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Gower, Karla K, Columbia, *Betsy Ann Plank: The Making of a Public Relations Icon*. Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2022, 240 pp., \$45 (hardcover). ISBN: 9780826222596

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Betsy Ann Plank: The Making of a Public Relations Icon depicts Plank's childhood, education, and career with a level of transparency usually reserved for celebrities. But then, Plank is a celebrity in her own right within public relations. If Edward Bernays and Doris Fleischman are the architects of early public relations, then Betsy Ann Plank is undoubtedly, as the author posits, the First Lady of Public Relations. Although clearly from the book, she would not have wanted this gender-referring label, she certainly earned it. With a 63-year career in public relations, Plank was the first female chair for the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and the only person to receive the PRSA Golden Anvil Award as an outstanding United States professional, the Paul M. Lund Public Service Award, and the Patrick Jackson Award for Distinguished Service to PRSA.

Plank's ties to the University of Alabama, the home of the Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations, began in her formative years. Living near the university where both her parents had attended, university professors and administrative leaders surrounded Plank. By any standards, you could categorize Plank's upbringing as privileged. Small in stature and humble in presence, Plank seems to know what she wants until she doesn't. She is brutally honest yet inspirational, argumentative yet sensitive, and above all, a perfectionist.

Her introduction to writing occurs as a first-year student for the university magazine, the *Bethanian*, at Bethany College, the first private college in West Virginia. By the start of

her second year, she is on the editorial staff as the Literary Editor. This is most impressive when you learn she skipped two grades in high school and is two years younger than her college peers. But all doesn't flow so well after a romance goes rocky and innuendos circulate on campus, resulting in the expulsion of her lover. Perhaps due to the numerous moves as a child, Plank learns to analyze people, trying to understand their motivations. While these insights into her formative years provide context on her life, the deep dive into her personal life is most intriguing, particularly the sacrifices she made as she pursued a career in a male-dominated industry and broke gender barriers.

The book takes a slight diversion into other pioneering public relations leaders of the era, such as Edward Bernays, Mitchell McKeown, George Tamblyn, Dan Edelman, and Lavinia "Duffy" Schwartz. The latter was the Midwest Director of the Advertising Council and Plank's mentor, whom she graciously acknowledged throughout her life.

The significance of this book is tremendous because it is the only book documenting Plank's life and career and one of the few about women in the industry. If there is one oversight in Plank's career, it would be her preference to discount the power of gender in the field. Plank credited her abilities over her gender. However, it cannot go unnoticed that throughout her career, Plank achieved prominent levels of leadership in a predominantly male profession when PRSA female membership was only in the double digits. Plank's goal was to simply be the best in the profession. The author skillfully addresses

Plank's latent feminism, which Plank begins to reflect on in the mid-1960s.

This biography would benefit a media history or women in public relations course. The book would also work well as a subset of public relations history within a public relations principles class. Within seven chapters, the reader understands the context of Plank's early years in Tuscaloosa, the evolution of finding her passion, and her emergence as an industry leader. The book emphasizes the value of writing for student publications and that a rocky college experience may be overcome. The author clearly illustrates how Plank led by example and shaped the future of public relations while providing a roadmap for those entering the field. As new technologies influenced the practice of public relations, it was Plank's skills, perseverance, and networking that won the day.

Plank had many firsts throughout her career. Other career firsts include the first female president of the Publicity Club of Chicago, the first female president of the Chicago chapter of PRSA, and the first woman who headed a department directing urban, community, and educational affairs for AT&T and the Bell system. She is also the first woman to have a center for public relations named after her, the Plank Center for Leadership and Public Relations at the University of Alabama.

Several noteworthy campaigns are detailed within the book. These include Morris, the Nine Lives cat, Playskool, and Kotex, which offered an educational booklet for young women in each box. Such information was still considered taboo in the 1960s. Therefore, Plank helped to establish the Life Cycle Center in

1967 to advance educational materials for sex education programs.

Although not its intent, the book serves as a blueprint for historical methodology. Plank passed in 2010, and much of her work with the Plank Center is known. The author integrates archival research such as Plank's letters to her mother, the Betsy Ann Plank Papers, newspaper articles, and secondary and primary interviews with Plank to form a cohesive life story. Gower's professional relationship and friendship with Plank add to the many nuances throughout the book that make Plank jump off the page. While the first chapter may start a little slow, the pace quickly picks up, and you find yourself wanting to know more about Plank.

In the preface, Gower writes, "My only hope is that it lives up to Betsy's expectations for how the story of her life might be told" (xiv). The book leaves the reader with a powerful sense that Plank's life, professionally and personally, was a journey well taken. As Plank would say, "Tunnel under, go over, walk around, walk away...do whatever you have to do to move on" (153).