



## **The Jet Sex: Airline Stewardesses and the Making of an American Icon**

*Victoria Vantoch*

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In the years after World War II, the airline stewardess became one of the most celebrated symbols of American womanhood. Stewardesses appeared on magazine covers, on lecture circuits, and in ad campaigns for everything from milk to cigarettes. Airlines enlisted them to pose for publicity shots, mingle with international dignitaries, and even serve (in sequined minidresses) as the official hostesses at Richard Nixon's inaugural ball. Embodying mainstream America's perfect woman, the stewardess was an ambassador of femininity and the American way both at home and abroad. Young, beautiful, unmarried, intelligent, charming, and nurturing, she inspired young girls everywhere to set their sights on the sky.

In *The Jet Sex*, Victoria Vantoch explores in rich detail how multiple forces--business strategy, advertising, race, sexuality, and Cold War politics--cultivated an image of the stewardess that reflected America's vision of itself, from the wholesome girl-next-door of the 1940s to the cosmopolitan glamour girl of the Jet Age to the sexy playmate of the 1960s. Though airlines marketed her as the consummate hostess--an expert at pampering her mostly male passengers, while mixing martinis and allaying their fears of flying--she bridged the gap between the idealized 1950s housewife and the emerging "working woman." On the international stage, this select cadre of women served as ambassadors of their nation in the propaganda clashes of the Cold War. The stylish Pucci-clad American stewardess represented the United States as middle class and consumer oriented--hallmarks of capitalism's success and a stark contrast to her counterpart at Aeroflot, the Soviet national airline. As the apotheosis of feminine charm and American careerism, the stewardess subtly bucked traditional gender roles and paved the way for the women's movement. Drawing on industry archives and hundreds of interviews, this vibrant cultural history offers a fresh perspective on the sweeping changes in twentieth-century American life.

## **The Jet Sex: Airline Stewardesses and the Making of an American Icon Details**

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## **From Reader Review The Jet Sex: Airline Stewardesses and the Making of an American Icon for online ebook**

### **Kate says**

I'd probably give this a 3.5 stars. Overall, it was really interesting .. the parallels between the evolution of the flight attendant and the evolution of the perception of women in popular culture was really good. One of my favourite sections was on the relations between the US and the Soviet Union vis a vis flight routes, airlines and flight attendant norms. A neat vantage onto the Cold War.

At times the book was a little rambly and I wasn't sure where Vantoch was going. Organization of the book got stronger the further in the book I read. I wish there were more pictures - the advertising and promotional images from the airlines are fantastic! I would also have loved to see scans of some of the handbooks or other materials that were produced for flight attendant education/training.

The story of Vantoch's research process which she includes at the end was another really interesting part of the book. It sounds like she is sitting on material for two or three more books, based on the interviews she conducted as well as the archives she was able to access. Really fascinating stuff!

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### **Brian Palmer says**

The book traces the development of the image of stewardesses throughout the decades of American commercial flight, without spending much time on the actual duties and role of the job; the role of the stewardess is important primarily for its reflection of the times. Naturally, concerned with the image of the stewardess, the book spends most of its time on the recruiting and selection of the stewardesses, and the advertising touting them to the public.

I was drawn in by the sheer paradox that the book spends time on: the competition for these jobs was ferocious, and the training intense; the stewardesses were for many decades an elite corp of highly-educated, cosmopolitan workers who were intentionally used as temporary workers and with no ability to turn this into a career.

There were a lot of interesting asides about cultural mores -- hair dye being forbidden to stewardesses until the late 60s, as a symbol of promiscuity, for example -- and how this changed, until in the 1960s and 1970s the stewardess was overtly sexualized, all subtlety flung away. The book's photographs are nicely integrated to demonstrate the sort of advertising being flung around.

Although most of the book is spent focused on 'white women' as a stereotype of stewardesses, some chapters focus on the struggle that black women had to obtain the prestigious jobs. One of the noticeable missteps, I thought, however, was the treatment of asian minorities: perhaps a few sentences total, each time dismissing them as tokens used to suggest submissive subservience.

One of my favorite bits for discussion was Vantoch's discussion of the Soviet/American cold war, as expressed in airline imagery. The fashionable stewardess of the late 1960s, when relations were thawing between the soviets and the US, allowed American airlines to be ambassadors in colorful clothing, with fashion accessories aplenty, while at the same time virtues of the Soviet regime (including, for example,

allowing stewarding to be a career even if the stewardesses were married -- something routinely forbidden to the Americans) helped drive the feminist and economic revolt that the stewardesses were beginning to drive against the airlines.

The book is short, but it provides an interesting way to consider the role of women from the 1940s to the beginning of 1980s (the book does talk briefly about post-2000 airlines, but its heart is clearly in the 40s-60s).

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### **University of Chicago Magazine says**

Victoria Vantoch, AB'97

Author

From our pages (May–June/13): In the postwar period, airline stewardesses became celebrated icons of American womanhood. They seemed to appear everywhere, from print ads to television commercials to Richard Nixon's inaugural ball in sequined minidresses. Stewardesses, says Victoria Vantoch, embodied mainstream America's ideal woman: young and beautiful, intelligent and charming. They gracefully bridged the gap between demure 1950s housewife and emerging career woman and, Vantoch argues, subtly challenged traditional gender roles, paving the way for the women's movement.

An excerpt "Selling the Friendly Skies" (July–Aug/13):

<https://mag.uchicago.edu/economics-bu...>

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### **Sydney says**

Fantastically written and incredibly interesting. Will most likely read again in the next few weeks.

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### **Jessica says**

I learned so much not only about the history of stewardesses and the airline industry but the history of women in the United States. Many of these amazing women who fought for equality in the workplace helped shape the world we live in today. I also never realized how glamorous being a stewardess and flying itself used to be until reading Victoria's book.

Nothing about her writing was dry or boring which certainly could have been the case. Definitely a very informative and enjoyable read overall.

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### **Biblio Files (takingadayoff) says**

The job of flight attendant has only existed for some eighty years, and it has gone through many transformations -- nurse, girl-next-door air hostess, sophisticated international traveler, sexy model in the

sky, surly overworked passenger monitor. In *Jet Sex*, Victoria Vantoch looks at the social history of American flight attendants and how those transformations reveal the country's changing attitudes toward women, capitalism, consumerism, the Soviet Union, and ourselves.

That flight attendants were mostly women was almost an accident. When passenger flights began to become common in the U.S., the co-pilot helped carry luggage and passed out blankets. When the airlines began to hire cabin attendants, they looked to railroads and considered hiring African-American porters, or they could copy the ocean liners and hire Filipino stewards. The turbulent nature of the early passenger flights suggested that women with nurse training might be a solution.

Those early days of aviation service are fun to read about, but it isn't until the 1950s and the jet age when things really get interesting. Once the Cold War set in, stewardesses became a weapon in the battle of whose women were most fulfilled, attractive, and equal. Aeroflot stews symbolized the relative equality of Soviet women (although that might have better been illustrated by women Aeroflot pilots...) and Pan Am stews countered by being more attractive. In American minds, attractive femininity trumped equality.

With the 1960s came increased sexualization of ads (free love, swinging 60s, flower power) and feminism. While ads exploited the image of stewardesses with come-on ads (Fly me! We really move our tail for you. The Braniff Air Strip), flight attendants were unionizing and fighting sexist rules such as having to quit when they got married or became pregnant.

Vantoch tells a fascinating story, backs up her work with copious notes, and reaches some provocative conclusions. Thoroughly enjoyable!

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## Age says

I just realized I reviewed this ages ago when it came out on my blog, so I'm finally getting around to reviewing it on Amazon and here at Goodreads. I'll simply copy and paste my review because I gushed and there's no way I can shorten it. I absolutely loved the book!

While in college, I focused primarily on my own specific studies, namely British Romantic, Victorian, and Gothic literature. Within these subjects, I developed an interest in women writers and a revision of canon that includes works written by people who aren't white men. I have an interest in feminism today, too, but I am woefully less knowledgeable about more recent history and perhaps my distaste for how second wave feminist figures have reacted to broader issues and the inclusion of women outside of their strict definitions. I feel like reading this book has reminded me that it is still important to know the progression of the feminist movement while still maintaining my own particular beliefs and hopes for the movement as it currently exists.

One of the first things the book did that I immediately loved was address how "pretty" women (the interest in beautifying and using cosmetics, especially) aren't typically associated with "serious history" (7). They aren't. I'm glad it was stated so bluntly because it forces the reader to confront biases immediately and it already begins a discussion about how beauty might be read as superficiality. And the writer does not merely let the reader come to the conclusion that this is unfair; Vantoch says, "Beauty, gender, and sex are not frivolous sidebars to 'real history' - they are major forces that have framed global debates and shaped the nation's past" (7).

I especially appreciated the stories included in the text that added a personal touch to the broader history of stewardesses from Ellen Church to Mildred Jackson and others.

Because the book spans decades, the evolution of the stewardess takes place amidst shifting backdrops including the post WWII years, the Cold War, and the present. Vantoch took special care in describing gender roles and expectations of the time period, some of which were unknown to me. The women chosen for the stewardess profession were typically capable of speaking multiple languages, attended Vassar and Smith, and she “was a member of the Junior League” (35). I was incredibly surprised by how pilots were described. Vantoch states, “The post-war pilot was also a ‘solid citizen and family man’ who was typically married with children. This ‘family man’ was contrasted with rebellious forms of post-war masculinity embodied by James Dean, to Beat poets, and Playboy magazines’ bachelor” (36). When I watch James Dean’s movies now (or even Marlon Brando’s), I find it amazing how the idea of masculinity shifts. There is a great discussion about a “masculinity crisis” that occurred on pages 36 and 37 that needs to be read! Also, page 37 includes a bit of background of the magazine Cosmopolitan, which I’d say is currently a publication that depresses me, and I found it an interesting piece of information.

One of the best parts of the book detailed the fight for black women to become stewardesses. Patricia Banks’ story was powerful to read, and her insight into the insidious forms of racism she encountered was heartwrenching. Vantoch took special care to mention how racism was embedded into the airline’s requirements. Instead of being blatant, the discrimination was less overt. In particular, it shows up in recommendations for how an applicant should look. For example, they’d make note of how applicants should not have “course hair” (60). What is so disturbing about this section of the book is how stereotypes are still pervasive and still hold power over notions of beauty. I think Banks’ bravery was amazing, especially when she said, “Nobody was aware of it. I know the only way to overcome it was to bring it to the attention of the public. People had to know” (65). Patricia Banks, Marlene White, Carol Ruth Taylor are just a few of the women mentioned in this section. The specifics of their cases and the legislation created during this time period is gone into further detail in this chapter.

Vantoch describes how regulations about a stewardess’ appearance became stricter over time, especially the weight requirements. She says, “by regulating the stewardess look down to underwear, airlines extended authority over women’s whole bodies” (118). And it got worse. Stewardesses who went overseas to provide aid to other countries were written about in articles as being the bringers of beauty to foreigners. One specific line that would be hilarious if it weren’t so sad was this: “It was as if bad hair (and the absence of combs) was the real tragedy - and style was America’s humanitarian aid contribution” (124).

The sections of the book discussing how the Cold War impacted stewardesses and perceptions of beauty was illuminating. I have a feeling that my education over the years didn’t do me any favors in understanding the many layers to the Cold War. I had no idea that “in foundational communist texts, women’s social and economic inequality was seen as a capitalist byproduct and limiting women to unpaid household labor represented the apex of capitalist exploitation” (129). Perhaps I too was sold on the images in my text books of the consumer driven culture of America during the Cold War. It’s only now that I see how neither of these conflicting ideologies is perfect but both have their own benefits and downsides. There were times reading this book where I was amazed and pleased by how Soviet women were perceived as valuable workers that made contributions to fields that women still face difficulties with in America, like the sciences (one of my science professors in college told me how she was expected to fetch coffee for her male coworkers).

The latter sections of the book dealt with the influence of ad agencies on the depiction of stewardesses and the amazing ways that stewardesses fought for their rights even before the feminist movement really began to form. I found myself amazed and angered by the influence advertising had over the depiction of

stewardesses in pop culture. Overall, I find the creation of ads interesting, artistic, and powerful, but it's so often a double edged blade. Women are so often objectified in media. There's a point where I feel like sexuality and beauty should be embraced, but at some point a line is crossed and the unfair way in which women are objectified compared to men is no longer something that can be taken lightly.

The sections discussing how stewardesses fought against the airlines over weight regulations, enforced leave after marriages or pregnancies, and age restrictions cut close to this topic of where the line between the power of beauty and objectification exists. Stewardesses used their looks for PR, signal boosting, etc., and I completely see why and appreciate the importance it had on making the sort of inroads that probably helped more women gain power over time. It certainly felt like Vantoch bookended the entire work with the idea that beauty is not trivial. It is absolutely important, and sometimes its importance can be uncomfortable, particularly when it relies on a set of standards we don't have complete control over. And sometimes we bring our own biases into it, as well. It's certainly something that bears thinking about.

Overall, I loved the book, and I feel like I learned so much. Oddly, I found myself extremely interested in the author's note on the sources. I think it was amazing for these women to share their correspondence, pictures, journals, etc. One of the reasons I studied literature in school was because I liked something more than just words in a history book/facts. I wanted the emotional, personal material that went along with these events. I definitely recommend this book. It has an academic slant yet is entirely accessible; the prose is engaging yet not overly informal. There is so much I didn't delve into here, and this non-fiction work wonderfully educates and entertains.

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### **?????? ?????? says**

Vicki Vantoch has an excellent way of adding humor elements to recounts of history. It is a fabulous read to understand how women can be simultaneously proud and embarrassed by our appearance, career, and sexuality. There was not a boring chapter in it for me - from sexist imagery to social icons to the battle between cross country airlines and fighting the courts!

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### **Kit Goode says**

I came at this book hungry for 1960's Americana, but a little bored of the fact that the majority of stories that've been treated right have been men's stories. But I'm putting the cart before the horse here, I'll give you the skinny.

The Jet Sex looks at the history of American air stewarding with a focus on the 1960's (the advent of the Jet and U.S counter-culture), though the author- as a British person with very little knowledge of this subject- did a grand job setting the tone and briefing how commercial air-travel had grown since it's 1930's conception. She was also mindful throughout the book of keeping personal accounts and information in a wider context in a way that felt fluid. I certainly left this book understanding a heck of a lot more about America as a whole than the subject matter covered, and more curious about it all besides.

(In this vein it also gave light to a topic that is becoming evermore pertinent in todays politics, especially amongst the more left-wing of us- The acceptance of the traditionally feminine as valid self-expressions. These women were not any less strong and brave for fighting their battles in tights and lipstick; it is not a

dichotomy of masculine and strong or feminine and weak. If we are to achieve true equality, we have to allow space for The Jet Sex as seriously as we allow for space for Mad Men. And that isn't even a problem to shoulder, not even a little, if the other stories of women are half as interesting, dramatic and fun as the ones in the Jet Sex are.)

Language in the book was fun and accessible without being patronising. As a non-academic and an infrequent non-fiction reader I also found that the notes hold these great little nuggets of information that didn't quite have a place in the book proper, nestled between the citations and further reading. One woman was so dedicated to flying, in light of the airline's unmarried requirement she kept two addresses and phone lines to hide her marriage!

There is very little to objectively criticise about The Jet Sex. There was some information repetition (especially in the midsections), but considering that I also had a similar problem with the author's previous work, I'll put it on the table that it could be at this point be my unfamiliarity with non-fiction. I'm a fast reader, so maybe this is a style choice for people who aren't going to ram through this in a couple of days. The cover also doesn't really do this stellar book justice, but who am I, Chip Kidd?

So let me break it down for you; give the book a go. It's a little pricey, but the chances are if it's not available in your local library it'll be in the universities (and you didn't hear it from me but those guys are usually not on the ball about security for people sitting on their sofas reading books). The Jet Sex'll take you through a world of women who were glamorous, hard working and smart in the face of blistering unfairness. If that's not a set-up that draws you in, well, more fool you.

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