

A CONVERSATION WITH LORI STURDEVANT

What inspired you to write *Her Honor: Rosalie Wahl and the Minnesota Women's Movement*?

I was delighted to be approached by Minnesota Historical Society Press and friends of Rosalie Wahl to write her story. I'd known and admired Justice Wahl since June 1977, when I was present at the Minnesota Women's Meeting in St. Cloud and witnessed the jubilation that met the announcement of her appointment as the first female associate justice on the state's high court.

Encouragement to intertwine Wahl's story with the concurrent rise of the Minnesota women's movement came from Rosalie herself. "I owe it all to the women," she said repeatedly as I interviewed her for this book in 2009-10. While she possessed great personal strength, wisdom and determination, she was clear-eyed in recognizing that the opportunities that came her way were not solely of her own making. She was a great believer in the power of shared human endeavor to create positive social change. I'm confident that she would appreciate being remembered as someone who rode the wave of the mid-20th century women's movement—and then accelerated it when her chance to do so arrived.

What did you enjoy most about writing *Rosalie Wahl's story*?

Researching this book had personal appeal to me. As a young reporter at the *Minneapolis Tribune*, I was assigned to cover several key events in the women's movement. The leading advocates of gender fairness in Minnesota became my sources; I joined many of them at the National Women's Conference in Houston in November 1977, where I covered the state's delegation.

Reconnecting with those sources more than 30 years later was gratifying; hearing their reflections on those "yeasty years" was inspiring.

What do you hope readers take away from your book?

I was asked not long ago whether I thought Minnesota school children should study the life of Rosalie Wahl, much as they might the lives of the nation's founders. I allowed that her story certainly has inspirational value as a tale of triumph over adversity and the virtues "nurtured by the hearth," as Rosalie once said.

But what I hope impresses readers is the value of citizen engagement in grassroots movements to make positive change. Rosalie saw herself as part of a movement. She

did a great deal to bring that movement's values to bear on the judiciary. But as she left the bench in 1994, she told an interviewer that she was cognizant of the limitations of that branch of government, and was eager to re-engage in politics, protests, and other forms of citizen activism. Those activities are vital tools for building a better society, she believed.

I also hope readers take away more awareness of two characteristics of the 20th century women's movement—and of Rosalie Wahl—that I believe are relevant to the movement's renewal in this century. One is the sense of sisterhood that participants in that movement shared. With seeming ease, they forged alliances that crossed boundaries of party, class and geography to accomplish their goals.

The other is their confidence that their goals were attainable. History was on their side, they believed. They had faith that the American system of democracy would deliver desirable results if they worked within it to affect change. As Rosalie said in a speech during a period of retrenchment, "We will not give one inch to despair."

Some of the notions of those Second Wave feminists may have been naïve or simplistic. But their faith in each other and in the possibility of a better life strikes me as essential to their achievements, and assets worth reclaiming by those who seek to complete the unfinished work on the women's movement's agenda.

**MINNESOTA
BOOK AWARD
CATEGORIES:**

**Children's
Literature**

**General
Nonfiction**

Genre Fiction

**Memoir &
Creative
Nonfiction**

Minnesota

**Novel &
Short Story**

Poetry

**Young People's
Literature**



325 Cedar Street
Suite 555
Saint Paul, MN 55101
651-222-3242

www.thefriends.org



27TH ANNUAL
**Minnesota
Book
Awards**

MINNESOTA WINNER

Category sponsored by
Saint Mary's University of Minnesota



***Her Honor: Rosalie Wahl and the
Minnesota Women's Movement***

by Lori Sturdevant

MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY PRESS

**A READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE PREPARED BY
THE FRIENDS OF THE SAINT PAUL PUBLIC LIBRARY**

SUMMARY

In 1944, young Rosalie Erwin made the decision to embark on a new academic and career path. She changed her major at the University of Kansas to sociology with the hope that her studies in this field would prepare her for a life dedicated to helping others and making the world a better place. In 1960, she had an epiphany that led to her decision to go to law school. At thirty-eight years of age, Rosalie Wahl (now married and a mother of four) began classes at the William Mitchell College of Law in St. Paul. Sturdevant describes how, despite personal struggle, Wahl completed law school and, in 1977 became Minnesota's first female Supreme Court Justice.

Lori Sturdevant accepts her award at the 27th Annual Minnesota Book Awards Gala on April 18, 2015.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Describe Wahl's childhood and her relationship with her grandmother and aunt. How did the influence of these strong women shape her into the smart, confident young woman she would become?
2. Aunt Sara's choice to remain single in order to maintain her financial independence taught Rosalie about the importance of family obligations and their cost. What are some of the sacrifices Wahl made on behalf of her husband and children? How might her path have been different had she not married after completing her bachelor's degree?
3. Of the failed attempt to establish an intentional community in Minnesota, Wahl said: "Those years weren't wasted. I don't think something has to be successful for it to have been worthwhile." What does this assertion say about Wahl's character? Do you share this same attitude?
4. What event in 1960 inspired Wahl to enroll in law school? What other factors, both at home and in the nation, helped to influence the then mother of four to take on such a challenge?
5. What was it like for Wahl as a student at William Mitchell College of Law? How do you view her resolute decision to continue classes just one week after the birth of her fifth child? Would you have done the same in her place?
6. Describe the criminal and civic law clinic Wahl was invited to help launch at William Mitchell in 1973. Why was she given the opportunity and what qualities of her character and teaching style made her so popular with her students?
7. What was the emotional climate of the Minnesota feminist movement in the mid-1970s? Describe how key individuals and groups organized to promote the need for women in the judiciary. How did they ensure Wahl's appointment after Governor Perpich promised to fill the next vacancy on the Minnesota Supreme Court with a woman?
8. How did Governor Perpich's decision to announce Wahl's appointment the way he did contribute to the significance of the event?
9. How did the nature of Wahl's appointment, the particulars of her personal biography, and the campaign against her appointment combine to make this a symbolic and meaningful first for women in Minnesota? Would any woman in her position have generated the same reaction, regardless of her personal qualities?
10. What were Wahl's most significant achievements during her seventeen years on the Minnesota Supreme Court?



Rosalie Wahl on the bench of the Minnesota Supreme Court.

ABOUT LORI STURDEVANT



Lori Sturdevant is an editorial writer and columnist for the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*, covering government and politics. The recipient of two previous Minnesota Book Awards, she has edited or co-authored seven books, each detailing the lives of prominent figures in Minnesota's history.

27TH ANNUAL MINNESOTA BOOK AWARDS

The Minnesota Book Awards, presented by 3M Library Systems, is a statewide, year-round outreach program of The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library in partnership with the Saint Paul Public Library and the City of Saint Paul.

The 27th Annual Minnesota Book Awards was supported by the following category sponsors:

Books For Africa; Education Minnesota; Macalester College; Minnesota AFL-CIO; Northwestern Mutual; Saint Mary's University of Minnesota; The Creative Writing Programs at Hamline University; and Wellington Management.

Printing of outreach materials has been made possible by funds from Minnesota's Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund through a designation by the Council of Regional Public Library System Administrators (CRPLSA).



MINNESOTA CATEGORY SPONSORED BY:
SAINT MARY'S UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA