The STEPFORD WIVES

Ira Levin

With an introduction by

Chuck Palahniuk

Praise for *The Stepford Wives*

‘Masterful, ridiculously well crafted and, like the ladies of Stepford themselves, flawless.’

Esquire

‘Levin is the Swiss watchmaker of the suspense novel.’

Stephen King

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REVISIONIST HERSTORY: EVERYWHERE IS STEPFORD

In 1972 Ira Levin told us what lay ahead. Oh, he sounded a loud, clear warning about some pent-up male reaction to the Women's Liberation movement.

In 1972 Levin's outlandish – *but not too outlandish* – idea of men counterattacking feminists was dubbed *The Stepford Wives*. Such a silly idea his was, that hostile husbands, afraid of losing control over their liberated wives, would murder those wives and replace them with pretty, painted dolls. These dolls would boast hourglass figures, and dress stylishly and immaculately. Those vapid dollies would enjoy nothing so much as shopping and housekeeping. Those glazed, pretty dolls, actually *robots*, would be subservient to men. That became the enduring metaphor: The Stepford Wives. A Stepford Wife. Even as the pretty, former fashion model Martha Stewart smiled and polished silver, validating the role of Domestic Goddess to

a new generation, the taint was always there … *a Stepford Wife looked so calm and organized, so lovely and buxom, but she wasn't really alive*.

In 1972 American women were nothing if not alive. So much of 1970s feminism was about the physical body, women accepting and celebrating their carnal selves. Here was the era of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* and the Feminist Women's Health Centre. For women the physical was political, from breast self-examination to at home briskly extracting one's menses with a single use of the Karman cannula. The speculum became a tool of political discourse in exploring the cervix, the os, the urethral sponge. The debate pitched vaginal orgasms against clitoral orgasms. Masturbation became a political action.

And nipples … brassieres were burning and nipples were sighted everywhere. And camel toe: hot pants were everywhere and so was camel toe. We'd banished the girdle and the garter belt. The push was on to ban the razor, and brandishing hairy armpits became a radical political statement.

No one wanted to be crowned Miss America. The Playboy Bunny was an antiquated joke. A woman's place was on the picket line, and it's no wonder men were scared.

Enter Ira Levin with his cautionary tale about husbands seeking retribution. One man is a plastics expert. Another, a pioneer in robotics. Another husband is an expert in human speech. One, Ike Mazzard, is an illustrator in the tradition of Alberto Vargas, a master at accentuating a woman's best features, exaggerating her hair and eyes and lips, and turning her into a centrefold beauty. These men are all members of the same boys' club where they claim to spend their evenings doing charity work. More specifically:

building and repairing toys for needy children. Hah! Toys! Needy children, yes, indeed, Ira Levin was nothing if not funny, and his boy-men enjoy nothing more than holing up in their hilltop clubhouse and redesigning their troublesome wives.

As readers we discover all of this through the eyes of Joanna Eberhart, a wife, a mother and a photographer. She becomes the camera, always watching, focusing, recording each detail in the discovery process. It's 1972, and New York City is a dirty, dangerous place to raise children so despite wanting to stay engaged with the larger world Joanna agrees to move to the idyllic bedroom community of Stepford. Of the two free-spirited women she meets there, first one, then the second seem to lose their resolve and succumb to being pretty, well-dressed zombies.

In the physical world of 1970s feminism, the final time we see Joanna Eberhart she's demanding blood. She's ferreted out the truth about the Stepford Men's Association, and she's standing in a friend's kitchen demanding this little sacrifice, this ultimate physical proof that her friend is a real woman: blood. After that, nothing physical remains of Joanna. We switch to the viewpoint of a new character, a female artist, to see that even Joanna is lost.

Levin did his job. We learned our lesson, got the message, and we can recognize a Stepford Wife from three hundred paces. It wasn't until 1991 when Susan Faludi officially dubbed a male reaction to feminism as 'backlash', but by then we'd already gotten wise. Poor Joanna might be replaced by a vapid, painted doll, but succeeding generations of women would be saved by her example. Nope, no way, we can't say Ira Levin didn't warn us this was coming …

Nevertheless, it's odd how the bookshelves are filling with pretty dolls. Those glazed pretty dolls wearing their stylish designer outfits – Prada and Chanel and Dolce – swilling their martinis and flirting, flirting, flirting in their supreme effort to catch a rich husband. Always a *rich* husband. Instead of political rights, they're fighting for Jimmie Choos. In lieu of protest, they express themselves through shopping. And men, they're no longer the oppressors – these days other women are, older women. In *The Nanny Diaries* and *The Devil Wears Prada* and *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, in this new generation of 'chick lit' novels, men are once more the goal. It's successful women who torment our pretty, painted narrators. Brassieres are back, as are girdles, eyelash curlers, perfumed and meticulously shaved underarms. The speculum and the cervix are forgotten. This it seems is progress: women may now choose to be pretty, stylishly dressed, and vapid. This is no longer the shrill, politically charged climate of 1972; if it's a choice freely made, then it's … okay.

Karl Marx said, 'History repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce.' Even the remake of the *Stepford Wives* movie in 2004 casts an older female character as the ultimate villain. As a Martha Stewart-type, she only wants to make the world a pretty, genteel place, free from the strife of women's liberation. Glenn Close plays the bad guy, as does Miranda Priestly, as did Amanda Farrow in 1959's *The Best of Everything*. Women are the ultimate threat to women. The Stepford remake is, of course, a comedy.

Now everyplace is Stepford, but it's okay. It's fine. This is what the modern politically aware, fully awake, enlightened, assertive woman really, really, *really* wants: a manicure.

We can't say Ira Levin didn't warn us.

‘Today the combat takes a different shape; instead of wishing to put man in a prison, woman endeavors to escape from one; she no longer seeks to drag him into the realms of immanence but to emerge, herself, into the light of transcendence. Now the attitude of the males creates a new conflict: it is with a bad grace that the man lets her go.’

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*