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Feminist Classics

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That Seventies Show

Travels with Older Feminists

Jennifer Baumgardner

ON A BLUSTERY DAY this past April, I sat in Barnard College's Altschul Hall among fifty accomplished feminists in their fifties and sixties, ten or so students, and two high-schoolers for the annual Veteran Feminists of America meeting. Part conference and part award ceremony, the event is a look back at the early days of the modern women's movement, starring the women who led the charge of the second wave. Feminine-mystique buster Betty Friedan was there, as was zipless-fuck creator Erica Jong. Different-voice researcher Carol Gilligan stopped in for the dinner to receive her medal. Seven of the original thirteen *Our Bodies, Ourselves* collective stood with their arms around each other on the dais, recalling the days when they sat at a kitchen table hammering out the original feminist health bible. Many of the women at the event spoke of having been through hell and euphoria, having known intense excitement and bravery and loss, which is why they use the somewhat tongue-in-cheek term "veteran," connoting one who served in a war, instead of the less bloody-sounding "pioneer" or "trailblazer" or (*ahem*) "foremother." In other words, these women enlisted in the revolution, and they have the scars to prove they were there.

I have attended this meeting for the last four years as a guest of Barbara Seaman, who wrote *The Doctors' Case Against the Pill* and *Free and Female*, among other influential books. I'm not a pioneer of the second wave but a person who was raised with the benefits of feminism. This year was a salute to the writers of the movement, and at the nonfiction panel it was suggested that no big, ground-breaking feminist books were being written today. Su-

san Brownmiller, author of *Against Our Will* and, recently, *In Our Time*, argued that this was because so much was unearthed by the second wave that it was next to impossible to find a hot, profound topic that would make millions of women exclaim "Wait, she's writing about me!" Letty Cottin Pogrebin, former editor of *Ms.* magazine and co-creator of *Free to Be . . . You and Me*, added that it was also due to the kind of feminism practiced by the daughters of the second wave, which she characterized as very individualistic, concerned with culture rather than politics. (This was seconded by sister panelists Brownmiller and Phyllis Chesler, author of *Women and Madness* and, now, *Woman's Inhumanity to Woman*.)

The theory that the important books were ones written roughly between 1964 (*The Feminine Mystique*) and 1975 (*Against Our Will*) struck me as provocative and inaccurate. I am the co-author of a book about the current state of feminism, and I'm in the process of writing two more books along feminist lines, so I have a personal stake in resisting the news that all the good writing has been done. Ironically, I had embarked a few years before on a grand plan to bring out some of the classics of the second wave. I focused on out-of-print books that I thought were ignored by the publishing industry and therefore unavailable to my generation. In pitching the *Feminist Classics* series, I was asked to prove that those important feminist books (written and trumpeted by the vets) were, well . . . relevant.

On a personal level, I wanted some role in preserving the legacy of second wave feminism. That compulsion can be traced back to my first job after college, in the editorial department at *Ms.* *Ms.* didn't reflect the feminism I saw in my own life, the *de facto* feminism of having been raised in a more liberated time, when ground-breaking acts come from sheer confidence, freedom, and a sense of entitlement and

not from consciousness raising groups and mass protests. *Ms.* didn't direct itself to an audience raised with both Maybelline ads and critiques of make-up. Nonetheless, I was fascinated by what I then perceived to be the "real" women's liberationists, and I was in the privileged position of meeting many of these veterans. It was heady stuff.

One night during the spring of 1995, I attended a gathering for the writer Susan Swan in a Greenwich Village bar when I met Karen Durbin, now the film critic for *Elle*, who was part of the later crest of the second wave. In 1995, she was the editor-in-chief (first and only woman in that job) at the *Village Voice*, the once-influential soapbox for the lefty counterculture. We talked about whether young women really had a grasp of feminism's theory and history. I recall Karen's saying something like this: *Look, you've got to read the big books of the second wave. Even if you spit 99 percent of them out, reading those books is critical.* So Karen wasn't insisting that I swallow everything the seventies feminists came up with. She was suggesting that my generation hadn't read feminism's foundational books and thus was unable to build on them. That was an epiphany.

I started reading: from *Sexual Politics* to *Pornography* to *In A Different Voice*; from *The Doctor's Case Against the Pill* to *Against Our Will* to *Vaginal Politics*. I read the novels (*Burning Questions*, *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen*, *The Women's Room*, *Fear of Flying*). I bought out-of-print books from street vendors who displayed their wares on card tables on Avenue A. I read the books written about the women who jump-started the radical second wave, like *Personal Politics* and *Daring to Be Bad*. I organized intergenerational readings and wrote in my magazine articles about events that occurred before I was born. I revisited the Miss America Protest of the late 1960s and the fight over the Equal Rights Amendment, reviewed the twenty-fifth-anniversary edition of *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen*, wrote about the *S.C.U.M. Manifesto*.

Then in 1998, I had the Feminist Classics idea. It seemed like a good idea back then—and deceptively straightforward. I (a twenty-eight-year-old feminist writer) noticed that most of the major classics of the second wave

were out of print. I was outraged. *Would Das Kapital ever be remaindered? Does anyone have to scour the Internet to find the speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.?* I would lobby to get these books back in print so my generation could read them and take the revolution to the next level.

"Mary Wollstonecraft wrote the *Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792; a few years later it was out of print and, with it, the first challenge—the foundation—of feminist intellectual tradition," began my 1998 proposal to Farrar, Straus & Giroux. "As a writer working on a book about feminism, I don't care if the seminal texts of the second wave aren't on lists of influential books—I'd be happy if they were in print. *Sexual Politics* by Kate Millett, *The Female Eunuch* by Germaine Greer, and *The Dialectic of Sex* by Shulamith Firestone are all dead. (And the works of lesser-known influential thinkers such as Ti-Grace Atkinson and Jill Johnston? Forget about it.)"

I approached a dozen younger feminists and asked them to lend quotes to bolster my case. "It's amazing that Firestone took on Marx—how bold," said Kathleen Hanna, a founder of riot grrrl and lead singer of Le Tigre. Susan Faludi threw her weight behind the project. "If there is a sense in the industry that younger women wouldn't be influenced by these books," she said, "it's a self-fulfilling prophecy: they certainly won't if the books aren't available."

MY AGENT, also twenty-eight, was eager to help out in what was essentially *pro bono* work. We approached the editor I was working with on my feminist book (who also happened to be under thirty). She went for it. What happened next was a roller coaster ride of frustration, leading to what I think of now as "Lessons in Feminism."

Lesson # 1: Just because a writer is a feminist doesn't mean she doesn't (or shouldn't) have an ego.

I approached Millett first. She had written an article that year in the now-defunct *On the Issues* about how she couldn't get a teaching job anywhere and almost all her books were out of print, including the 1970 classic *Sexual Politics*. That book was the first major example of something routinely done now: the parsing

of a beloved cultural creation for its misogyny. The lens she held up to D.H. Lawrence and Norman Mailer is now almost automatically applied to work from such varied artists as Woody Allen and Eminem. When we spoke, Millett was interested in my classics proposal but noted again that *all* her books were out of print. She was sick of being reduced to the first book of her career (her Ph.D. dissertation, for God's sake) and wanted a publisher to commit to doing at least four of her books. I quickly read *Sita, Flying*, and the *Loony Bin Trip* and made the case to Farrar, Straus & Giroux. No dice, so no dice. The idea of getting classics out for my generation wasn't enough inducement for Millett. Though I was disappointed, I could hardly blame her. No points for taking less than you think you deserve.

Lesson #2: Just because a second-wave feminist is old enough to be my mother doesn't mean that she is my mother.

My next call was to Shulamith Firestone, who has been very reclusive after her 1970 *Dialectic of Sex*. Like Millett, she wrote her first book at twenty-five and had already founded and left several influential New York feminist groups such as Redstockings and New York Radical Feminists by the time it was published. *Dialectic* had a tight, ambitious, radical argument. "The missing link between Marx and Freud," was how it was billed on the back cover. The point of feminism, Firestone argued, was to "overthrow the oldest, most rigid" class system—caste based on sex. The book was a bestseller, but Firestone left the movement soon after it came out and fell off everyone's radar. In 1998, she published a lovely, tiny book of disturbing vignettes about people with mental illnesses called *Airless Spaces*. She called me when the book came out to see if I would review it. I seized the moment to get her involved in the classics project. After many phone calls with me, my agent, and the editor, in which we agreed to very specific terms (no new introduction, the same artwork as the 1970 edition, no publicity responsibilities on her end), Firestone agreed to participate. My agent negotiated for months to get the rights to *Dialectic* back from William Morrow.

Days before she was to sign the contract, Firestone called and said, Sorry for the trouble,

but she had decided she no longer wanted the book to come out. It hadn't made her life any better when it came out originally, and she didn't want to go through any of that shit again. ("Refusing a career as a professional feminist, Shulamith Firestone found herself in an 'airless space,' approximately since the publication of her first book *The Dialectic of Sex*" reads the back cover of *Airless Spaces*.) I sputtered something about how my generation should have access to the book, that it could change lives and consciousness, and didn't she *care about that*?

No, frankly, she didn't. "If your generation really wants it, there are a few old copies available on Amazon.com," she said. "I don't feel a responsibility to bring out the book just because you want it. I'm very sorry."

There had been so much back and forth, months and months of negotiating these tricky concessions, hours of phone calls and then *poof!* It was over. I couldn't believe that I thought it was the patriarchal publishing industry keeping these books out of younger feminists' hands when, in a way, it was the authors themselves. As I came to terms with the fact that my vision for a series of feminist classics wasn't going to be realized, I started to see the lesson in Firestone's actions. Her book was a challenge to the inevitability of the female role, especially that of the mother who has to forgo her own needs by constantly privileging the needs of her progeny. It's true that men spend significant amounts of time mentoring other men—it's the positive side of the old boys network—but men don't feel that they owe other men this. With women, perhaps because

ON BOARD

With this issue of *Dissent*, Jeffrey C. Isaac joins the editorial board. Jeff teaches political theory at the University of Indiana in Bloomington. His books include *Power and Marxist Theory* (1987), *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion* (1992), and *Democracy in Dark Times* (1998). He was written frequently for *Dissent* on theoretical questions and on contemporary campus politics, in which he is actively engaged.

we've only recently entered the public sphere, there is a sense that mentoring and torch-passing steal from one's own hard-won store of power.

Lesson #3 Do it yourself.

By saying that she wasn't going to give me or my generation any intellectual nourishment—what I perceived as our inheritance, our due—Firestone spurred me to look at myself and my own book to fill that role. The book I was writing with Amy Richards, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism and the Future*, would have to be an “important feminist book,” if I thought the world needed such work so badly.

Lesson #4: Feminism means rejecting received wisdom.

Which brings me to the challenge implied by the Veteran Feminists panel: are today's feminist books important? Obviously, I think so. And although we may not be writing the “first” book about rape or the “first” nonsexist children's book, we *are* writing the books taught in women's studies programs across the nation. We are writing the books (and zines and songs) that girls and women and guys pick up and say, “I didn't realize that I was a feminist until I read your book” (or zine or song, and so on). We are, most critically, writing the first feminist books written by people raised with feminism “in the water,” as we say in *Manifesta*. Amy and I sought to describe the feminism we saw every day in our peers. In doing so, we had to shake off the received wisdom of current feminism. We had to discard the idea that the only important books were “radical” ones in which patriarchy was the problem, where women defining themselves as a “class” was the clear solution. We had to repudiate the myth that younger people rejected feminism itself, and point out that they (we) may be rejecting a definition of feminism coined in another time.

There is clear value in the past—especially the singular history of the second wave, when so much changed so rapidly. In a relatively few years, these women went from back-alley butchers to legal abortions, from girl writers never getting assignments to important journalists and authors. By the end of the seventies, there were female firefighters and words for—thus acknowledgment of—date rape, sexual harassment, and domestic violence.

There was a women's music scene and a national feminist magazine.

But there is even more value in the present. *Manifesta* was published in October 2000 and is now taught at hundreds of schools from Harvard to Winona State, from Lynwood Alternative High School in Ohio to McGill University in Canada. There are indeed feminist books published right now (*Slut!*, *Cunt*, *Don't Believe the Hype*, *Listen Up*, *Black White Jewish*, *Stiffed*, *Yell-oh Girls*, *Harmful to Minors*, *Body Outlaws*, and many more) that are relevant to the thousands of men and women taking women's studies courses today.

“I would say *any* band that's operating today is more important than bands that came before. They're more important *because* they exist,” said Ian MacKaye, the lead singer of Fugazi, in an interview in the Punk Planet anthology, *We Owe You Nothing*. Actually existing feminism is widespread, permeating every corner of the culture and every person in it. More people identify with feminist values than did thirty years ago. Furthermore, young people today (male and female) have grown up in a more feminist environment. People live feminist lives without knowing the label—women run marathons, men can be stay-at-home dads. Given this, those wise words from Karen Durbin can be turned back on the second wave: read our books and participate in our events. Even if you spit out 99 percent of it, reading the books and understanding what younger feminists are doing is a feminist act.

THE MUCH-LAMENTED and longed-for radical movement was both a boon and a curse for writing, by the way. In the seventies, radical feminists regarded writers—even the important ones—as “ripping off the movement,” as Alix Kates Shulman reminded everyone when she received her medal at the VFA event. The ideas were the movement's, any attempt to sign one's own name an act of unforgivable egotism. Writers were the mercenaries in this revolutionary war, fighting by writing, simply in order to make a buck or a male-identified career. A writer has to write, though, and she'll do it even if she's misunderstood or maligned. As the women at VFA kept saying, the feminist writer's job is to tell the

truth. Those women, writing in a different time, were also writing to answer an ignorant question posed by their male colleagues, "Why are there so few great women writers?" Their answer to that bit of received wisdom was a flood of work and a call to sexist, patriarchal society to open its damn eyes.

Lesson #5: You can't always get what you want, but sometimes you can.

Coming full circle, the Feminist Classics series actually worked out. We had hesitated about approaching Germaine Greer, certain that she would say no because of a somewhat nasty biography of her published by a subsidiary of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, but she agreed to let us bring out *The Female Eunuch*. It appeared in March 2002. Around the same time, Firestone called to say she had changed her

mind. She wanted *Dialectic of Sex* to be available after all.

In the years since initiating the Feminist Classics series, my opinion about the enterprise has evolved. I still believe the books deserve to be in print—but not because they are more important than the books written by my peers. I believe in the series for the sake of parity. Every movement has its classic texts. We deserve access to ours. ●

JENNIFER BAUMGARDNER, a journalist and the co-author, with Amy Richards, of *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism and the Future*, is writing a book about young women and bisexuality (*Look Both Ways*), and she and Richards are at work on a book about activism. She is deciding on the third title in the Feminist Classics series.