


# Boardinghouse Women: How Southern Keepers, Cooks, Nurses, Widows and Runaways Shaped Modern America

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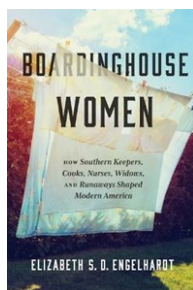
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## REVIEWS

### ***Boardinghouse Women: How Southern Keepers, Cooks, Nurses, Widows and Runaways***



Elizabeth S. D. Engelhardt  
Chapel Hill: University of North  
Carolina Press, 2023  
ISBN: 9781469676401  
312 p. \$27.95 (Pbk)

The boardinghouse industry was integral to the definition of Southern culture and the development of its distinct cuisine, while at the same time providing a crucial safety net for those needing to earn additional income or find a safe space to stay. In her latest book, Elizabeth Engelhardt explores how boardinghouse women helped to shape culture not just in the South but across the United States, through business innovation, the acquisition of financial independence, and fostering artistic creativity.

Engelhardt takes us on a journey through the boardinghouses of the South, contrasting makeshift Mississippi logging camps against the genteel boardinghouses that catered to Virginia elites. Covering a time span from the 1700s through the Jim Crow years, she shows how the South's segregation policies resulted in the boardinghouse industry surviving longer in this region than in the rest of the country.

The book is well researched, and the author uses an impressive wealth of sources, including interviews obtained in the Federal Writers' Project of the 1930s. Her case studies cover women from different racial and socio-economic backgrounds across the South. Although mainly focusing on boardinghouse keepers, several of her case studies follow women who either grew up in boardinghouses or lived in them as guests, which gives the reader a well-rounded overview of the boarding house experience. Several of these women also forged successful careers, such as pioneering travel writer Anne Royall, entertainer Jackie "Moms" Mabley, and early cookery writers Malinda Russell and Mary Randolph.

Rather than organizing her work chronologically, the author divides her chapters into themes focusing on different aspects of the boardinghouse industry, with the first three chapters showcasing women as business innovators, caregivers, and pioneers of culinary development. The middle three chapters are devoted to the more hidden aspects of boardinghouses as spaces for political debate, freedom of expression, or as a safe refuge. Each chapter is presented using detailed case studies of two main women, but then gives additional examples of other boardinghouse keepers to support the theme. By focusing each chapter on a particular theme, Engelhardt allows the reader to easily compare the experiences of women from different eras.

Engelhardt provides a full history of each of the women in her examples and gives the reader a fascinating glimpse into the issues faced by women who had limited economic options while struggling to support their families.

Boardinghouses were one of the few industries open to women who were property-rich and cash-poor in the 19th and early 20th centuries. As a young widow, Alice Larkins found that running a boardinghouse gave her freedom, opportunities, respectability, and financial independence. Operating a boardinghouse also allowed women to use the skills that they already had in laundry, cooking, and caring for others. A common theme that runs through the book is that of women overcoming difficult odds, including widowhood, financial hardship, abuse, and discrimination. These women found futures for themselves, either as businesswomen or creatively through the freedom that the boardinghouse provided. The food that was created in such houses helped to shape Southern cuisine and hospitality.

Particularly interesting was the chapter on using boarding houses for political ends. Engelhardt recounts the life of entrepreneur and abolitionist Mary Ellen Pleasant, whose establishment played a role in the underground railroad. She contrasts this to the experiences of Mary Surratt, the first woman to be executed by the federal government, whose house was implicated in the assassination plot against President Lincoln. Boardinghouses offered these women access to political discussion and provided cover for their

political involvement.

Also enlightening is Engelhardt's focus on the boardinghouse as a safe space. She uses examples of travelers during the Jim Crow era who used Green Books to identify safe spaces or who used the anonymity of the boardinghouse to present themselves as a different race, gender, or class:

Some used boarding houses to leave their past behind, whether in terms of racial identity, gender or class; some found the freedom to love who they wanted or resist expectations they hated. Some found that boardinghouse tables were places of influence, politics, or culture not otherwise available to them. (p.13)

Engelhardt is willing to identify the gaps in her account. She emphasizes that although many boardinghouse women are absent from the historical record, even more notably absent are the scores of women (both employed and enslaved) who toiled in their establishments.

The title effectively demonstrates how Southern boardinghouses were important in establishing Southern cuisine and provided a place of refuge in a sometimes threatening society. The author emphasizes the legacy of boardinghouses in American culture in terms of written works, businesses, and in the spirit of today's pop-up restaurants, Airbnbs, and assisted living communities.

Academic libraries, in particular those with an interest in Southern history, women's history, and African American history, should consider including this title in their collections.

*Boardinghouse Women* would also be of interest to those studying the development of the Southern hospitality industry. Elizabeth Engelhardt is Kenan Eminent Professor of Southern Studies in the Department of American Studies at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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### ***Integrating Pop Culture into the Academic Library***

Melissa Edmiston Johnson, Thomas C. Weeks,  
& Jennifer Putnam Davis, eds.  
Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022

ISBN: 9781538159408  
309 p. \$132.00 (Hbk)

Can using popular culture materials in academic libraries across the United States make a difference in the student user experience at institutions of higher learning? In what specific ways have popular culture trends influenced library purchases in the 21st century? Throughout the pages of the book *Integrating Pop Culture into the Academic Library*, co-editors Melissa Edmiston Johnson, Thomas C. Weeks, and Jennifer Putnam Davis provide a picture of how academic library personnel can incorporate popular culture as a means of learning course material for many college students. As learners in the digital age, college students nowadays relate more easily to popular culture icons if they can see a connection to their daily lives. Ultimately, library personnel must face the reality of a different user population in the 21st century. As an example, the authors of one chapter indicate that using specific fictional newspaper materials from J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter books and film adaptations to explain news misinformation or disinformation might be the best path forward. In these ways, the library course material is more "relatable" to the students. For their part, the book co-editors emphasize using the *Quibbler* and *The Daily Prophet* from the Harry Potter books to aid students in understanding news media more completely.

One very interesting aspect of the book is the case studies that show how specific colleges and university libraries are changing their outreach programs to consider the growing popularity of popular culture books, television, or classic movies (like *The Black Panther*). In one chapter, the authors mention communities of practice or common interest groups as a specific means to meet the needs of a changing library user population more completely. The authors recommend that a popular culture interest group consisting of interested faculty and students would showcase the impact of popular culture in the 21st century or spread the word about its growing emergence. Notably, once college students can engage in meaningful conversations about popular culture with their faculty, they begin to realize that shared

