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WHAT'S ON THE SHELF?

Understanding women in their lives is important for men's happiness, divorce lawyer says in new book

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In *Passion and Power: A Life in Three Worlds*, Harriet Newman Cohen chronicles her journey as a divorce lawyer, with clients including actress Linda Lavin, actor Laurence Fishburne and many other celebrities.

Cohen, who is 93 years old, graduated from law school as a single mother of four children in the 1970s. She

Harriet Newman Cohen's first husband strongly advised her against going to law school; that didn't stop the mother of four. Decades later, the divorce lawyer wrote a book about her experiences. (Photo by Beowulf Sheehan)

began practicing a year after the U.S. Supreme Court's decision

in *Roe v. Wade* and on the cusp of what she calls “the divorce revolution.” In what she calls “the case of a lifetime,” she also represented the lesbian partners featured in *Nuclear Family*, a 2021 HBO documentary.

She details these experiences and offers insight into the political and cultural landscape at the time in her memoir. A founding partner of Cohen Stine Kapoor in New York City, Cohen writes that she “was determined to tell this story through the lives and experiences of people—my family, myself, my clients—from the bottom up, as it were, rather than from the top down.”

Cohen recently talked with the ABA Journal about her book, which is available Feb. 5. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Why did you feel the need to write this book?

Well, I wanted to make some sense of my own life and the impact that my life and the experiences in my life had on forming and shaping who I was. So I had a very personal reason, which was to try to find out what had it all meant. But I knew I had been in important places during the many decades that I've lived. Finding myself here in the ninth decade, because I'm 93 years of age, I feel that I've been one of the very, very fortunate ones who have lived a long life with many very, very important experiences. I've been in the “room where it happens” repeatedly.

I've noticed people ask you often about your age. Do you think it's your focus that's kept you working and enjoying your work?

Yes, I think that as a lawyer, I am privileged to live such an exciting life. I belong to a private club, a cultural club, Mark Twain's club, called the Lotos Club, where I think almost everybody by age 65 or 66 has retired. By that point, these people have amassed sufficient wealth, so that they don't need the money to work. And I am one of the only older people who still goes to the office every day and holds down a job and has a paycheck and learns something new from my young colleagues.

In your book, you share your story, but you also delve into political and cultural moments that happened simultaneously. Why was it important to include those perspectives?

In the three worlds I write about, because I break the book up into the three worlds of Harriet Cohen, I found myself at the brink of change. I didn't go to law school until I was 38 years old, so I didn't graduate until I was 41. And I graduated in 1974, as the New York state and the country's laws were just changing in the field of divorce law, from title states to equitable distribution states. So the first thing I was able to be a part of as a brand-new lawyer was the change in the law. I went to work for [Julia Perles], the



woman who became known as “the mother of equitable distribution” in New York. So I had that opportunity to be where the action was just as I emerged from law school. And it made me want to be where the action was from that point forward.

**You write about the moment you knew you wanted to be in “a man’s world.”
What happened?**

Thank you for asking me that question because that was the moment that changed not only my life but the lives of my four daughters and my husband. I was married to my high school sweetheart. I had four children right away because in the earlier world, the man’s world, when I graduated from Barnard in 1952, I was utterly convinced that my role was to be a very talented mother. Eighteen years later, I realized I wanted to be a lawyer. When I told [my husband], he said, “Over my dead body; you’re not going to law school.” I went and spoke with my parents, and I told them that I wanted to go to law school, that I needed them to fund it for me, and that it was going to be an advance on my inheritance. I mean, I was speaking in fancy words. I didn’t know if they had any money. My mother said to me, “If you go to law school, [your husband] will leave you.” And I said to her, “Well, if he leaves me, and if you think my marriage is that fragile, then I had better go to law school because I’m going to need a way to support myself and these four girls.” And then she said to me, “But it’s not your turn. It’s their turn.” And I said, “It may be their turn, but we’re going to sit at the dining room table together. We’re all going to study, and we’re all going to move forward.” Well, the marriage did break. The four girls have told me that their life was hard, that what I did caused them to have to make sacrifices. But it worked out. All of my children are professionals. My oldest daughter is my partner. My second daughter is my office manager, as well as a

professional flutist with a beautiful musical career. My third daughter is a physician. And my fourth daughter is a cracker-jack trial lawyer in Madison, Wisconsin. They're all married. They all have children.

You were one of the only women in law school and in practice after you graduated, but you noted in your book that it wasn't that difficult. Why?

I think because of what I had come from and what I had gone through. I had four children under the age of 10. And when I went to law school, it was four under the age of 18. I was accustomed to being a manager of that kind of household and of handling a difficult husband. I didn't handle him that well. He left. But it turns out that was probably one of the best things that ever could have happened to me because I met [Arthur Feinberg], an extraordinary man the following year. My boyfriend for nine years, who becomes my husband, becomes a very important mentor of mine and gives me a great deal of confidence to take on the world. The men in my world helped me to become strong in a man's world. I had a very strong and positive relationship with a wonderful father, an immigrant from Ukraine. A wonderful brother, five-and-a-half years younger than me, but he was my best friend. An incredible second husband. And then mentors along the way, like Louis Nizer, who was probably the most famous lawyer in his day, who had me at his side in my second job. I made my female clients strong, as well, and we took on their husbands. I got a reputation as a fighter for women, a fighter for reform, a fighter for what was right.

Who do you hope reads your book, and what do you hope they get out of it?

I hope that lawyers read the book. I hope that the public reads the book. I hope that men read the book, so they can get an idea of where women came from, of how hard it was, of what a fight it was, of how important it is to the happiness of men that they understand the women in their lives. And I hope women read my book. I think my book will give many women the courage to improve their lives, to go back to school, to work alongside their children, to work it out and also to get divorced if that's going to improve their lives.

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