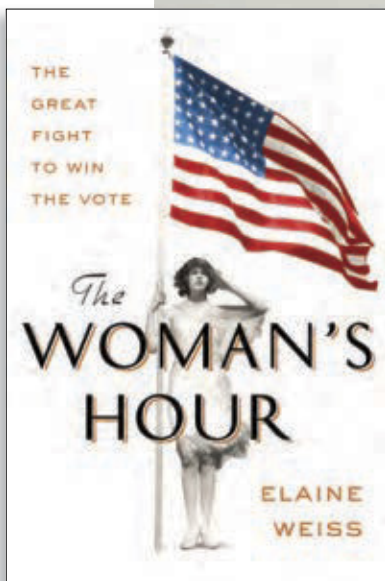


Elaine Weiss's new book, *The Woman's Hour*, puts excitement into the suffragettes' fight to win the vote

By WENDY SMITH

One of Elaine Weiss's most remarkable achievements in her new book, *The Woman's Hour: The Great Fight to Win the Vote* (Viking, Mar. 2018), is that she has written a historical narrative with the furious urgency of a thriller. Even readers well versed in American history will likely be surprised to learn that the ratification of the 19th Amendment came down to a single vote in the Tennessee state legislature in the summer of 1920. Tennessee was the 36th state to ratify the amendment, giving it the three-fourths total necessary to become law. Had one more representative voted no, women might have had to wait decades longer to get the right to vote.

"The suffs sensed that the pendulum was swinging," Weiss explains, using the contemporary nickname for suffragists (their opponents were called antis). In the months before the Tennessee vote, ratification had stalled with a high-profile defeat in Delaware and more predictable losses in Deep South states. "They knew that if they didn't



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get it now it might have been delayed quite a bit. Women didn't get the vote in Switzerland until 1971."

Weiss's vivid account shows the suffs twisting arms, dangling favors, and making compromises like true politicians. "These women had to learn to pull the levers of power," she says. "They were stymied in Congress for 40 years; woman suffrage was introduced every year for 40 years. They had to learn how to chip away so an idea that seemed totally impossible would come to seem inevitable. Toward the end, that's what they were able to do. Congressmen and state legislators who may not have been truly in favor of women's suffrage were convinced that the train was leaving the station—that's what the suffs were saying."

The loss in Tennessee was not the end for the antis, Weiss notes. "After 1920, the antis get stronger and move on to issues we see hinted at in Tennessee—they become rabid anticommunists, superpatriots, against immigration, against public health; they are against a maternal health bill that comes up in Congress shortly after 1920 because it's big government. These themes of big government and states' rights are voiced today. I'm not sure it's possible to connect the dots all the way to Phyllis Schlafly [the constitutional lawyer and conservative activist], but there is a legacy of socially and politically conservative women who still wield power."

Anti leader Josephine Pearson, mainstream suff Carrie Chapman Catt, and the more militant Sue White are the book's main characters. "It was just one of those gifts to writers," Weiss comments. "I was reading the local Tennessee press, and I saw that these three arrived in Nashville on the same day from different parts of the country, and that they represented different sides of the argument. They allowed me to explore the tensions in Nashville and the larger questions of suffrage and anti-suffrage."

Contemporary newspapers were among Weiss's most important sources. "This was a time when newspapers reported everything," she says, with professional appreciation; she is herself a veteran journalist. "That was also a great gift, because they would report conversations, what the reporter heard in the hallways, and the floor debate over ratification. For me, this was like interviewing; I had the quotations that really give you character, it's just that my sources were dead. Journalism is the first draft of history, and I had a great opportunity to write the second draft."

Suffragist archives in Tennessee and the Library of Congress also helped Weiss bring that second draft to life. "I had receipts, telegrams, letters, handwritten notes that gave me a sense of what was going on day by day," she says. "I wanted readers to understand what these people were like, because change isn't done in a vacuum by anonymous

people; it's done by flawed human beings. These people weren't automatons acting out roles; they were scared, they were hot, they were vain. It didn't make it into the final draft, but Carrie Catt wrote to her secretary, 'If sweat could do it, I would come home thin!'"

Editor Wendy Wolf blue-penciled that comment, along with some other details Weiss regrets losing, even though she acknowledges the necessity. "Wendy's favorite marginal comment was, 'We need to move on,'" Weiss says, laughing. "I am so fortunate to have her. And I can't say enough about my agent, Dorian Karchmar at William Morris Endeavor: smart, passionate, an excellent writer herself. Dorian has a very discerning eye—a very clear idea of how she wants something developed. We worked for over a year on this proposal; she pushed me and pushed me. She kept bringing it back and saying, 'Let's sharpen this, let's deepen this.' The final proposal was something like 90 pages: two sample chapters and a complete chapter breakdown, with character analysis and an overview of themes; basically, I had to know the whole book and how I was going to tell it. My friends would say, 'You're still writing this proposal?' But Dorian knew exactly what she was doing, and I trusted her judgment completely. When it was ready, it was like that"—Weiss snaps her fingers. "Twelve publishers were interested. Nobody wanted my first book, and now people were explaining to me why they should publish this."

Weiss's first book-length effort, an oral history of an elderly female storyteller, remains unpublished. "It won a Pushcart Prize for a neglected manuscript—but not a contract," she remembers ruefully. "But one of the stories she told was about coming from Massachusetts to Vermont as a young woman to join the Woman's Land Army."

That stray detail eventually led to *Fruits of Victory: The Woman's Land Army in the Great War*, a history of the "farmerettes," who, during World War I, worked on America's farms in place of the men serving overseas. Weiss speaks highly of her editor on that project, Elizabeth Demers, whose commitment to the manuscript survived several job changes. "Elizabeth bought that book three times! She signed me at the University of Nebraska Press, which does wonderful crossover books, and just as I was handing in the manuscript, she said, 'I'm leaving.' I followed her because she loved that book and knew that book."

Finally published in 2008 by Potomac Books, *Fruits of Victory* remains in print, and Weiss still gets occasional invitations to speak about this neglected byway of history. But she's glad to be at Viking with Wolf this time around. "Dorian wanted Wendy to get the book," Weiss says. "They'd worked together before, and she said, 'Wendy's going to be tough and she's going to get the best out of you,' and she absolutely did. Wendy is wonderful, she has this wry sense of humor, and she's very detail oriented and supportive. She and Dorian continue to be deeply involved in all aspects of *The Woman's Hour*. We feel like we're the suffs here: we have this cause and this story, and we're going to tell it." ■