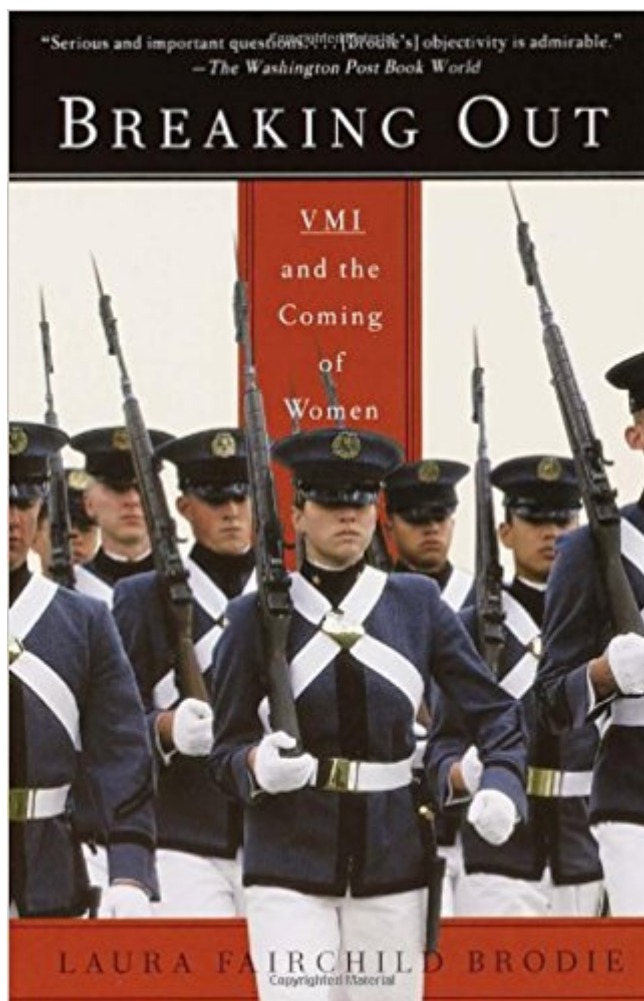


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Breaking Out: VMI And The Coming Of Women



Synopsis

On July 26, 1996, the United States Supreme Court nullified the single-sex admissions policy of the Virginia Military Institute, the last all-male military college in America. Capturing the voices of female and male cadets, administrators, faculty, and alumni, Laura Brodie tells the story of the Institute's intense planning for the inclusion of women and the problems and triumphs of the first year of coeducation. Brodie takes us into the meetings where every aspect of life at VMI was analyzed from the perspective of a woman's presence: housing, clothing, haircuts, dating, and the infamous "Ratline"—the months of physical exertion, minimal sleep, and verbal harassment to which entering cadets are subjected. Throughout the process the administration's aim was to integrate women successfully without making adjustments to VMI's physical standards or giving up its tradition of education under extreme stress. No other military college had done so much to prepare. But would it work? With everyone on the Post, we hold our breath as Brodie takes us through Hell Night, the unrelenting months of the Ratline, the fraternization, hazing, and authority issues that arose, the furtive sexual encounters, the resentments and, for the women, the daily difficulties of maintaining a feminine identity in a predominantly male world. Despite the challenges, we see the women ultimately making a place for themselves. Though new problems continue to arise, Brodie's lively and inspiring account makes it clear that VMI's story is an important and timely one of institutional transformation.

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Customer Reviews

A 1970s feminist poster featured cartoon character Nancy burning down a clubhouse that sported a "No Girls" sign on its front door. Nothing so dramatic happened when, in 1989, the Department of Justice told the Virginia Military Institute that it had to admit women. The school fought the order--at a cost of ten million dollars, making a small dent in its \$250 million endowment--but the Supreme Court ruled against the school in 1996. In this engrossing, informed and even-handed analysis of the institution's "assimilation" (the word carefully chosen by VMI's administration) of women, Brodie brings a clear, feminist perspective to her analysis of the school's history, students and bureaucracy. As a part-time teacher at VMI, a member of VMI's Executive Committee for the Assimilation of Women and wife of the band director, Brodie has both an insider's and outsider's perspective. In her nuanced and surprising account of VMI's struggle to change deeply embedded traditions, she charts how specific words and phrases in the cadets' established slang had to be altered, how the school's "Code of Gentleman" was viewed as a rudimentary sexual harassment policy and how seriously many of the male cadets assumed the responsibility for making the new system work. She also critiques VMI's all-male history and atmosphere, which have been, in small and large ways, profoundly misogynist. Brodie's account concludes on a cautiously optimistic note, as VMI's first female cadets graduated in 1999 to little controversy. (May) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

In 1996, the Supreme Court ruled that the Virginia Military Institute would have to admit women, ending over a century and a half of state-funded single-sex education and creating great uncertainty about the future of the institution. This account, written by a feminist, part-time English professor and member of the VMI community, attempts to introduce the reader to the culture of VMI and to chronicle the process through which it underwent minimal alterations to include women. Brodie, the wife of the VMI bandleader, actually participated in the transition and was in a particularly good position to observe this period of change. This highly readable book, based primarily upon personal experience and interviews, presents a positive view of VMI's efforts to assimilate women rather than accommodate them and is the only volume published to date to deal with this aspect of VMI's history. Recommended for larger academic and public libraries.-Theresa McDevitt, Indiana Univ. of Pennsylvania Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Just read this fascinating book, about...what else, VMI!! Its title..... BREAKING OUT by Laura Fairchild Brodie! Terrific read, for every parent and cadet. Informative for those who have female

cadets, or those who want to know "insider facts and fiction" about the ratline.....or decipher all that "alphabet soup, language"..... or why VMI became the last Military Institute to become co-ed ... how it was handled and sometimes, mishandled! Easy, informative, entertaining read.

For someone who remembers the media coverage of the first woman to The Citadel, and VMI, I was impressed by how VMI prepared for the assimilation of women into their ranks, even though they made mistakes by not training their second and third cadets that first year, which undid much of the positive done the year before. Still, they are to be commended for what they have done. Change is hard, more so for some than others.

Good book

Excellent read. A real eye opener. As the mother of a daughter at VMI, it was a very interesting read. It is interesting to see that some things change and some things simply stay the same.

Nicely detailed, objective story of VMI's efforts to accept women.

Brodie's book is perhaps the best written and most well researched work on the admission of women into both VMI and any US Service Academy or formerly all-male military academy yet. I credit Brodie with this success for two reasons: First, Brodie has a unique perspective on the behind-the-scenes processes involved with assimilation of women as she worked on them. Secondly, the book is a good length--long enough to be detailed, but short enough to be free from erroneous details. The majority of the book I think is objective. There are only two or three instances in the book that feel a little "feminist" but that is okay with me. It is hard to write a good book about what VMI actually IS without actually having to deal with being an actual cadet at the school at some point or another. Without actually having been a cadet, Brodie describes the school process and "politics" beautifully. To be sure, VMI was the last all-male school to admit women, a point of pride to many at the Institute, however, most books on other schools that I've read, like the Citadel or USNA, are from an early female-cadet's perspective. Brodie's book is one of simultaneously outside AND inside perspective. She has the unique perspective to write on the process toward admitting women and witnessing the triumphs and tragedies of the initial classes, but she is also separated from the politics and bias of actually dealing with being one of those first female cadets. Though she mentions some quotes from Ruth Bader Ginsberg's majority opinion on the case, it would also be

interesting to supplement this reading with Justice Scalia's complete dissenting opinion in the VMI Case which is found in *Scalia Dissents: Writings of the Supreme Court's Wittiest, Most Outspoken Justice* pp 194-232.

Reading this book is like reading a biography of someone still alive: you know the information you're getting is incomplete. The story isn't over yet. In this case, most (or many?) of the women who entered the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) in the second half of Dr Brodie's book are graduating in 2001. The questions the author asks about how the women will fare as upper-class cadets, and how they will relate to incoming rats, male and female, in later classes can now, more or less, be answered. This isn't really a criticism of the book, but more of a hope that someday we may see another volume, or at least an updated epilogue, that addresses these questions. It's often said, in this book and elsewhere, that nobody who hasn't been through the ratline can ever really understand VMI. To a certain extent, that may well be true. But insofar as any one who hasn't had that experience can be an insider at VMI, Dr Brodie seems to be one. Dr Brodie introduces herself by saying 'I am the band director's wife.' But she's also an accomplished academic, a Ph.D., a professor, and a self-described feminist. I was pleasantly surprised, therefore, that Dr Brodie doesn't attempt, as other academic feminists have, to describe VMI in the sociological language of male tribal ritual, primitive societies, and the like. Dr Brodie clearly has sympathy for the women in the ratline, and the males -- cadets, faculty, and administrators -- who tried to smooth their way into the Corps. At the same time, though, her tone on the whole is not censuring toward cadets and administrators who resisted 'assimilation.' (She seems to have less patience for anti-assimilation alumni, though that may be just my interpretation.) And she is even-handed in recounting the battles VMI has had with the Justice Department and the courts. I picked up this book less because of my specific interest in the assimilation of women than because I was interested in learning what life at VMI is (was?) like -- culture, traditions, the daily experience of the Corps. Although shedding light on those topics was not Dr Brodie's main objective, I do think I have a much clearer picture of what goes on at one of America's most historic educational institutions. My major disappointment with this book is all the more disturbing given Dr Brodie's academic background: there is no index and no bibliography. I hope these deficiencies (plus, as another review on this page notes, the stupidly reversed cover photo) can be remedied when a later edition comes out.

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