Phyllis Diller

Phyllis Diller’s Housekeeping Hints

Manual

By: Phyllis Diller
Date: 1966

Phyllis Diller’s Marriage Manual

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About the Author: Phyllis Ada (Driver) Diller (1917–), insecure about her physical appearance, developed an outgoing personality and indulged her love of music by studying the piano at the Sherwood Music Conservatory in Chicago. In 1955 Diller made her stand-up debut at the Purple Onion nightclub in San Francisco. Within five years, she appeared regularly on national television as one of the few female comedians of the day.

Introduction

Although her stand-up comedy routine at first relied on her musical talent with a series of impressions, Phyllis Diller quickly realized that the monologues about her domestic life were proving even more popular with audiences. As Diller refined her act, she came upon the formula that she would use for nearly the next half-century. That formula included jokes about her inability to manage her household and keep her children in line, gags about her husband’s deficiencies as a breadwinner and lover, and pointed remarks about her neighbor, Mrs. Clean, who actually lived up to the ideals of suburban life with an immaculate home and well-behaved kids. To go along with her skewed take on domestic life, Diller created a persona to match. She typically wore outlandish evening clothes and dress gloves with a long cigarette holder to demonstrate an exaggerated sense of feminity. Diller also sported a disheveled hairstyle and combat boots to make the contrast between the ideal suburban housewife and her everyday reality even more obvious.

In an era still dominated by the images of domestic bliss seen on Leave It to Beaver, The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet, and The Donna Reed Show—all of which ran well into the 1960s—Diller’s take on marriage, child-rearing, and housekeeping was all the more jarring. Although her marriage to Sherwood Diller ended in 1965, shortly before Phyllis Diller’s Housekeeping Hints and Phyllis Diller’s Marriage Manual appeared, both volumes became best-sellers. She married Ward Donovan in 1965 and divorced him a decade later. Diller also made headlines by poking fun of her face lift, which made her one of the first celebrities to acknowledge undergoing cosmetic surgery.

Significance

From her roots on the San Francisco comedy scene in the 1950s, Diller made a name for herself as one of the first nationally known female comics in the 1960s. As demonstrated in her best-selling volumes, Phyllis Diller’s Housekeeping Hints and Phyllis Diller’s Marriage Manual, she did so by making light of the traditional images of women as wives and mothers that dominated contemporary popular culture. In presenting a take on domestic life that upended the common assumptions of a woman’s supposed natural abilities as a wife and mother, Diller presented a sharp counterpoint that verged on the subversive, even as she enjoyed mainstream success.

With her best-selling books, guest appearances on television variety shows, and starring roles in the 1966 movie, Boy, Did I Get a Wrong Number! with Bob Hope and the television series The Phyllis Diller Show, Diller confirmed her position as one of America’s most popular comedians of the decade. She continued to tour with her stand-up act through 2002, when she announced her retirement from the road after almost a half-century of appearances. By that time Diller had influenced two generations of prominent female comics, including Roseanne Barr, the woman whose own take on domestic life was just as subversive.

Primary Source

Phyllis Diller’s Housekeeping Hints [excerpt]

SYNOPSIS: Diller’s books presented parts of her stand-up routines in the form of self-help advice manuals. Typical of her comments was this advice to prospective home buyers: “Buy the house far enough away from school so your kids can’t come home for lunch.”

I am an immaculate housekeeper. I’m clean, but the house is a mess. I suspected I wouldn’t be the perfect housewife the way I botched up the wedding cake.

They won’t even sell me Good Housekeeping magazine. They’re afraid it might be seen in my home. And I can’t blame them. I’m such a lousy
housekeeper even the white pages in my phone book are yellow.

I know people who are so clean you can eat off their floors. You can’t eat off my table. Fang, my husband, says the only thing domestic about me is that I was born in this country.

Some women have qualities that take away the need for being a domestic expert, but unfortunately, I do not. When I stand next to Jayne Mansfield I feel like a cake with the baking powder left out.

And household ability wouldn’t matter if I were a financial genius, but if I invested in a mouth wash stock, bad breath would suddenly become popular.

Besides this, I live next door to Mrs. Clean, who bleaches her snow. She’s got dust cloths for her dust cloths. Everything at her house folds up and puts away. She has a folding ping pong table that has folding ping pong balls. She polishes her furniture so much you can see your face in it. (Now why in heaven’s name would I want to do that?) . . .

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Ah! The magic of childhood! But it doesn’t work. I can’t make them disappear. I do wear dark glasses in the house hoping they won’t recognize me.

To show how wild they are, my eight-year-old bought a bicycle with money he had saved by not smoking. I got one of them a pair of elevator shoes and sent him to school a year early. I had him going to kindergarten and two nursery schools at the same time.

One of my girls was so hard to get along with she was in a Girl Scout troop all by herself. She never smiles. She was 15 before I saw her second teeth, and then I just happened to be with her when they told her she was on Candid Camera.

None of my kids were drop outs, but they caused several drop-outs among the teachers. They are so hard to live with our next-door neighbors were ready to sell. Well, in fact, they were ready to give.

I signed up for the Foster Parents Plan, but that didn’t work. I thought they’d send me some foster parents to help.

And did we have kids! We were sort of an atom bomb in the population explosion. We were having kids so long I went straight from buying Carter’s baby clothes to Carter’s Little Liver Pills. I was tired out all year signing their names on the Christmas cards. I finally quit having them by lying to the doctor about my age.


Then Mrs. Clean has the nerve to say things like, “Children grow up too fast.” I keep asking mine, “Why can’t you be like other kids and grow up too fast?” One day she said, “If they make you so nervous, why did you have so many?” I told her I had them before I knew poodles were going to become so popular. Once she looked at my five and said sweetly, “You’re so lucky. How I’d love just one of those.” I said, “Frankly, that’s what I would have settled for, too.”