

The Huffington Post



Peggy Drexler

Gasp! Katie Plays Rough

Posted September 11, 2007 | 06:07 PM (EST)

I haven't read Edward Klein's new book about Katie Couric: *Katie, the Real Story*.

And I probably won't.

I think I already know how the story goes: ambitious young woman cuts some corners, had some affairs (got to have those affairs), breaks some China, gets to the top, does what she has to stay there.

And with that story again comes the question: are women held to different standards than men? And once again, even a casual scan of the record says: of course they are.

The review of the book in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, home town paper for CNN, where she made her journalistic bones, says the book paints her as a "cold, calculating diva." Help me out here: is there a male equivalent for the word "diva?"

I'm going to go out on a limb here and say that self-effacing Mike Wallace didn't get to the top by signing his inter-office memos with a smiley face. Neither did Dan Rather, or Tom Brokaw, or Brian Williams or, even journalism's paterfamilias Walter Cronkite.

Big news is a tough business, with a very big prize going to those who can win a competition where people don't always play nice. It's the same anywhere many people want what few can have: like getting your kid into the best Upper East Side pre-school.

But once again, we see that familiar gender partitioning: bitch-bad; son-of-a bitch-tough.

Katie is simply at the end of a conga-line of women who had to suffer the same -- like Martha Stewart, Carly Fiorina, Hillary Clinton, Barbara Streisand. Maybe Madonna was on to something when she said about Martha Stewart: There is just seems to be something about blond, powerful women that pisses people off."

Of the darker hues, there is Judith Regan who wanted to publish O.J. and Leona Helmsley, who just left \$12 million to her dog, while stiffing two of her grand kids. Ok, there's bitch, and there's crazy bitch.

Spin the dial and you come up with E-Bay's Meg Whitman, honcho of 11,000 people, owner of a net worth of 1.3 and mayor of the prototype global Internet community. No b-word for her, mainly because she comes off as your slightly loopy neighbor you love to have over to help kill a bottle of Chardonnay on the back deck. Softer patina, but in some ways every bit the stereotype as the others.

And you can bet, one snappish moment reported anonymously or caught on a cell phone video, and she will be cast into the pen with the rest of the snarling anti-fems.

Is this just another shading of our celebrity culture -- not all that different from how we divide female film stars into good girls and bad girls? Or does this speak to women everywhere?

A 2005 Catalyst report called *Women Take Care, Men Take Charge*, argues the latter: that stereotyping is alive, well and stubbornly limiting to lives and careers. Both men and women surveyed said women were better at things like supporting and rewarding. And both said that men excel at more conventionally masculine skills like influencing superiors and delegating responsibility. While women said that women were better problem solvers, men said just the opposite -- a problem given the fact that men greatly outnumber women in the upper strata of leadership.

We've traveled far, but the fact that we are trying to reconcile Katie's sweet face with her sharp elbows, says the day when we default to simple equality in matters gender lies somewhere in our future.

Until then, I'm afraid, we're going to continue to apply swift judgment on women who play rough, win big and -- if ratings are any indication - read us the evening news.