

This truly is an extraordinary time for women. So many doors have opened and so many barriers have been broken down. In every facet of life, we've made great strides.

In 1992, when I first ran for the Senate, there were only two women United States Senators. I used to say that 2 percent might be good for the fat content in milk, but it's certainly not good enough for the United States Senate.

We're now up to 16 percent; that's a little more than the fat content in premium ice cream.

And we're doing better across the board. There are 74 women serving in the House of Representatives—that's about 17 percent, an all-time high. Nancy Pelosi is the first female Speaker of the House. There are nine female governors and eleven female lieutenant governors.

All across the country women hold countless positions in state legislatures, in school boards, on city councils, on boards of supervisors. Women have also entered the workplace in record numbers. They've joined senior management. They've opened their own businesses by the thousands. And the list goes on.

The key is this: Once you open the door, it stays open for all time.

In the pages of this book, you'll encounter a number of remarkable Jewish women who have played no small role in helping to open these doors. Each of the women has excelled in professions that were doubly closed to their ancestors, first as Jews and then as women. Together, they represent an impressive constellation of talent, creativity and commitment. I consider myself fortunate to know several of these women—and to benefit from the trails blazed by those who came before us.

Here are just a few of the women you'll read about:

Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Associate Supreme Court Justice

Bobbie Rosenfeld, Olympic gold medalist

Ernestine Rose, champion for women's suffrage

Judy Blume, renowned children's author

Rosalyn Yalow, Nobel laureate

Bessie Moses, co-founder of Planned Parenthood

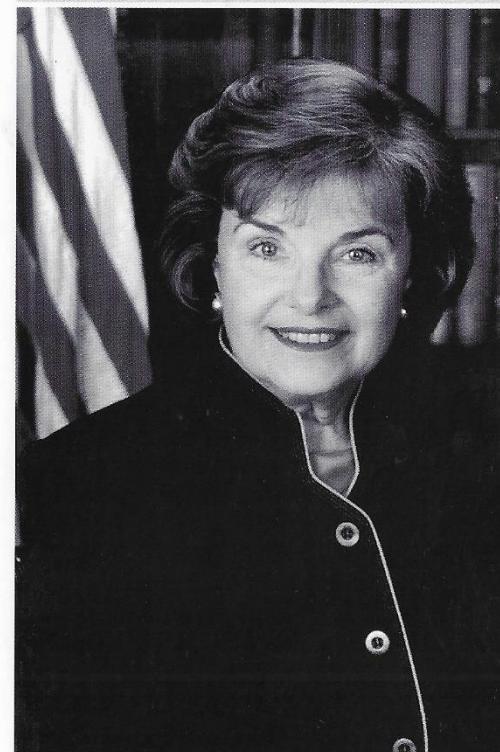
Gilda Radner, comedian

Carrie Marcus Neiman, fashion visionary and entrepreneur

Their contributions reflect the diversity and richness of the experience of the American Jewish woman—past, present and future. It is my hope that you will take some encouragement and inspiration from this remarkable group of Jewish women.

## FOREWORD

Dianne Feinstein,  
United States Senator, California



# INTRODUCTION

**S**he is clothed with strength and splendor. So writes the author of the paean to the woman of accomplishment (*eishet bayil*) in Proverbs 31:25. In this portrayal of the archetypal woman, the biblical poet captures a complex of complementary attributes, physical courage, and the more ethereal quality of majesty. Arguably, for most mortals, it is an impossible standard. But in this assemblage of remarkable Jewish women, there are individuals whose lives and works fulfill these expectations, breathing life and personality into an idealized image. Some of these women are well known, some little recognized outside of their own spheres of influence. But as pioneers, their courage, determination, and imagination enabled them to challenge the boundaries of gender and social convention, thus forging new paths that enrich our world.

The academic field of women's history dates only to the beginning of second-wave feminism in the early 1960s. Jewish women's history is an even later development as Jewish feminism in the early 1970s evolved from the general social movement to address issues of gender equality within the Jewish community. Since then Jewish feminist historians embarked upon the task of recovering women's experiences and discovering women long denied visibility by those who crafted the accepted male-centric Jewish historical narrative.

But the task of this recovery is more than what historian Gerda Lerner characterizes as "add women and stir." Social historians of the twentieth century challenged the prevailing notions of what is historically significant—politics, economics, and intellectual achievement—and expanded their scope of inquiry to include areas of domestic and personal concerns. It is a coalescence of Jewish feminism and social history that is now producing works of Jewish history that are more inclusive and representative of the Jewish experience in its totality, not only its communal, religious, and intellectual elite.

The story of Jewish women in North America is the story of new beginnings—both as Jews and as women. As Jews their lives were previously dictated by external political restrictions and, as Jewish women, their position was defined by internal cultural and religious considerations. In the new world, they have been freed to explore new frontiers in science, the arts, politics, religion, and even in the exclusive male fraternity of competitive sports. But even as they successfully challenged cultural norms of femininity and notions of a woman's place, their

accomplishments continued to be neglected in Jewish historical writings. This project aims to bring women in from the margins. In its original form, it was a photographic and biographical exhibit sponsored by Women's League for Conservative Judaism to commemorate the 350th anniversary of the arrival of Jews in North America. Its ironic title, *Beauty, Brains and Brawn: The New World Balabuste*, suggested that the romanticized old world *balabuste*—the consummate tender of hearth and home—was recast in a new idiom as a woman of accomplishment in any area to which she aspired. The original twenty-eight women are here now expanded to forty-seven. The new title, *With Strength and Splendor: Jewish Women as Agents of Change*, reflects a further shift in emphasis, that Jewish women disassembled old paradigms of gendered roles, shattering boundaries and expanding the options for future generations of women seeking personal and professional fulfillment.

This collection of women also represents a unique diversity in geography and focus. The women most often cited in historical writings lived in or near the major Jewish population centers in the northeastern United States. But theirs is only part of the story of Jewish women in North America. From Montreal to Dallas, from Orlando to Portland—and all points in between—Jewish women have made major contributions to the communities where they settled.

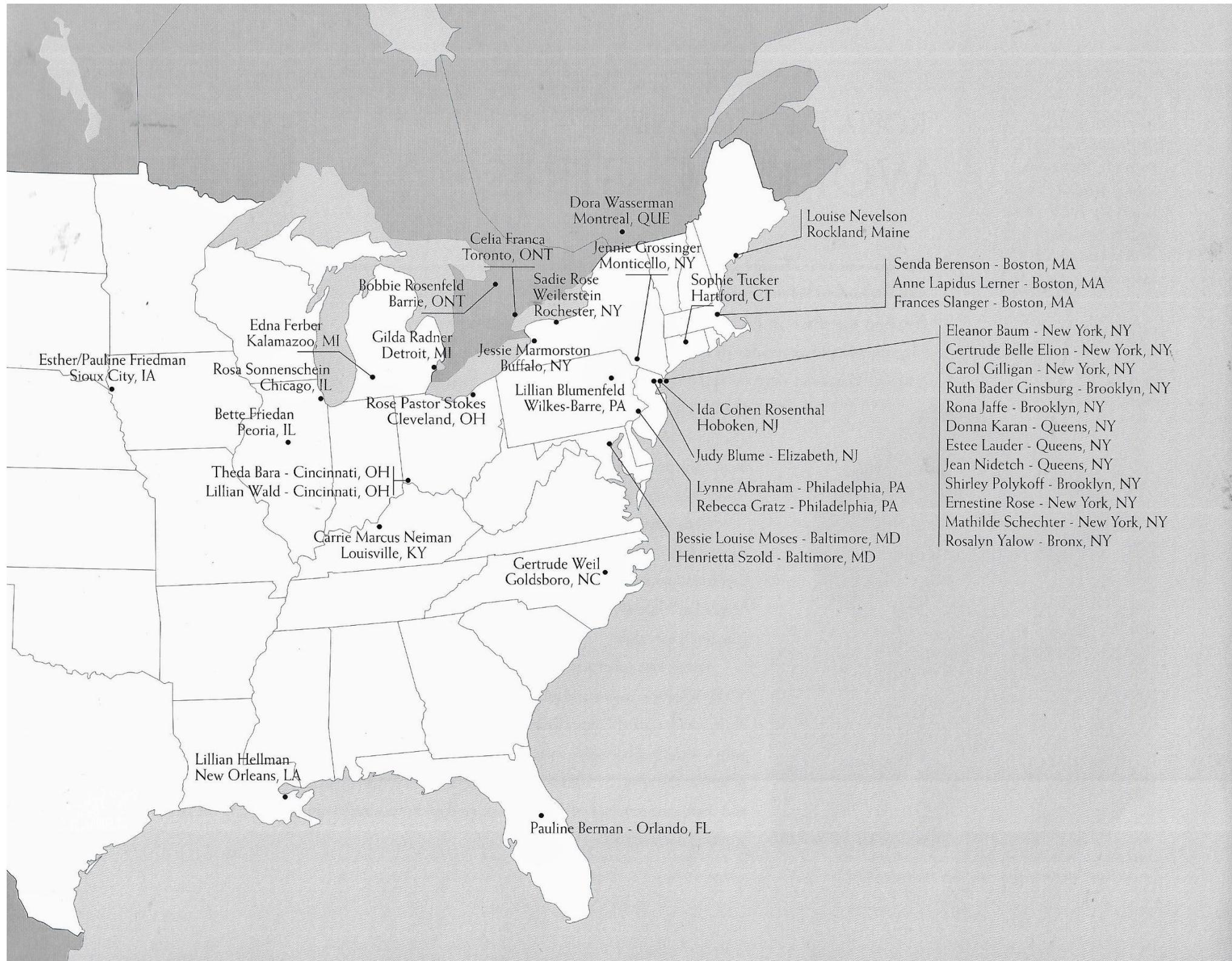
Additionally, included here are women whose contributions are not always valued by mainstream historical writing but who nonetheless address very real social and personal concerns for women. How women sustain their physical and internal well-being, how they contend with concerns such as reproduction and outward appearances, should no longer be regarded as reflections of narcissism or vanity, but can be seen to have real implications for women who comprise nearly half the work force.

And finally, this is a collection of women whose Jewish identity runs the gamut, from those most committed to preserving the religious and intellectual heritage of Judaism to those for whom Jewish tradition is a catalyst for artistic expression or social activism, to those for whom Jewishness is merely an indicator of ethnicity. What unites them beyond a shared culture is a vision of an improved world, a world in which women are more than mere spectators from the sidelines, but are participants in events and are, indeed, agents of change.

In addition to their professional and social diversity, these celebrated women reflect the geographic diversity of North American Jewry. The large wave of immigration from 1881 to 1924 brought nearly three million Jews to North America, most of whom settled along the Northeast corridor. The high concentration of our women in these communities reflects that pattern of settlement. By the mid 1920s, New York City's 1,750,000 Jews constituted nearly half the Jewish population of North America.

Other large Jewish population centers were Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, Cleveland, Detroit, Baltimore, Newark, Los Angeles, Montreal, and Pittsburgh. Many who lived in communities far from the population centers of the Northeast, such as Arlene Schnitzer, Pauline Berman, Felice Cohn, Ray Frank, Gertrude Weil, and Celia Franca, played significant roles in the development of local political and cultural institutions.





*Working girls,  
professional  
women, mothers,  
and grandmothers  
lined up with their  
dog-eared copies  
at Rona's book  
signings.*



Rona Jaffe

## RONA JAFFE (1931–2005)

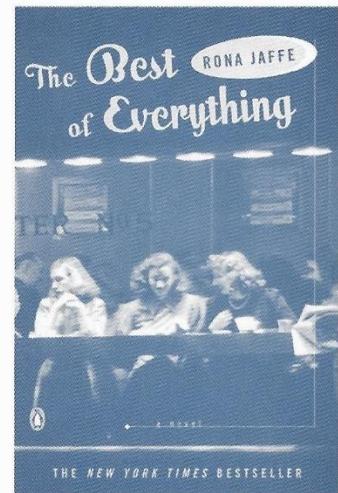
# WORKING GIRLS

The year was 1958. Twenty-six-year-old Rona Jaffe had recently quit her job as an associate editor at Fawcett Publications to begin what would be the first of fifteen novels. *The Best of Everything*, a portrayal of a colorful mélange of young female office workers in New York City, captivated a generation of women hungry to break out of the confines of social restraint. The critics were less than kind, but the urbane Rona Jaffe had offered her not-yet-liberated readership a taste of freedom.

In 2005, in the foreword to a re-released edition of her first novel, Rona wrote that she began practicing her craft at the age of two. By nine, she was sending stories to *The New Yorker*, which were rejected by editors who thought they were from an adult.

Rona was born into a family of privilege at the height of the Depression. Her parents were Samuel Jaffe, a high school principal, and his first wife Diana, daughter of Moses Ginsberg, the construction magnate who built the Carlyle Hotel. Rona grew up in the affluent culture of the Upper East Side of Manhattan, graduating from the Dalton School at fifteen and Radcliffe College four years later.

Rona's first novel was the result of a chance encounter with Hollywood film producer Jerry Wald. Wald was looking to produce a modern story comparable to the 1940's blockbuster *Kitty Foyle*, which starred Ginger Rogers as a feisty working-class girl haplessly and hopelessly in love with a socially inaccessible man. Rona was convinced that the men who produced the movie—as well as the novel by Christopher Morley on which it was based—were clueless about women and their experiences, feelings, and motivations. Rona was determined to write the story from a woman's perspective.



*The Best of Everything* captured the zeitgeist of the late 1950s, when young working women were beginning to challenge the boundaries that could barely contain them. Almost overnight it shot to the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list. As Rona's four career girls careened through the melodramas of Machiavellian office politics and sleazy men, trying to finagle a cashmere wardrobe on a polyester budget, women of all ages reveled in their bravado. Working girls, professional women, mothers, and grandmothers lined up with their dog-eared copies at Rona's book signings.

Today, the women of *Sex and the City* are the cultural icons for those who choose to pursue (at least for a while) trajectories other than the classroom, carpool, and altar. But Rona was there first. Her alternate models of femininity, hollowing out crevices of individuality, spoke to women everywhere, transcending age, class, and education. Her last work, *The Room-Mating Season*, is just as juicy as her first.

Rona's titles, including *Class Reunion*, *Family Secrets*, *The Road Taken*, and her classic children's book *The Last of the Wizards*, have sold millions of copies and been chosen by numerous book clubs. As a result, she was able to create an organization to foster and support literary achievement among women. Established in 1995, the Rona Jaffe Foundation Writers' Awards program is the only national program of its kind, offering grants to women writers of fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry, with an emphasis on those in the early stages of their careers. The foundation provides financial support to assure writing time, and for such specific purposes as childcare, research, and travel costs. Since its inception, the foundation has encouraged nearly one hundred women writers. The program remains a hallmark of Rona's legacy, and the foundation continues to support the many causes that were important to her during her lifetime.

Rona left us with a cast of unforgettable characters who reflect our contemporary selves. Sometimes offering thinly veiled morality tales, often leaving us bleary-eyed at work after reading through the night, she could make us laugh and she could make us cry, the novelist's ultimate gift.



2005 Rona Jaffe Foundation  
Writers' Awards winners  
(left to right):  
Asali Solomon, Aryn Kyle,  
Frances Hwang, Rebecca  
Curtis, Nan Cohen,  
Averill Curdy, with  
Rona Jaffe (center).  
Photo by Nancy Crampton.

*Lynne Abraham has initiated dozens of municipal programs dedicated to combating violent predatory crime in Philadelphia.*

## LYNNE M. ABRAHAM (b. 1941) LAW AND ORDER

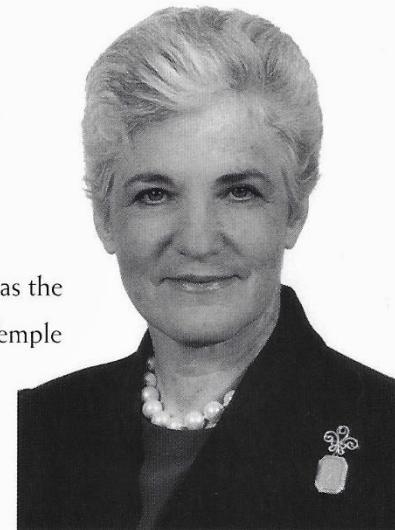
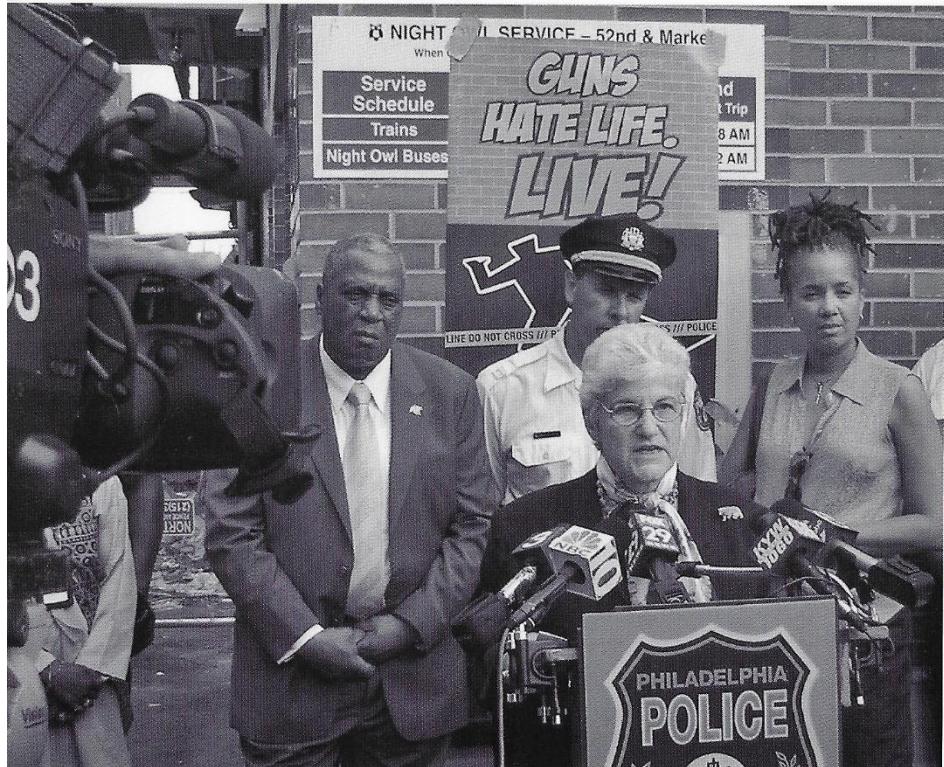
In Philadelphia, the birthplace of the American legal system, Lynne Abraham has served as the chief law enforcer since becoming the district attorney in 1991. Since graduating from Temple Law School in 1965, in a career spanning four decades, Lynne has dedicated her life to preserving law and order and to creating a safe environment for Philadelphia's one and a half million residents. She has provoked criticism for her vigorous application of the death penalty for violent homicides, but she was nonetheless elected to the office five times between 1993 and 2005. By the time she completes her fifth term, Lynne will have held the office longer than anyone in Philadelphia's history.

Lynne grew up in Germantown (northwest Philadelphia), a tomboy and the first member of her family to complete high school. She put herself through Temple University and then its law school. After graduation, she worked for Dis-

*Lynne Abraham at a press conference in 2006 announces the new Philadelphia Gun Removal Program, part of the Gun Violence Task Force.*  
District Attorney Arlen Specter (now a U.S. senator), and was the executive director of the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority during the administration of the controversial Mayor Frank Rizzo. When

Rizzo fired Lynne for refusing to make patronage appointments, she may have lost her job, but she also earned a reputation for integrity and moxie.

In 1975 Lynne was elected to the Municipal Court—its first female jurist. She was then elected to the Common Pleas Court and spent the next eleven years



*Lynne M. Abraham*



*Many of Lynne Abraham's anti-crime initiatives demonstrate her concern for the safety of Philadelphia's children.*

presiding over major felony trials. From 1974 to 1994 she also taught at several of Philadelphia's law schools, including her alma mater. With her extensive experience in criminal proceedings, Lynne was appointed in 1991 to fill the vacated office of district attorney; in 1993 she was elected unopposed, winning 76 percent of the vote.

In the years Lynne has held office, she has initiated dozens of municipal programs dedicated to combating violent predatory crime in Philadelphia. Additionally, she has helped create a complex of community-based organizations to help citizens fight crime in their own neighborhoods. Some of her initiatives include the Public Nuisance Task Force, the Do-

mestic Violence Task Force, the Narcotics Strike Force—which involved, among other things, closing thousands of crack houses in Philadelphia—the Gun Violence Task Force, the Philadelphia Gun Removal Program, and the Urban Genesis and I-LEAD Foundations.

Since 1976 Lynne has been married to former radio talk show host Frank Ford (Eddie Felbin). Her success as district attorney has made her a legendary figure in Philadelphia's history, earning her national renown as well. Like some of her predecessors who went on to careers beyond the city's precincts, Lynne's story is still ongoing.

*"I have the face  
of a vampire but  
the heart of a  
feministe."*



## THEDA BARA (1885–1955) THE SILENT “VAMP”

In an era when a young woman's greatest aspiration was to marry well and produce beautiful and accomplished children, Theda Bara became America's first sex goddess. By 1917 Bara had established herself in the new and phenomenally popular medium of

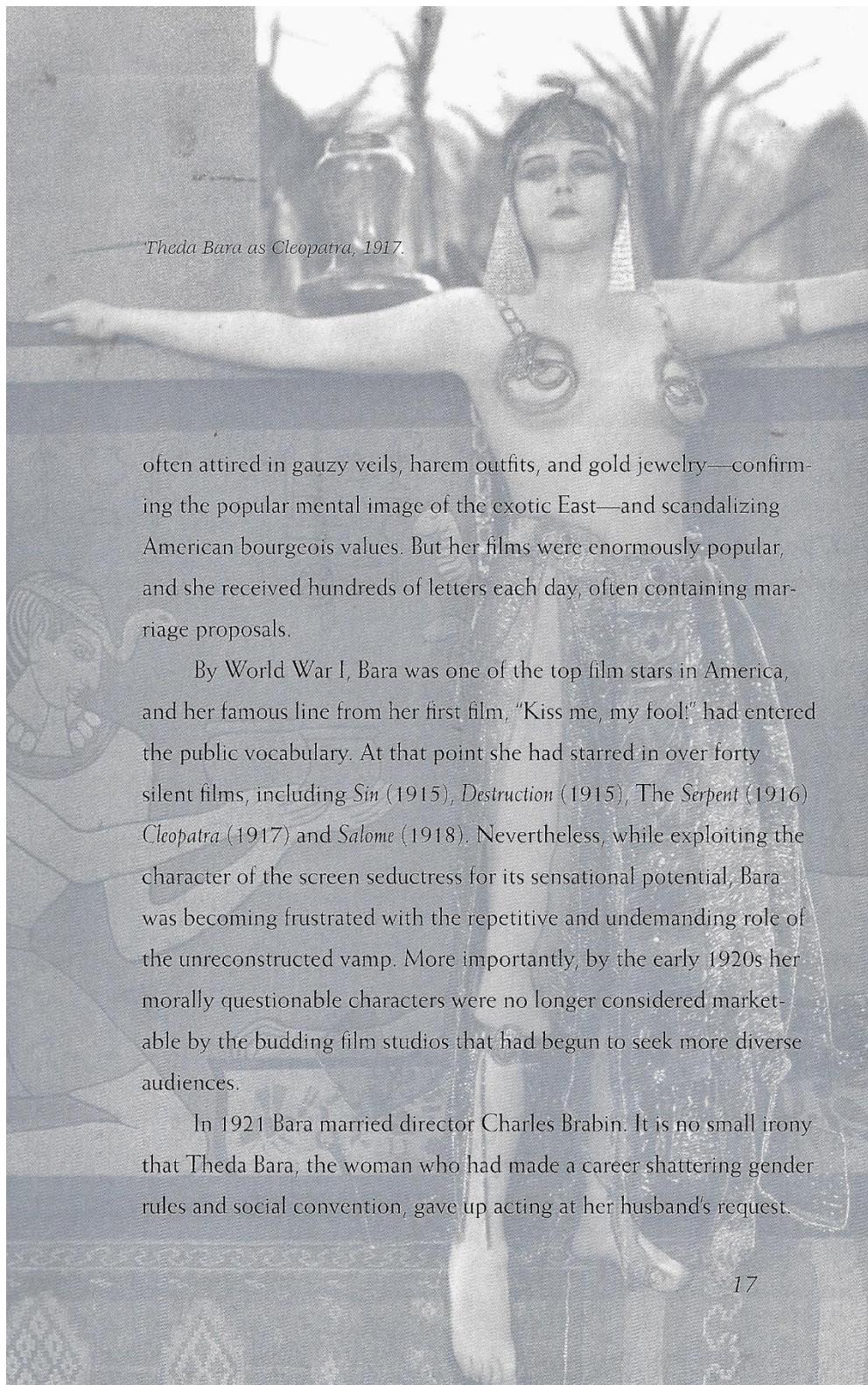
silent film as a sultry temptress, introducing the concept of "the vamp" to popular culture.

Born Theodosia Goodman to immigrant parents in Cincinnati, the reputedly well-read young woman attended college briefly, but to her father's chagrin moved to New York to pursue a career on the stage. With little success landing theatrical roles, she accepted a role in the Fox film *A Fool There Was* (1915). The studio undertook to re-create this unknown young actress as a romantically mysterious figure, the love child of a French artist and his exotic Arabian mistress, born in the shadow of the pyramids. They changed her name to Theda Bara, publicizing it as an anagram of "Arab Death." (In reality, "Theda" was a childhood nickname, and "Bara" was her maternal grandfather's name.) The film, Bara's first, was based on Rudyard Kipling's poem "The Vampire," about a seductress who beguiled her hapless male victims.

*Theda Bara and Fritz Leiber Sr. as Caesar and Cleopatra. The silent film Cleopatra (1917) was one of the most elaborate productions in the early years of Hollywood, featuring lavish sets and costumes, and with 2,000 people working behind the scenes. Theda Bara wore several risqué costumes, and despite its enormous success, the Hollywood Hays Code later judged the film "obscene."*



*Theda Bara, circa 1920*



Theda Bara as Cleopatra, 1917.

often attired in gauzy veils, harem outfits, and gold jewelry—confirming the popular mental image of the exotic East—and scandalizing American bourgeois values. But her films were enormously popular, and she received hundreds of letters each day, often containing marriage proposals.

By World War I, Bara was one of the top film stars in America, and her famous line from her first film, "Kiss me, my fool!" had entered the public vocabulary. At that point she had starred in over forty silent films, including *Sin* (1915), *Destruction* (1915), *The Serpent* (1916) *Cleopatra* (1917) and *Salome* (1918). Nevertheless, while exploiting the character of the screen seductress for its sensational potential, Bara was becoming frustrated with the repetitive and undemanding role of the unreconstructed vamp. More importantly, by the early 1920s her morally questionable characters were no longer considered marketable by the budding film studios that had begun to seek more diverse audiences.

In 1921 Bara married director Charles Brabin. It is no small irony that Theda Bara, the woman who had made a career shattering gender rules and social convention, gave up acting at her husband's request.

## VIXENS AND VAMPS AND VICTIMS (OH MY!)

Theda Bara's first movie, *A Fool There Was* (1915), was based loosely on Rudyard Kipling's poem "The Vampire" (1897):

A fool there was and he made his prayer  
(Even as you or I!)  
To a rag and a bone and a hank of hair,  
(We called her the woman who did not care),  
But the fool he called her his lady fair—  
(Even as you or I!)  
—Verse 1

In her short-lived film career, from 1915 to 1919, Bara starred in more than forty films about women with unquenchable passions. Although "silent films," their titles speak volumes:

*When Men Desire* • *The Siren's Song* • *The She Devil* •  
*The Tiger Woman* • *When a Woman Sins* • *Salome* •  
*Madame DuBarry* • *Camille* • *The Forbidden Path* •  
*The Unchastened Woman* • *Cleopatra* • *The Rose of Blood* •  
*The Vixen* • *Her Double Life* • *Gold and the Woman* •  
*The Serpent* • *Carmen* • *Sin* • *Lady Audley's Secret* •  
*The Devil's Daughter* • *Siren of Hell* • *The Eternal Sappho* •  
*The Galley Slave* • *A Woman There Was* • *Destruction* •

She described her motive as a female predator: "The vampire that I play is the vengeance of my sex upon its exploiters. You see, I have the face of a vampire, but the heart of a feminist."