In mid-August 1929, the soon-to-be-very-famous author Ursula Parrott reached nearly one hundred years into the future to offer her advice on the writing of the book you are now reading. She wrote her message just after her first novel, *Ex-Wife,* was published and less than three months before the diametrically opposed coincidences of the stock market crash, which triggered the United States’ slide into the Great Depression, and the arrival of the novice author’s first big paycheck. Her letter had a purpose: to convince her lover not to end their affair. But halfway down the first of seven single-spaced pages, Parrott took a detour, declaring, “If I, by accident became sufficiently important, ever, to have a biographer, he might say about me, ‘The publication of her first book coincided with the final rupture of her heart.’ (Providing he was writing in a sentimental decade that took things that happen to the heart, seriously.)”

Although I was not the intended recipient of this letter, I am sympathetic to Ursula Parrott’s ambitions to become “sufficiently important” as well as to her anguish—more so, it seems, than the man for whom these sentiments were intended. Parrott stands at one end of modernity, struggling to find her way during its untrodden novelty stage, and I stand at another, with a road made easier because so many, Parrott among them, forced the culture to reckon with women defying tradition and emerging from the confines of the home to explore what Parrott described as the wide, wide world.

The publication of Ursula Parrott’s first book coincided not only with her personal heartbreak but also with a cultural rift: a fault line dividing the
Victorian age, into the tail end of which she was born, from what we might call the modern age. Parrott’s formative years were colored by the traumatic upheavals of the deadly influenza epidemic of 1918 and the Great War, which endowed her generation with a sense of life’s fragility, easily evidenced in the “omnipresence of death from every daily paper’s casualty lists,” as the narrator puts it in her sixth novel, *Next Time We Live*. In the postwar era, she observed her generation indulging in a host of hedonistic impulses, squeezing life out of every waking moment in case tomorrow never came. Those who lived by this ethos, Ursula eventually among them, often found that their pursuits were a recipe for exhaustion as they muddled through missteps made in the spirit of free living.

Although she is almost entirely unknown today, Ursula Parrott spent a high-profile career exploring what she called “maxims in the copybook of modernism.” From the late 1920s through the late 1940s, she published twenty books, several of them best sellers, and over one hundred short stories, articles, and novel-length magazine serials. Parrott made and spent astronomical sums of money during the height of the Depression through the post–World War II years, some of which she earned during brief but lucrative stints in Hollywood. Her movie and book deals, as well as her divorces and run-ins with the law, regularly generated newspaper headlines. She was a world traveler, a partner in a rural Connecticut newspaper, an informant in a federal drug investigation, and a pilot in the Civil Aeronautics Administration during World War II. She navigated a wildly fluctuating career and personal life, including four husbands and as many exes. For the most part she was a single—or unmarried, as it was usually termed—mother with strong beliefs about child-rearing, which she shared with the reading public whenever given the opportunity to do so.

Starting with her debut best seller in 1929, Ursula Parrott wrote thousands of pages about modern life and especially about the modern woman, probing the perplexing times in which she lived. Her experiences—with marriages, divorces, and raising a child; with career ambitions and loneliness; with birth control and abortions; with alcohol and depression—made their way into the pages of her stories, which are about how women broke with much of what had previously both constrained and protected them. Ursula frequently bemoaned her imperfect balancing acts as she tried to find the right mate to copilot the ship of life while balancing a demanding writing career that supported her unconventional family and lifestyle. She became a voice of alarm about what was happening to women like her—white, educated, city dwell-
ing, and economically privileged by birth, career, or marriage—who were caught between a push for “equal everything,” as she put it, and an uphill battle to succeed on so many fronts at a time when men’s interests were often at odds with women’s ambitions. “I’m not important,” she once declared; but the story she was writing at any given moment “might be a comfort to” her readers.³ She described the sticky situations in which women found themselves with the hope that greater understanding would lead, eventually, to less disappointment, especially if and when men accepted women’s “new existence” on equal terms with what they expected for themselves.

After publishing Ex-Wife—a bold book about a young married woman who becomes, against her wishes, a divorcée—the exploration of male-female relations became Parrott’s raison d’être. Parrott’s autobiographically inspired first novel also became the blessing and curse that defined her, personally and professionally, for the rest of her life. When it was published in 1929, the New York Times credited Parrott with creating the category of the ex-wife, which they described as “a new descriptive tag to the American language.” Although the term ex-wife had been in circulation for years, Parrott endowed it with a vivid new life at a moment of widespread curiosity about what was happening to society in an age of marital impermanence. Many years and marriages later, the Boston Herald proclaimed that “‘Ex-Wife’ is more than a best seller to Ursula Parrott; it’s a state of mind!,” and the Los Angeles Times called her “the logical candidate for the presidency of the ‘Ex-Wives’ Association of America.”⁴ Ursula’s debut novel branded her in ways that were simultaneously profitable and impossible to shake (see figure 1).

Parrott became known as a specialist in “the maladjustment emotionally’ of women whose marriages had gone on the rocks” at a time when the number of women who fit this description was growing. If a journalist in the 1930s was writing an article about women’s careers or the institution of marriage, they often called Ursula Parrott for an expert opinion, as Helen Welshimer did for “What the Best Known ‘Ex-Wife’ Thinks of Marriage,” one of many like-minded (and like-titled) articles published in this era.⁵ Ursula became a spokeswoman about life in a period of dizzying change in part because she expressed the contradictions of her own moment with great candor and lucidity.

Parrott published her stories in commercial magazines—the likes of Cosmopolitan, Redbook, Ladies’ Home Journal, American Magazine, and Good Housekeeping—which had enormous circulations and paid extravagantly, even during the Depression. Her words became, as Hollywood’s Photoplay
magazine put it in 1931, “important to the modern woman”: she told tales about failed marriages, work-life balance, the dilemmas of single motherhood, and the seemingly incompatible desires for independence and security. Parrott dramatized contradictions about modern life that remain unresolved, especially regarding women’s roles at work and at home. She exposed dilemmas that Betty Friedan would describe in *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, that Helen Gurley Brown would imagine pushing past in *Having It All* in 1982, and that Sheryl Sandberg would encourage women to transcend in her 2013 *Lean In*. She wrote about women stumbling through frustrating rituals of modern courtship and proto hookup culture; paying bills and keeping things together when their lovers or husbands failed to hold up their end of the bargain; raising children whose fathers were absent because their “liberated” views allowed them to shirk responsibility; and numbing themselves from the miseries of modernity with alcohol. It is easy to see reflections of her life in her fiction; she wrote about what she knew.
Her stories rarely have happy endings. After pages that point to numerous paths to contentment, Parrott’s smart and savvy female characters leave or are left, accept their loneliness with resignation, compromise their moral standards to have affairs instead of marriages, soldier on unaccompanied, or die. If they are not disillusioned on the first page, they are almost always disappointed by the last. Her stories regularly conclude with an emptiness reminiscent of her contemporaries, like F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, delivered with the kind of wisecracking wit practiced by Dorothy Parker. Like these benchmark figures of twentieth-century American literature, Parrott was committed to writing with “terrible honesty,” the phrase historian Ann Douglas uses to describe the ethos shared by New York writers of this period. Parrott wrote about romance but was not just a romance writer, though she was widely perceived as one during her lifetime. She did, however, write about the consequences of romance and sex in a newly liberated age. Parrott once said that she confined her “literary attention to women who understand the meaning of life,” possessed of real-world problems and survival skills built on a track record of letdowns, as well as sexual experience, often outside the safe confines of a marriage.

Feminists in the early years of the twentieth century advocated for things that liberated women from the limited options of marriage, family, and home. Margaret Sanger inadvertently led the way as an advocate for birth control, which made it possible to imagine cleaving sex from reproduction. This was amplified by easy—though, of course, not legal—access to abortionists, at least in a metropolis like New York City, where Parrott lived most of her adult life. Ursula availed herself of their services numerous times, with serious physical and psychological consequences, and knew firsthand what it was like to risk her life for the “felicities,” as she referred to them, of sexual intimacy. She saw women’s sexual liberation as a mixed bag, characterizing some of her own encounters as “a tawdry business, mixed up with permitting one’s self to be mauled in a taxi-cab,” and others as “a very beautiful thing.” Her stories depict what women living in a less rulebound age often had to face alone: pregnancies, decisions to have abortions or not, childbirth, and child-rearing. As she would have known from her father’s recounting of the postchildbirth death of his first wife, pregnancy was risky. In the late 1920s, more women in the United States died each year as a result of childbirth than all other causes outside of tuberculosis.

Ursula Parrott blamed the “Equal-Everything” feminists for many of her generation’s difficulties. “I am not a feminist,” she told an interviewer. “In
fact, I resent the feminists—they are the ones who started all this. I won-
der if they realized what they were letting us all in for." She believed that young women of her generation inherited a drive for equality—for the vote, at first, but subsequently in the realms of education, work, and marriage—that made their lives harder, and her stories dramatized the consequences of this unwanted bequest. She was twenty-one when women got the vote in 1920, so she was aware of the fight it took to earn the right. However, by the mid-1920s, with the suffrage victory behind them, a sense of battle fatigue for the old guard of the women's movement set in just as a younger generation started to reject many of the movement's ideals. Some “ex-feminists” began speaking out about their husbands' resentment toward them, debunking the optimism that carried them through the suffrage years; what they had fought for in theory, they could not execute with satisfaction in practice. Scholar Elaine Showalter describes this postsuffrage era as a “feminist crash.” Women who wanted to work, marry, and have children were finding “that such a life was still unattainable, and they interpreted their inability to find exciting jobs and reliable child care as personal failures, rather than challenging the patriarchal assumptions of American society.”

Despite her alleged disregard for feminism, challenging patriarchal assumptions turned out to be Ursula Parrott's specialty. She observed what we would now call structural inequalities, complaining that women “don't earn quite as much” as men despite the fact that “it costs them just as much to live (savings in food offset by greater clothes' expense), so they're more likely than young men to be in recurrent jams.” She called out instances of sexual harassment, describing her first publisher, Jonathan Cape, twenty years her senior, as a “white-haired sturdy ambitious man” who “mauled [her] between calls.” “He's a grand person,” Parrott proclaimed flippantly and with a qualifier, “if he'd keep his hands where they belong.” She was even more indignant when a banker told her she “should always borrow from his bank, by suggesting payment in kind-ness.” “I refused to do anything about it,” Parrott proudly declared, “and he never suggested it again,” the outcome of which was that “I pay 'em six percent interest, like all the men who borrow from them.” Had she been alive today, instead of writing letters in which she complained about these matters privately, Ursula might have Tweeted about them with the #MeToo hashtag and the rallying cry “Time's Up.”

Parrott's stories collectively offer an argument about how much women's lives were changing during the first decades of the twentieth century, and what a bad job men were doing dealing with these changes. Her male char-
acters tend to be fragile and insecure, falling apart in the face of women who are more independent and ambitious than they are. These men try to marry ambitious women away from their work or lash out at their girlfriends and wives when they are more successful, as is almost always the case. They drink themselves into oblivion and sexual misconduct, seeking out other women, young or without career aspirations, to make them feel powerful after their wives or lovers outpace them in talent, fame, or fortune. They shield themselves from self-scrutiny by blaming their demise on women who are unerringly—and sometimes embarrassingly—dedicated to them. Virtually no Parrott heroine overcomes the disequilibrium between them and the men who come to resent them. An advertisement for the 1936 movie based on Parrott’s novel Next Time We Live, starring Jimmy Stewart and Margaret Sullivan, sums up the dilemma that Parrott saw as the pathology of her age: “What happens to romance when the wife becomes the breadwinner and the husband becomes the housemaid?” Spoiler alert: it does not go well.

Ursula Parrott came out of the publishing gate with an argument about what was wrong with modern life: while men had never had it better, these were confusing and anxious times for women. In her first nonfiction article, published in December 1929, “Leftover Ladies,” Parrott summed up the crisis with an unexpected twist: her generation “are all Free Women, free to work, to vote, to experiment with alcohol and extramarital arrangements, or what they choose. And their grandmothers had more actual freedom than they have” (see figure 2). In comparison to past generations when men were, for the most part, husbands and economic providers and women were, for the most part, wives and mothers, impermanence had become the governing principle of the times, inseparable from its inherently negative twin, instability. As one of Parrott’s pitiable male characters says to the successful woman he’s convinced to be his mistress instead of his wife, “So few things or people in the world we know are really permanent. It’s—it’s almost impossible to be permanent about anything.”

Without indulging in naïve enthusiasm or uncomplicated nostalgia, Parrott argued that women of earlier generations who had little choice except to focus their energies on the home had a sense of clarity and security that was now in short supply. Since women of her generation could have careers and earn their own wages, men no longer felt obliged to care for them, freeing husbands from “so many restraints and responsibilities.” As she put it,