irving High School. The students have been in the high school's Law and Public Service Program, which promotes career and leadership development for those who are interested in the law. At the conclusion of the event, NYWBA President Beth Bryson presented the students with a copy of Ms. Collins' new book, a purchase that simultaneously benefited both the Foundation and the Washington Irving High School Library.

Gail Collins,
NYWBA Foundation Director Marian C. Burnbaum,
and Washington Irving High School students



Gail Collins

NYWBA Foundation President Katherine P. Posner,
Gail Collins, and NYWBA President Elizabeth A. Bryson
(l to r)

