



# Superior Women

*Alice Adams*

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## Superior Women Alice Adams

Eager to escape her carhop mother and the rank and file of her California town, Megan Greene heads for Radcliffe — in part to pursue an older man (twenty-one, Harvard medical school, Cape Cod summers) who represents her dream of the upper-middle-class, conservative East Coast. What Megan finds are four other girls — Janet, Lavinia, Peg, and Cathy — who seem to have little in common save for their freshman status. Neither they nor Megan could know that their destinies are about to inextricably intertwine.

The year is 1943, and these superior women, as often enemies as friends, will share a place in each other's lives that no one else can — not husbands, not lovers. Across four decades, as time and events sweep away their expectations, five women discover their sexuality, reveal their secrets, struggle with independence — sometimes surrendering, sometimes making stunning choices — in Alice Adams' richly drawn, uncompromising novel about women's intimate, interior, and often unsuspected lives.

## Superior Women Details

Date : Published July 1st 1998 by Pocket Books (first published January 1st 1984)

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Author : Alice Adams

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# From Reader Review Superior Women for online ebook

## Sidna says

I'm surprised to see that this book got the same rating as Mary McCarthy's "The Group" which was published 21 years earlier since it is really a rip-off of the earlier book. I read "The Group" in the early 60's around the time it was published and liked it very much. The women in "The Group" went to Vassar. The women in this book, which was published in 1984, went to Radcliffe. Other than that, the two books are pretty much the same.

I wonder why the author thinks the women described in this book are "superior"? Because they attended an expensive Eastern women's college? Because most of them came from families with money? I didn't really see anything superior about them. None of the characters were particularly likeable.

After slogging through over 100 pages about the lives of five young women in college, two pages were missing from the book (I got the book at our library's used book store) and those were the pages where the women finally graduated from college!

The book really has two main characters, Megan Greene who runs around having sex with everything in pants, and Lavinia, the cool blond beauty who comes from a wealthy family. The three other women who are their friends are hardly mentioned during their days at Radcliffe, but we learn more about them later in their lives. With all the time these women spend on their personal pursuits and crises, it doesn't sound as though any of them ever had any time to study. I didn't think the courses at Radcliffe were that easy.

Adams' view of marriage and family life is jaded. No one has a happy marriage and the husbands and wives all cheat without suffering any consequences. The one woman who seems to have made a "normal" marriage, has a breakdown from the stress of having four children. It does not make being wealthy and beautiful look appealing. In fact, I don't think I have ever read a book about people who are extremely wealthy who seem to have happy lives. Apparently, the old saying "Money doesn't buy happiness" is true, but it would allow you to be miserable in comfort.

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## Holly Lindquist says

I was never quite able to discover what made the four girls in this book 'superior women'. They seemed utterly obsessed with superficial social posturing, backbiting, shunning their unconventional friends and relatives, and other perfidious activities. These are not people you would want as friends and certainly not 'superior women'(unless she was being sarcastic. Hmm. It's possible, I suppose.) Anyway, it's a shallow read, with generally unsympathetic characters.

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## Mugizi Rwebangira says

Must have been my mom's book.

As a kid this book intrigued me.

I had no context for any of the characters.

They seemed impossibly sophisticated to me.

Now I can see the patterns and what they represent more clearly.

I am actually not sure what I think of it really.

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## **Amanda says**

### **Really 3.5 stars**

I kept my eye out for this book when it was named as a read-a-like to my 2011 5 star read *The Group* by Mary McCarthy. So when I saw it on a Better World Books sale list, I ordered a copy. I can see why this was named as a read-a-like. Both books view a historical time period through a group of women who attended a women's college together. What McCarthy wrote stunningly and with subtlety, though, Adams wrote in a barely above-average fashion.

The book covers 1940s to 1980s America, yet as the decades move on, less and less is said. The 1940s are expressed clearly with exquisite detail, and I was excited to see what would happen with the 1950s and the 1960s. But the 1950s slowed down, the 1960s were barely touched upon, the 1970s were jumped over almost entirely, and the 1980s were the final chapter of the book. The pacing was all off. I wanted to know these women in as much detail in the latter decades as in the first. Instead of feeling like I knew them more and more intimately, they increasingly became strangers to me.

One thing that I think really works against the book is it is neither an ensemble nor a one character piece. Most of the book is told about Megan, but not all of it. We get snippets of the other characters, meaning perspectives that Megan is not privy to, but not enough to ever truly know them. Since most of the book is about Megan, these bits away from her feel sort of like the story is robbing us of more time with the main character we are interested in. Similarly, reading the blurb and the title, I thought this was going to be an ensemble book, which is not what we get either. Too much time is spent with Megan to consider it an ensemble piece, and, due to that time spent, other storylines for the other women that are much more interesting are barely hinted at instead of being fully fleshed-out.

Similarly, while big issues and events of mid-20th century America were briefly touched upon, the book never really presented a truly personal look at any of them. For instance, Megan has a friend who is bashed in a drive-by gay bashing but we never get to see Megan emotionally deal with this stark reality. She hears about it, calls him, and moves on. Similarly, the character Peg (view spoiler) It is disappointing because we get a taste of really encountering these historical issues, but we never actually get to.

In spite of all these problems, I still enjoyed reading the book well enough. The plot, while frustrating, does progress forward in an interesting fashion. The characters, although frequently two-dimensional, are bright and vivid. I came away with the perspective I always have with historical fiction about women's history. That I am grateful I was born in a different time, because we women have much more opportunities available to us now. So I appreciated my visit to that time period but it was a bit disappointing.

Overall, if you are a huge fan of historical fiction about women's issues, this is an interesting book to add to

your repertoire. It is a good comparison to others that did it differently or better, and it is still fun to visit those time periods. If this type of literature is not generally your cup of tea, though, I would suggest you instead read stronger competitors in that genre, such as *The Group*.

Check out my full review.

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### **Kathy Kennedy says**

A story of 4 or 5 young women from completely different backgrounds, who meet as freshmen at Radcliffe. The book follows most of them for about 60 years. A better name would have been *Shallow Women*. I appreciate that 60 yrs ago, things were different, most of them are reflected thru their choices of partners. It spends some time on the Nixon era and seems to me that there is a lot of similarity to the Trump era. I had expected something like *The Group* by Mary McCarthy who told of a group of Vassar women between WW1 and 2. This one is a pale comparison, but a good beach read.

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### **Lynette Lark says**

What a wonderful book that I thought I was gonna hate! Four (actually five to me) ivy league college "frenemies" who share a 40-odd year span from the 40s through the 80s. From the beginning, one can almost see how they're gonna turn out (with some surprises). Lavinia, Megan, Cathy, and Peg (I count Janet as number five). How they struggle to stay "technical" virgins; how snobbery and bigotry and class and money all figure in to this marvelous book. They all judged each other and other people as badly as I judged this read. I'm ashamed of myself.

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### **Catherine Oakley says**

Alice Adams produced a good book in *"Superior Women"*. It is good enough to recommend reading, but it has some flaws that prevent it from being great. Adams's books tend to be feminist, which this book definitely is. I do like Megan and Peg, who both become rather feminized by the end. This book doesn't disappoint, that way. I did find Megan a bit annoyingly neurotic. Peg has the best transformation: from overweight, unsure girl to confident lesbian activist. Lavinia, reaps the whirlwind, which is satisfying. And Cathy wrestles with her faith and is dealt a bad hand. The ending was fitting, and I did like how some of the friends got together to help others. Unfortunately, these women may be superior, but this novel is sadly mundane.

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### **Sarah Cafilisch says**

Sometimes the day calls for Alice Adams.

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## **Suzanne Moore says**

This story takes place over a period of 40 years, and revolves around the lives of five women. Megan, Janet, Lavina, Peg, and Cathy. Beginning in the 40s shortly after war times the women meet on Radcliffe campus as freshmen. Sharing a dorm, sharing secrets and dreams they become close yet remain distant. Coming from different social circumstances they either tend to lie to impress, or gossip to feel superior. The story is a journey where not only the times change, but morals as well. The women are involved in situations dealing with abortion, divorce, extra-martial and interracial affairs, lesbianism, and cancer. Political issues are addressed when Megan fights for equal rights in the career field and Peg becomes involved in the Civil Rights movement. Self-centered Lavina marries for status rather than love and begins having suicidal thoughts in her older years when she realizes how shallow her life has been. Cathy who develops cancer, raises a child on her own (the result of a secret affair with a priest.) Janet's open marriage to a famous actor ends in divorce. These are SOME of the highlights of the women's years. The story draws the reader in through the interactions between the group.

Superior Women is an interesting look at self-awareness and relationships. It would make a good book for discussion.

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## **Freddie Mckenna says**

First, the style. Off-putting and unpleasant. The entire book is written in the present, there is no interesting imagery, and the writing is lazy (The word very is used over and over). One reviewer compared Adams' compact writing style to Hemingway's. I find his style annoying as well, but he is much better at short, crisp, and to the point than Adams.

Second, the characters. Very superficial. Never really felt I got to know any of them, not even Megan who is the closest to having an actual inner life.

Third, the plot. The story hinges on these four friends and the characters around their periphery of their lives. The four women on whose friendship everything hinges don't really seem to have valid friendships. You never understand what affinities they have with each other, or what they actually see in each other. It all feels totally arbitrary. The characters seem to float through time and history, with life happening to them. I didn't buy it psychologically at all. The corny ending seems random and tacked on.

The most interesting aspect of the book to me is what it reveals about the writer, and East Coast girl who ended up in San Francisco. The ending, in which most of the surviving characters end up living together as a faux family, is very Bay Area.

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## **Samantha Sprole says**

Reading the reviews spoiled me to this book at first, but I'm so glad I kept on and finished. There are moments and ideas about love, marriage, aging and living well that are absolutely worth reading. Perhaps I especially enjoyed the book because it explores issues that I care about in my own stage of life. Although the

friends' time in college is as superficial and unenlightening as I'm sure most of us were back in those days, the later years of career and commitment are especially poignant. Although I'm always wanting more from the author in the way of characterization (more moments inside our characters' minds, more depth of thought, more more more) the book is worth the time I put into it. I especially like the manner in which some of our beloved characters (in particular the redeemed Florence) find fulfillment in the end ... It's an Epicurean vision of I ever heard one, without slipping into unbelievable utopianism, either. And of the relentless criticism that "the women in this book aren't all that Superior ..." I can empathize to some extent, but I feel the author is making a statement about the perceived superiority of women who think outside the limited social roles available to women in the mid-twentieth century. All their choices do supercede the expectation that a woman will find a fulfilling identity in their relational roles of lover, wife and mother. Indeed, none of these women find satisfaction in feminine tradition, and the fact that some of them perhaps never find satisfaction, period, makes the title "Superior Women" seem more than a little tongue in cheek.

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### **Amy Turner says**

An engaging story of four friends, from when they met in college (1943) to 40 years later (1983).

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### **Tam May says**

\*\*\*Spoiler alert\*\*\*

I was very excited about reading an Alice Adams novel because I had read that she was a feminist writer. I found this novel quite disappointing. While it has some interesting characters and it depicts the lives of women from the post WWII era to the early 1980's with some accuracy, it is not what I would consider a feminist novel or even a strong women's fiction novel. It holds a mirror up to patriarchy but it never allows the women characters to really show much strength or independence. The four women depicted in the novel aren't really "friends" - they are more like four women who happened to stay in the same college dormitory and just sort of kept in touch with one another. They don't even seem to like or care about one another all that much. While they are not complete stereotypes, they are certainly types and their roles change as the eras change but nothing about them ever really breaks out of the conventional patriarchal mold. For example, Megan, starts out as the stereotypical working class Californian, overweight (somehow, the book seems to focus a lot on weight) intelligent girl who later becomes the career woman whose happens to have a career almost by accident and who would really much rather be involved in a relationship and jumps from one man to another, none of whom she really cares all that much about. The way she ends up in the last chapter also seems accidental rather than an act of strength and doesn't follow logically in her character development. In fact, there isn't much psychological insight into the characters at all, which is very disappointing. The four women depicted in the novel seem much more interested in their relationships with men (mostly of a sexual nature) than they do in developing themselves, so much so that they seek out old boyfriends rather than deal with their pain. To me, this is an extremely stereotypical patriarchal way of women to deal with emotional upheaval - run to some man to "save" them. Even in the 1980's when this novel was written, this could have really explored the patriarchal absurdities that women were subjected to in the second half of the 20th century and transcended them. Instead, it falls flat with types that don't really go anywhere or make the reader want to cheer for them. I haven't read any of Adams' other books, so they might be more feminist than this one, but reading this one doesn't quite encourage me to read others, I'm sorry to say.

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## **Anna says**

I absolutely love books that tell the stories of multiple, interconnected characters that span several decades, and *Superior Women* by the late Alice Adams is no exception. I don't know why, but I get a thrill out of watching characters evolve over time and seeing how things done by one character affect the others.

*Superior Women* follows Megan Greene as she moves from her parents' home in California to Radcliffe in the early 1940s, chasing a Harvard boy she met over the summer. At Radcliffe, she meets a group of girls: Lavinia, the sexy bitchy one, Peg, the motherly one, Cathy, the smart one, and Janet, who's not part of the clique. Megan is close to each of them at different points in her life.

The book covers the usual feminist themes, such as women overcoming sexual and gender stereotypes, and shows that while these women form a strong bond, they have no qualms about stabbing one another in the back. Adams gives each one their moment in the spotlight and begs the reader to ask, "Were they superior women after all?" They were superior because they knew what they wanted and were willing to go after it even if it didn't meet society's (or their family's) expectations. I believe they also thought themselves to be superior, given that they were women taking on the world and caring only about making themselves happy no matter the consequences.

Full review at [Diary of an Eccentric](#)

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## **Susan Morris says**

*Superior Women* by Alice Adams copyright 1984, novel, Women's fiction

This women's coming of age novel follows the lives of four women, starting with their freshman year at Radcliffe, and takes them through forty years. Each woman is different, each having a different background, a different set of beliefs and values, and a different temperament. Over a period of forty years, the women grow and change. The reader can watch them in their beginnings as college schoolgirls, tentatively finding their way in the adult world, to women who come into their own power. Or not, depending on the cards they are dealt and the choices they make. The author portrays the complexities of the friendships between these women. They like and admire each other and then sometimes they dislike one another. It's never black and white. No one is idealized, each woman has flaws, and the author presents these without judgment.

Themes in this book include feminism, discrimination, social justice for gays and people of color, and classism. The story takes place mostly in the Eastern USA, from 1942 to 1983.

In this novel, the characters are the story. The events, the plot, are of less significance than the characters themselves, their complexities and the way they change as they mature. The author uses dialogue and descriptions of character's thoughts to portray the way people can make wrong assumptions about the motives and thoughts of others.

The author's style is simple and clear yet beautifully descriptive. The humor is dry. Her rhythm is perfect. She describes the character's thoughts without laborious dialogue.



Each of these women is superior in that they do not lead ordinary lives. When the main character, Megan, meets the woman that her first love married, she asks herself: “could it have been Connie’s very ordinariness that he found so appealing? Are some men put off by extremes of intelligence or even attractiveness in women – put off by superior women?”

And again on page 219: “You superior women have a real problem for yourselves, don’t you. Just any old guy won’t do. You wouldn’t like him, and even if you did your strength would scare him, even make him mad.”

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