

Pledged: The Secret Life of Sororities

By *Alexandra Robbins*

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Reviewed by

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Alcohol abuse, mean girls, drug use, sexual promiscuity, elitism, paying for friendships, cliques, drama, eating disorders, privilege, racism, and hazing are some of the assumptions many people have of sorority life on college campuses. Non-Greeks who can only envision what goes on behind sorority house walls and inside sorority girls' heads, merely have movies such as *Revenge of the Nerds*, *Animal House*, and *Legally Blonde* to inform their views about sororities (Robbins, 2004, p. 5). Alexandra Robbins, who is not a member of any Greek organization, explored the inner workings of sorority life to see if there was any truth behind the assumptions.

Robbins set out to fully engulf herself in sorority life so she could fairly and accurately represent its members (p. 6). However, she was met with fierce resistance from all twenty-six member groups of the National Panhellenic Conference (NPC). Due to the negative press the National Panhellenic Conference felt its members were receiving, they decided "not to cooperate with any members of the media" (p. 6). Due to this reaction, Robbins decided to work directly with the sorority

members rather than the sororities' national offices. She found four sorority sisters from diverse backgrounds who helped her go undercover in their respective chapters and who also shared their thoughts and opinions about sorority life. Robbins described the women as "good-hearted girls who were members of 'normal' sororities not known on campus as extreme stereotypes. I chose these girls on the basis of their diverse attitudes toward and their roles in their sororities" (p. 10).

As the school year begins, Robbins focuses on the process of how sorority women fit in within their own chapters. The impression is given that the first few weeks of school are a crucial period as the women figure out their social position among other members as they learn acceptable behavior (i.e., attitudes, attributes) of the sorority (p. 25). This is particularly important as each sorority on campus has its own individual identity and members of each house often feel pressured to conform to that stereotype to keep with the sorority's image (p. 25). Robbins believes this conformity and urge to belong is the main cause of eating disorders, drinking, and dating patterns within sororities (p. 37). As August progresses, Robbins helps readers understand how sororities function. She gives an overview of the recruitment and pledging process as well as how sororities are structured.

September finds the four women engrossed in Homecoming activities at State University. Homecoming events highlight the importance of fraternities to sororities. Each homecoming, sororities are paired with fraternities giving them an opportunity to lobby for social status within the Greek system as a whole. Robbins describes that much of the drama in sororities is caused around fraternity issues especially since most official sorority activities involve fraternities (p. 51). The sexual side to the sorority and fraternity relationships is one issue Robbins addresses in this chapter. Personal examples from two of the four women and also several legal cases in recent years, provides an in-depth description of the power of sex within sorority and fraternity relationships.

As October begins, the financial commitment and personal obligation of sorority membership is explored. Socioeconomic status plays a large role within the sorority. Members are expected to pay large dues that can range from a few hundred dollars to \$2,500 a semester (p. 68). Chapters also impose fines on their members for missing events such as chapter meetings. Philanthropy is also discussed in the month of October. Robbins found that much of the community service highlighted as a cornerstone of sorority life revolves around donations rather than service (p. 71).

Living arrangements, privacy, cliques and hierarchies, and mean girls are discussed in the month of November. Belonging to a sorority offers a permanent affiliation, but it does not signify unconditional acceptance. Subgroups are often based on factors such as looks, pledge class, and general attitude towards the sorority (p. 115). Alcohol abuse and drug use within the Greek system is also explored by citing research which finds students in the Greek system to have higher percentages than non-Greeks to engage in this behavior.

December begins with Robbins attending a Northeast Greek Leadership Association Conference (p. 166). At the conference, Robbins was provided with

an understanding of the values and standards associated with Greek life. Robbins discovered that when a sister wears sorority letters, everything she says and does is perceived as reflecting onto those letters (p. 166). These values and standards also surround morality guidelines dictated by the chapter's national organization. The morality guidelines are intended to regulate behavior (i.e., sex, drug use, dress) of the chapter's members (p. 188). At the conclusion of the month, Robbins describes how each of the four women seemingly contradicts the morality guidelines.

In January the women returned to campus in time to begin preparations for spring rush. In the subsequent 30 pages, Robbins covers many aspects of women's recruitment – from practicing conversations and dress checks to explaining NPC policies and guidelines for its member organizations. The collective attitude throughout the book provides a stark contrast between the information put forth by the sororities' national headquarters and the practices of each individual chapter. Membership decisions are shown to be based more on family income and choice of designer labels than contributions to the campus community and strong values.

Robbins began her book by acknowledging that her focus was going to be on historically White national sororities. During the month of February, she explores the differences between historically White sororities and their historically Black and Latina counterparts. While the explanations of historically Black Greek-lettered organizations are surface level at best, the differences draw the purpose and focus of historically White groups into question. Detailing the long rooted racism that is commonplace in historically White Greek organizations, Robbins provides examples and narratives of individual efforts to desegregate chapters and the resistance of chapter members, alumni, national offices and campus administrators to diversify their organizations.

March provided little insight into the state university Greek experience outside of a common Badge Day Ceremony created by the NPC to bring solidarity among its member organizations. Robbins used this section to discuss the issues of hazing, spring break, and the secret rituals commonly associated with members of the Greek community.

Examples of hazing are provided that cover the spectrum, from requiring new members to wear a certain color to leaving new members in the woods and requiring them to find their way back to campus. Even more shocking than the details that sorority members were willing to share with Robbins are the attitudes about hazing shared by the women highlighted in the book. Many of the spring break stories are just as surprising. The women who participated in Robbins' nearly 100 interviews painted a scene of drunken escapades with unknown fraternity men and complete strangers without the rules and regulations of their home chapters.

The eight pages entitled "Sorority Secrets" share with readers many of the secret symbols, words, and meanings behind the chapters' rituals. This section is light on general ideas and heavy in specific examples from each of the NPC organizations that sisters have sworn by oath in front of their sisterhood to keep secret (p. 280).

Robbins begins by describing the ritual as “a symbolic and often emotional expression of the organization’s myths, values and identity” (p. 280), but describes these secrets as “nothing more than backward-spelled passwords or trite expressions.” (p. 324)

April offers a time for reflection on the year. The four women provide a recap of their growth through the year via their participation in sorority functions, their friendships with their sisters and their relationships with men. Robbins provides her own reflection on her year in the life of sorority women. Her mixed reaction gives affirmation to the women who truly gain a deeper connection with the women in their house and find an inner confidence as a result of being around supportive peers. On the other end, she demonstrates concern for the women whose experience breaks down their self-esteem, making them feel helpless and alienated (p. 320). Robbins agrees with the need for undergraduate students to feel like they belong to a community but also acknowledges advancements in campus residential life and orientation programs for providing students that opportunity.

Robbins goes on to provide readers with her recommendations on how the system can be improved. Her feelings on national sororities’ leadership concerning rush and hazing as well as campus administrator’s responsibility in taking back authority over their campus Greek system are shared. She suggests that parents, siblings, and friends of interested sorority members educate themselves on the organizations that their daughter, sister, or friend may be joining.

Pledged offers an interesting insider’s look into the sorority system. It provides a mix of personal narrative from our four sorority sisters, some historical references, and current topics being discussed on campuses today. The personal narrative can be taken as just that – the story of four sorority women who chose to let an author into their lives for one year. The historical reference provides a starting point for the conversation on the purpose and significance of fraternities and sororities. The topics discussed deserve consideration and conversation by campus administrators and faculty. *Pledged* is an excellent choice for a reader who is looking to understand more about sororities although readers should be made aware that it is not an accurate depiction of Greek life on every campus.