

PROFILES OF FEMALE GENIUS:  
Thirteen Creative Women Who Changed the World  
by Gene N. Landrum  
Prometheus Books, Amherst NY 1994  
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Reviewed by Peg Tittle

Finally, a 437 page counter to the claim 'But there are no great women \_\_\_\_\_s!' Not quite. Not at all, in fact. Rather, this is a 437 page attempt to appear politically correct: Landrum wrote *Profiles of Genius* in 1993 and managed to include not one woman (yet neglected to properly title his book *Profiles of Male Genius*).

Though Landrum clearly states his criteria for inclusion--candidates must not have inherited or married into their profession/success, they must have reached the top of their field and stayed there for at least ten years, they must have had international influence, and they must have accomplished their major achievement within the past forty years--he gives no justification for his definition of genius. And I don't think it's a good definition--it's neither sufficiently inclusive nor sufficiently exclusive. At the very least, it creates a bias against many fields (even the most brilliant of mathematicians probably don't dominate the field for ten years) as well as a bias toward many fields (of his chosen thirteen, nine are in business or entertainment).

Perhaps more important, since Landrum does call his book *Profiles of Female Genius*, he does not compare his definition of female genius to his definition of male genius. If it's different, what is the basis for differentiating? And if it's not different, why weren't these women simply included in the original book, *Profiles of Genius*?

It is hard for me to take Landrum seriously, when it is clear that he doesn't take me (women) seriously: he mentions a hypothetical "little old lady" (p.44) as a paragon of ignorance; while describing the role of Catholic nuns in Madonna's early life, he adds the parenthetical snicker "Can you imagine a convent with Madonna orchestrating the entertainment?" (p.64). Worse are the sexist assumptions scattered throughout: for example, he says that "Oprah Winfrey has a schedule that

would fatigue most men" (p.43), implying that most men have more energy than most women.

Unfortunately, the style is as poor as the content: many individual items are repeated, sometimes within the same chapter; and the book often reads like a list (findings are presented without much analysis). On top of that, the chapter on Ayn Rand is completely missing, as are parts of the Meir and Steinem chapters.

Notwithstanding all of the above, there were some interesting statistics. About half of the women attended all-female schools. Though female mentors were significant, the support of fathers rather than mothers was clearly instrumental. And, many experienced a fair amount of transience during childhood.

In addition to these interesting aspects of the profile of female genius, I learned some interesting things about the women themselves. Most memorable is the feminist side of Mary Kay: she created her firm to provide job opportunities for working mothers, in reaction to the systemic male chauvinism in the workplace that she had experienced.

In his last chapter, Landrum compares the profile of female genius with the profile of male genius: in some respects, the women and men are similar (both tend to experience formative traumas) and in some respects, they're different (beauty was far more important to the women than to the men--eight of the thirteen geniuses Landrum chose "either sold beauty products . . . or needed beauty to perform" (p.404).

This comparison, however, is for the most part simply a reflection of current gender differences in our society, so it seems that male and female geniuses differ from each other much like male and female non-geniuses do. Pity--I was hoping genius surpasses sex. And it could be it does--perhaps it's only Landrum who hasn't.