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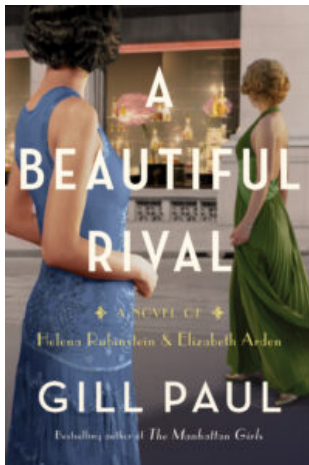
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# A Beautiful Rival by Gill Paul: Elizabeth Arden and Helena Rubenstein Push Each Other to Greatness



BY HELEN PIPER

When Gill Paul was researching intra-war Paris she stumbled upon a PBS documentary about the rivalry between beauty titans Helena Rubinstein and Elizabeth Arden. No stranger to historical rivalries – Paul had already depicted the Maria Callas/Jackie Kennedy dynamic in a previous book – she featured the result of her research in her latest novel *A Beautiful Rival* (William Morrow, 2023).

“Jealousy is a deep-rooted, incredibly powerful human emotion we can all identify with,” Paul explains. “And rivalry can inspire humans to push themselves to greater achievements. Elizabeth Arden and Helena Rubinstein are part of an age-old history of rivalries. Perhaps there is a feeling that women rivals will resort to bitchy back-biting, scratching and hair-pulling, but that certainly wasn’t the case with Maria Callas and Jackie Kennedy, both of whom retained their dignity throughout their overlapping relationships with Onassis. Helena and Elizabeth went to great lengths to sabotage each other’s businesses, and some of their strategies were very aggressive for the so-called ‘gentler sex.’”

Still, the competition was not only a negative. Paul is convinced they wouldn’t have pushed themselves so hard if wasn’t for their rivalry. Both Rubinstein and Arden came from humble backgrounds – albeit different – and built businesses in an age when women were expected to be housewives. Paul points out their extraordinary achievements: creating vast global empires from scratch. They had no family money and at the time it was impossible for women to get bank loans. But Arden and Rubinstein not only manage to start businesses, but also drove themselves to be bigger and better, shattering glass ceilings as they went.

“Perhaps their achievements as feminist heroes are not taken seriously because they worked in the cosmetics industry and some of their advertisements had messages we wouldn’t endorse today?” Paul says.

Despite the fact that both women went outside the traditional female role, it was not beyond them to play on the expectations of the times. In one of her adverts Rubinstein asks, “Has he said he loves you lately? If not, you need my Endocrine Hormone cream.” Arden’s advertising promised to “prevent freckles and keep skin from darkening”.

Advertising aside, neither of them lived a traditional life. Both Elizabeth and Helena put their businesses before their marriages, and Helena put her work before her children too. Paul explains, “But they were only doing what male entrepreneurs have done through the ages. There’s still a double standard, with media stories criticizing women in business for not being hands-on parents and doting partners, in a way that they would never criticise Elon Musk, say, or Bill Gates.”



author Gill Paul

Helena Rubinstein also faced open anti-semitism, but she decided to make her heritage a feature rather than trying to hide it. She played on her 'exoticism' in her adverts and in the dramatic way she dressed. Her dark hair was always scraped back to emphasize her famous profile, and she wore lots of striking pieces of jewelry contrasting with bold self-colored gowns. This strategy worked in brand-building but when she wanted to lease a Park Avenue triplex she was refused because she was Jewish. Her response?

She bought the entire building.

Elizabeth Arden's choice to focus on business rather than her marriages was met with speculation about her sexuality. Paul has a different perspective. "My instinct is that Elizabeth wasn't a strongly sexual woman. She put business squarely first in her priorities and both of her marriages were to men she thought would boost her social standing." At one point, Elizabeth fell in love with a married man, which gave her the thrill of the romance without the need to compromise her commitment to work."

Paul only writes about subjects that she admires, and as she worked on this book, she did extensive research. She discovered some major gaps and contradictions in the existing biographies, which gave her freedom as a novelist. All thoughts, feelings and dialogue in the novel were invented. Still, Paul endeavors to give the novel as a whole an "emotional plausibility". She also tries to consider the feelings of any relatives that might still be alive, and she hopes that if anyone who was related did pick up the novel "they would feel my depiction was ultimately affectionate."

**About the contributor:** Helen Piper is a freelance journalist, and currently working on her first novel. Previously she worked as a lawyer.

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