

The following essay was written by Levin to accompany a New York Times *'Stepford Husbands'*-themed fashion spread which appeared in the December 7, 2003 issue, under the title "*Fashion for Dummies (Redressing the Fatal Flaw in 'The Stepford Wives')*." It was occasioned by the then-upcoming release of the 2004 remake of the original 1975 film adaptation.



UNTITLED *STEPFORD HUSBANDS* PIECE

By Ira Levin

Back in the fall of 1971, when I finally decided on Stepford as the name of the Connecticut town I was about to populate with feminist wives and chauvinist husbands, I had no idea that I would be adding an adjective to the language. A phrase is actually what I was aiming for.

If I found the right name, I thought, a whatever-it-was wife could become the popular label for an obsessed, perfectionist homemaker — assuming, of course, that the novel turned out to be a success. (It helps to assume that when starting one.)

No such label existed then. In earlier years a woman might have been called, behind her back, a “Craig’s wife,” after the obsessed, perfectionist title character in a Rosalind Russell movie, but the term had faded from use and “Martha Stewart” had not yet been invented.

For more hours than you can imagine I sat before my typewriter auditioning dozens of names that sounded like Connecticut towns but weren’t: Norwood, Ridgeford, Martindale, Eastbridge... Stepford finally won because it fell most easily from the lips and because, in its subliminal suggestion of a step being taken, I heard something faintly robotic. And robots, as you must know, were what those uppity wives were about to be replaced with by their technologically gifted husbands.

In the three decades since the novel was completed and published and the movie botched and released, obsessive, perfectionist homemakers have indeed been labeled as Stepford wives. Far more frequently though, to my pleased surprise, there have been media references to Stepford students, Stepford marines, Stepford cops, even Stepford rats — mini-robots that seek out earthquake victims. There have been, right here in The Times, a Stepford first lady (Hillary, not Laura!) and a Stepford Saddam (Hi there, Maureen Dowd).

It may be that this tide of Stepfords, mailed and faxed to me by friends and relations, has made me blasé, because I was hardly surprised at all when I was presented with a portfolio of photos of Stepford husbands, with their wives masterminding the robotizing.

Why not?

In fact there's a certain irony in this transgendered Stepford appearing in a fashion layout, because more than anything else, it was the costumes in the movie that set my teeth on edge.

At a lawn party on a summer afternoon, the men are in jackets and ties, the women in floor-length dresses. In Stepford? The event would be a softball game and the men dressed like slobs. The women, bringing the beer and burgers, would be in hot pants and low-cut blouses. Or maybe wet T-shirts.

And that final scene in the supermarket! The cart-pushing wives in picture hats and, again, floor-length dresses! William Goldman, who wrote the screenplay, explained the absurdity in his book *Adventures in the Screen Trade*: one of the featured wives didn't have the leggy pin-up figure for proper Stepford gear — and she also happened to be the wife of the director. All the wives were costumed accordingly.

The photos here are far truer to the Stepford concept. The men are wearing exactly what women would have them wear — black tie or outfits you might see in a fashion layout. And the women are wearing exactly what they would choose for themselves — smashing gowns by name designers. Now *that's* a coherent Stepford.

Another Stepford is on the way, a remake from Paramount. Given that the cast includes Nicole Kidman, Matthew Broderick, Bette Midler, Christopher Walken, and Glenn Close, and assuming that they're all dressed right, this *Stepford* may well be so successful that Paramount will be obliged to acknowledge a net profit — in which case I'll be kicking myself for having taken my money up front.

