In 1960, Rosalie Wahl, a mother of four in her mid-30s, had an epiphany. Along with several other women, she had presented a proposal to the Washington County Board in Minnesota to use some of its budget surplus to establish branch libraries in rural areas. After their presentation, the women were asked to leave the room and subsequently were told their proposal had been defeated. Tired of sitting outside as male functionaries exercised power, Wahl decided to go to law school.

Wahl, who missed one week of classes to give birth to her fifth child, graduated from William Mitchell Law School in St. Paul in 1967. She worked on felony appellate cases as a public defender and then returned to her alma mater to run a newly established legal clinic, where senior-year students defended low-income litigants under the supervision of professors. In 1977, Wahl became the first woman to be named to the Minnesota Supreme Court.

In “Her Honor,” Lori Sturdevant, a Star Tribune editorial writer and columnist, sets the life and career of Wahl in the context of the women’s movement in the second half of the 20th century. Her book effectively, and often eloquently, captures the obstacles women faced and the strategies they used to overcome them.

In “Her Honor,” Sturdevant credits Wahl with three “lasting transformations” of the Minnesota system of justice: opening the door to the appointment of female judges; and playing leading roles on the Gender Bias Task Force and the Racial Bias Task Force.

Nonetheless, Wahl, who died in 2013 at age 88, disappears for long stretches in the book, as the narrative turns to the tribulations and triumphs of other feminist pioneers. And Sturdevant does not adequately examine Wahl’s decisions or her judicial philosophy (beyond a claim that she “pushed the legal system to value life’s emotional and psychological components,” and to respond with alacrity to acquaintance rape, child and spousal abuse, and the welfare of wives in divorce cases).

That said, Sturdevant does an exemplary job of documenting the challenges women faced in Minnesota, “despite its latter-day reputation for progressive politics.” The Gender Bias Task Force, she points out, discovered that judges and male attorneys often assumed that women attorneys were assistants or secretaries, made comments about their sexuality, and addressed them as “dearie,” “ma’am” or “little lady.”

Progress has been made, Sturdevant writes, but equality for women “is yet to be achieved, even in the legal profession.”
Proclaiming that Wahl did all she could and putting her faith in the daughters of baby boomers, Sturdevant predicts that more change is coming: “Bring on the next wave.”

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While there is no single hero of the Minnesota women's movement, Rosalie Wahl, the first woman on the Minnesota Supreme Court, changed the way her fellow judges saw the cases they decided. A champion of both women's rights and civil rights, she brought new attention to the problems that faced women impoverished by divorce, women abused by their partners, and others who coped with poverty and discrimination. Minnesota: Her Honor: Rosalie Wahl and the Minnesota Women's Movement by Lori Sturdevant (Minnesota Historical Society Press). Novel and short story: A Brief History of Seven Killings by Marlon James (Riverhead Books). Poetry: Dangerous Goods by Sean Hill (Milkweed). Young people's literature: West of the Moon by Margi Preus (Amulet Books). Kay Sexton Award: Mary François Rockcastle. Book Artist Award: Harriet Bart, in collaboration with Philip Gallo and Jill Jevne. Talk tomorrow