“The sad thing is that the Women’s Liberation Movement has created a backlash of sorts—and the subject of the unhappy middle-class wife is almost taboo ... Be thankful you’re not a fiction writer baby—I know of five first-rate women novelists who say the last thing they want to do is start a novel at this point.” (Sue Kaufman to Judith Krantz, excerpted from Sex and Shopping: The Confessions of a Nice Jewish Girl: An Autobiography)

The perfect home. The perfect family. The perfect stay-at-home wife. The June Cleaver of pop culture. This idyllic image was shattered in the 1960s by a burst of second-wave feminism that swept across America. The women that drove the liberation movement were active in many ways: protests, demonstrations, legislation, and literature. In fact, a key element of the second wave was women writers expressing their frustrations through the fictional novel. Among those books was Sue Kaufman’s Diary of Mad Housewife (1967). Her novel centered on Bettina Balser, a Manhattan housewife and mother teetering on the edge of insanity. She attempted to save herself by writing a diary that evoked her innermost feelings and desires. This paper will explore the dynamics behind this book, as it is asserted that this work was a key reflection of the women’s liberation movement and sparked a whole genre of the ‘mad housewife.’"
The Women’s Liberation Movement was galvanized by literary developments in the 1950s and 1960s. Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1953) and Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) explored the underpinnings behind women’s potential empowerment socially, politically, and culturally. Though Friedan focused on white, middle-class women and Beauvoir on French women and feminist philosophy, their aims intersected. Both works encouraged women to rethink their position in the world personally, professionally, and politically. More specifically, the role of women in the home was no longer viewed as faultless. In essence the domestic sphere became a contested arena: the personal became political.

In particular, Friedan blasted the myth of the happy, selfless, middle-class housewife. She insisted that women were not content as homemakers and in fact desired a different purpose beyond the domestic sphere. At times unable to articulate “the problem without a name,” Friedan sought to answer to why women felt the way they did and encouraged a reconsideration of social norms. A key question in this book was “is this all?” She ended her tome quoting from one of her case studies, “I want something more than my husband and my children and my home.” Freidan concluded that women should find out what is missing in their lives, as it could mean the success the nation.

Within this historical context came the publication of *Diary of Mad Housewife* in 1967. Many critics have viewed this work as a “feminist novel.” I would also see this work as a “consciousness-raising novel.” Whether intentionally or unintentionally, I would argue Kaufman’s novel fits both of these labels. Joanne Barken writes that as a “feminist novel,” *Diary of a Mad Housewife* was a part of the late 1960s attempt at “popular realistic fiction by women about contemporary women’s lives.” I would also
add that Lisa Hogeland’s assessment of a “conscious-raising” novel also relates to
Kaufman’s book, though she focuses primarily on novelists of the 1970s. In some ways
Sue Kaufman’s work “depicted a woman’s process of consciousness-raising, more or
less explicitly engaging the women’s liberation movement’s concern in the 1970s with
consciousness-raising novel as a wholly new way of understanding and making political
change.”8 However, despite viewing *Diary of a Mad Housewife* as a “feminist novel” or
“conscious raising,” Kaufman would not have considered herself a “women’s movement
writer.”9

So who was Sue Kaufman? She was born 7 August 1926 in Long Island, New
York. She married Dr. Jeremiah A. Barondess in 1953 and had one son, James.
Academically she attended Vassar College and obtained an A.B. in 1947. In that same
year she published her first short story in *Junior Bazaar*. Professionally, Sue Kaufman
was an active writer and editor, publishing under “Sue Kaufman” and not her married
name. It appears she was keen to maintain a separate identity from her married life.
Kaufman was an editorial assistant at *Mademoiselle* between 1947-49. After that and
until her death in 1977, she worked as a freelance fiction writer, known for her short
stories in national magazines and her novels, such as *Diary of a Mad Housewife* (1967),
*The Happy Summer Days* (1959), and *Falling Bodies* (1970). Her literary efforts did not
go unnoticed, as she was a two-time recipient of an honorable mention in the Martha
Foley collection of short stories.10

What is interesting and perhaps still not fully understood was whether the novel,
*Diary of a Mad Housewife*, mirrored Kaufman’s own life. Was the book a revelation of
her frustrations as a housewife, mom, and professional writer? Speculation has circulated
that she suffered from bouts of mental illness, such as depression. Online sites have alluded to a bitter marriage that left Kaufman stagnant and frustrated. Others have noted that perhaps Kaufman had embarked on an affair and wanted to, but could never, leave her married life.  

Many of those concerns stem from the manner of her untimely death. While her obituary does not specifically mention the cause of death, speculation has abounded that Kaufman, suffering from mental illness, took her own life by jumping from an apartment deck where she lived onto the courtyard below. Others have said she endured an illness like cancer. Judith Krantz, long-time friend of Kaufman and romance writer herself, in *Sex and Shopping*, wrote that her death was a suicide. She pointed out that, in her opinion, Kaufman’s husband, who she called “Jerry”, kept pertinent information from her regarding Kaufman’s frequent institutionalization for depression. She hints that Kaufman may have committed suicide that day because she was supposed to be sent to another institution.  

So what is *Diary of a Mad Housewife* about? In some ways Kaufman’s novel is the antidomestic novel. According to Annegret S. Ogden, the “antidomestic fiction” novel came in the late 1960s, and similar to the main character Bettina in *Diary of a Mad Housewife*, the “woman could function with no real sense of her own identity.” The novel centered on Bettina Balser, aged 36, a mother of two and a housewife living in Manhattan. She was married to Jonathan, an attorney for a huge corporate firm. However, much discontent loomed beneath the surface of this supposed idyllic marriage.
Bettina wrote her private ruminations in a diary, which she publicly referred to as her “accounts” to her daughters. This personal narrative kept her sane and gave the reader insight into the mad life she lived. Her job was to care for the kids, assist her husband on the ladder of social and financial mobility, and manage the housemaid, Lottie.

However, Bettina was lost on many levels. She struggled with the boredom of living the life of a Manhattan housewife. She became inert, looked gaunt, barely eating, unable to do the laundry, and refusing to take care of her life. Instead of supporting her, Jonathan ridiculed her in front of the kids. He said at one point in the book “You don’t look well ... you look just terrible. Your color’s rotten, you look exhausted, you seem to be losing weight, and to top it off you don’t seem to care how you look.”

Beyond this, Bettina struggled to find meaning in her life and enjoy sexual fulfillment with her husband. She succumbed to her husband’s call to sex, “Hey, Teen—How’s about a little ole roll in the hay?”, but only did it to make him happy. In addition, Bettina did not share her husband’s desire to host parties and make new social circles.

The book took a dramatic turn when Bettina met playwright George Prager at a party. Despite his brusque nature, Bettina embarked on an affair with him. Yet, Prager was no different than her husband. In fact, he was condescending and rude to her. Jean E. Kennard contended that the plot of the female adultery in the 1970s literature indicated a woman was in “a search for self fulfillment”. A ‘convention’ or model of a female adulterer or a woman torn between two lovers became a new common theme in some novels of the Women’s Liberation period.
Diary of a Mad Housewife ended with a pregnancy scare and violent confrontation between Prager and Bettina. Bettina shouted at Prager “I hate you ... I hate you and always have. And the real reason I’m so worked up is I can’t bear to think of any part of you growing in my body ... my womb!” The affair was over and Bettina returned home to a husband who had revelations of his own. In fact, Jonathan bared all to Bettina, revealing that he has lost all of their money and was falling out of favor with the bosses at his firm. Moreover, Jonathan told her his most important secret, which was that he had been having an affair and been seeing the same therapist that she had seen a while back. Undaunted and not surprised, Bettina took the news in stride. She was left with the choice of disclosing her own affair or making the choice to divorce based on her husband’s indiscretions. As in the beginning of the novel, she chose to mask her emotions, withhold information on her own affair, and stay with her husband.

How was this book received? The book came out in 1967, a period when the Women’s Liberation Movement was beginning to sweep across the whole country. Overall the reaction to the book was mixed. On one hand, there were critical reviews, such as the one in The New Yorker. In that magazine the author noted that “Miss Kaufman expresses herself in a shrill voice in the overstuffed account of the life of a thirty-six year old wife and mother who lives in a large, comfortable apartment on Central Park West.” He ended his review remarking, “It is surprising that a writer of Miss Kaufman’s proved talent should offer this as a serious work.” However, there were voices of praise. Edith C. Howley in Best Sellers wrote that Kaufman’s “writing ... is superb and many a woman will recognize herself in Bettina as she becomes so real a person.” In another review, the author wrote “Women will understand and sympathize
with Tina’s problems, and Miss Kaufman exposes the frustrations, dangers, and foibles of life in ‘fun city’ with a shrewd and knowing eye.”

Indeed, Kaufman had opened a Pandora’s box of female marital discontent and echoed the pulse of Betty Freidan’s pivotal book. Maria Lauret noted that her book and others at the time “were the first of the new women’s writing to be widely reviewed in the mainstream press and discussed on talk shows, with the predictable result that they quickly achieved best seller status.” Lauret pointed out that a rise in this form of literature helped to amass a new and large audience that the commercial publishing companies were waiting to accommodate.

The popularity of the book led to a film being made with the same title. *Diary of a Mad Housewife*, the motion picture, was released in August 1970. It was directed and produced by Frank Perry and written by his wife Eleanor. Richard Benjamin played Jonathan Balser, Frank Langella was George Prager, and Carried Snodgress fulfilled the role of Tina Balser. In many ways the film was a direct adaptation of the novel. The actors were cast to mirror the roles they had in the book. The only major change was the ending. The book closed with Bettina Balser deciding to stay with Jonathan. However, in the film, Tina was seen in a group therapy session asking for help on what to do after learning of her husband’s affair. Tina received shouts from all parts of the room, with some saying she should stay with Jonathan while others insisting she should leave. The film ended with a close up of Tina’s face, as the camera narrowed solely to her eyes, leaving the audience wondering what decision she made. The intention of Eleanor Perry was to make the ending that way. Perry noted in an interview that “our feeling was that Tina would eventually not stay married to Jonathan (analysis doesn’t change the basic
character) and that she would find more in life for herself than the traditional feminine role,” and added that she wanted to keep the film “open ended” in its final scenes.24

Similar to the book, the film had mixed reviews. On one side, it was widely praised. Roger Ebert noted in 1970 that “What makes this movie work, however, was that its played entirely from the housewife’s point of view, and that housewife was played brilliantly by Carrie Snodgress.”25 The acting did indeed help carry the film, as Snodgress received a best actress award at the Golden Globes and was nominated for a best actress prize at the Academy Awards in 1971.26 Likewise, Frank Langella and Richard Benjamin were also nominated for Golden Globes.

How did Sue Kaufman feel about the film? While there is no biography or autobiography of her, we do have a small glimpse of what she felt about the film. In the late 1970s, James R. Messenger queried novelists about how they felt about their books turning into major film productions. The article came out in 1978, and Kaufman died in 1977. Presumably, this interview was conducted sometime close to the time of her death. Kaufman was not mentioned in all responses. One could speculate that either she did not address all the questions posed to her or her responses were purposefully left out. We do, however, have two of her answers. Kaufman’s response to the question of whether she agreed with the character’s representation of the film was “I feel the character of Jonathan, the husband, was made too much of a caricature—and I felt that they did not do enough with the setting, the madness of New York, an important part of the book.”27 Her answer to whether she was consulted for the film was “No, alas.”28 With these responses, one does wonder how Kaufman felt overall about the film, even as it was well received and rewarded.
What about the lead actress, Carrie Snodgress? How did she feel about the film and the praise that she received for it? Before filming, Snodgress had to do 5 screen tests before she got the role of Tina Balser. Looking back on the film, she described director Frank Perry as “hostile and cold.” She added, “Oddly enough, I took that as a stage direction: ‘Maybe that’s what he wants—Nothing.’”

Despite the apparent friction between her and Perry, the film became a hit and she became the ‘new’ actress on the Hollywood scene, receiving Golden Globe awards, Academy Award nominations, and several others. Added to these developments, once the film premiered, was her new relationship with singer/songwriter Neil Young. In essence they became the power couple or royalty of Hollywood, as “he was the big pop star, [and] she was the movie star nominated for an Academy Award.”

Friend Elliot Roberts noted that “Wherever they went it was a big thing [as a couple]. Diary was a big woman’s film—people looked to Carrie like she was this incredible political figure. She was what Jane Fonda wanted to be.”

Despite this newfound fame, Snodgress did not embrace the limelight, as she was not a public woman’s liberation figure nor a typical film actress looking for celebrity status. In fact, Snodgress very quickly shunned Hollywood and all that it offered. Looking back at the film and her nomination, she stated, “When I got nominated for Diary of a Mad Housewife, I didn’t think ‘Aah, now I’ll get more money.’ My dream had always just been to do my works well, fall in love, and build a life for myself.”

This mindset induced her to not attend the Academy Awards in 1971. Johann Putnoy noted that “We were all anti-establishment and she had the guts to thumb her nose at Hollywood.” Guillermo Giachetti added, “It was really considered very ballsy of her,” “I
always felt for Carrie, giving up her career for the love of a man.”33 She may have earned some support among the anti-establishment and political figures; however, it did damage her reputation and support in Hollywood. After *Diary of a Mad Housewife*, Snodgress moved away Los Angeles, had a child with Neil Young, and became in essence a “hippie” of sorts. She later returned to Hollywood, but struggled early on to find producers willing to take her back.

What do Snodgress and Kaufman have in common? On one hand they lived in different time periods, diverse locations (Snodgress on West coast, Kaufman on East coast), and had dissimilar occupations. On the other hand, these two women were both mothers, career-minded women, and were intrinsically linked together by the chronicle of a housewife going barmy. Indeed, both women seemingly shunned the fame they earned from their work in *Diary of a Mad Housewife*. The film and the novel undoubtedly made them ‘heroines’ or faces of the Women’s Liberation Movement due to how they challenged the image of the perfect housewife. It seemed as if the fame and accolades from *Diary of a Mad Housewife* forced them to retreat more and more from the limelight. After the early 1970s, none of Kaufman’s hardbacks became films and Snodgress turned away from Hollywood. Moreover, their professional and private lives seemingly were imbued with struggles with the men they loved. Rumors abounded about the relationship between Kaufman and her husband, while Snodgress and Young had a very public breakup.34 In some ways, these women share similar lives, fears, and experiences.

In conclusion, *Diary of a Mad Housewife*, the film and the novel, both helped to change the genre of feminist literature and films not only in the 1970s but also into the modern period. The ideal image of the perfect housewife was forever shattered in the
minds of audiences everywhere, with new attention and concern towards their mental and emotional psyche. Kaufman and Snodgress, both in the novel and on the silver screen, evoked the fears, frustrations, and insanity of domestic life and tapped into what Friedan wrote years earlier, that which is ‘the problem that has no name.’

This fascination with the ‘mad housewife’ feeds itself into our culture today, with high rated televisions show of the past and present like *Desperate Housewives* and *Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*. Likewise, film such as the *Stepford Wives* show that the interest in this genre has not dwindled. People flock to films or read books that break down the barriers of idyllic domestic life. Moreover, there is a plethora of self-help literature to aid women today to cope with running a home.

Unfortunately, unlike the novel that has been republished, few today have seen the film that garnered so much critical claim in the 1970s. *Diary of a Mad Housewife*, the motion picture, till lingers only in VHS format and is not in a modern format accessible to a large audience. YouTube has been the only salvation for those wishing to watch it. Perhaps, as we approach the fifty-year mark of the Women’s Liberation Movement attention will be given to this novel and film and in turn create a whole new audience ready to embrace it.

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3 Carol Hanisch, “The Personal is Political”. In Firestone, Shulasmith and Anne Koedt. *Notes from the Second Year: Women’s Liberation: Major Writings of the Radical Feminists* (New York: Radical Feminism, 1970).

Joanne Barken. “(Ms.) Reading Erica Jong’s Fear of Flying.” Dissent (Fall 2009): 97-100.


7 Barken, “(Ms.)”, 97.


12 Krantz, Sex and Shopping, 254.


14 Ogden, The Great, 199.


16 Kaufman, Diary, 5.

17 Kaufman, Diary, 54.


19 Kaufman, Diary, 290.


24 Kay Loveland, Estelle Changas “Eleanor Perry: One Woman in Film,” Film Comment (Spring 1971); 7; 1.
The film was also nominated at the BAFTA and the National Society of Film Critics Awards (USA). She won Star of Tomorrow honor and Best Dramatic Performance at the Laurel Awards. See www.imbd.com.


This quote is cited extensively in many different sources online. Noted in “Obituary for Carrie Snodgress,” 4 October 2004, BBC News online.

