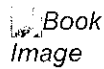


## Reading Group Guide



### Discussion Questions

1. "[T]he image by which modern American women live also leave[s] something out. . . . This image—created by the women's magazines, by advertisements, television, movies, novels, columns and books, by experts on marriage and the family, child psychology, sexual adjustment and by the popularizers of sociology and psychoanalysis—shapes women's lives today and mirrors their dreams." Betty Friedan first published these words in 1963 when the media's picture of a woman as wife and mother was certainly leaving something out. Today, the media is still projecting an image of women that "mirrors their dreams." What has changed from the image of thirty years ago and what has not? What is today's image leaving out? Do you think this image will ever truly reflect the needs and aspirations of women?
2. "The feminine mystique says that the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity . . . this femininity is so mysterious and intuitive and close to the creation and origin of life that man-made science may never be able to understand it. But however special and different, it is in no way inferior to the nature of man; it may even in certain respects be superior." Does the idea that women's differences give them a kind of superiority—or at least a certain advantage—have any currency today? In what ways do you see it expressed? Do you think it holds any truth?
3. Betty Friedan writes: "I never knew a woman, when I was growing up, who used her mind, played her own part in the world, and also loved, and had children." Discuss how the tension between work and family operates for women today. Are the expectations of men and women different in this regard? Have expectations changed? When women do try to achieve a balance, what things stand in their way? Do the scars of the feminine mystique play a role in this issue today?
4. Friedan argues that women were choosing marriage in order to avoid their fears about establishing their own identity and handling the fear and uncertainty that comes with being alone. Do you agree with her assessment? Do you agree with the causes she cites: Margaret Mead, Freud and sex-directed education, the aftermath of World War II? Do you see any evidence that women today marry for any of the same reasons? Why do women choose to marry today?
5. "[I]t is not the strength of the mothers that is at fault but their weakness, their passive childlike dependency and immaturity that is mistaken for 'femininity'." Are immaturity and dependency words that are still associated with femininity? What are the qualities that the word "woman" connotes today? Discuss the possible origins of these connotations.
6. In many of her interviews with housewives, Betty Friedan found the overwhelming sentiment was: "I feel empty—as if I don't exist." However, as the author continues, her interviews reveal that these unhappy women are not trying to improve their situations, nor are they even aware that other women are feeling the same agony. What is the cause of their anguish? Is society forcing women to be unhappy? To what extent are these women responsible for their own situations?
7. "Perhaps it is only a sick society, unwilling to face its own problems and unable to conceive of goals and purposes equal to the ability and knowledge of its members, that chooses to ignore the strength of women." Was the society of 1963 sick? What problems was society unwilling to face?
8. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word "feminine" first appeared in old French and was derived from the Latin word for woman (*femina*). The first definition of "feminism" is "the qualities of

females." What are the "qualities of females"? Are they simply qualities that men do not possess, such as the ability to bear children? If so, is it possible for men to treat women completely equally, despite being unable to share their defining characteristics? If not, what is it that makes men and women different, if anything at all?

9. Most of the text concerns the experiences of middle-class women. How were things different at the time for other socio-economic groups? While most would agree that middle-class women today do not feel bound to be housewives and do pursue their own education and careers, is this true for all women?
10. In "Metamorphosis: Two Generations Later," Friedan moves into a new generation, which is not as plagued by the feminine mystique as the preceding one. Does Friedan seem to have new opinions and thoughts on the feminine mystique? What has changed in the space of time between the first publication of *The Feminine Mystique* and today? In light of these changes, what is the relevance today of the original text?

# The Skeptical Early Reviews of Betty Friedan's 'The Feminine Mystique'

ASHLEY FETTERS

FEB 13, 2013 | 10:21 AM

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*"[Friedan] demands that all women find a life purpose or career which will give them an independent identity and what she calls fulfillment. In that, she surely goes too far."*



AP

Today, it's well known that Betty Friedan's 1963 work *The Feminine Mystique* was—and still is—a seminal, revolutionary piece of literature. The National Organization

of Women formed in its wake; it jolted a generation of women into thinking critically about their futures and their choices, and apparently it even killed home cooking (according to some people, at least).

But none of those things happened right away. In truth, *The Feminine Mystique's* 50-year shelf life got off to a somewhat rocky start. While many book critics immediately recognized the potential in Friedan's book when it was released in 1963, some remained skeptical. Some detractors said it was too alarmist, others said it was too complacent—and one even complained that Friedan went too far in asserting that average girl wouldn't *rather* be at home putting cream on her face. That last guy probably has a few regrets.

Related Story



'Anger Boiled Up, and Betty Friedan Was There': 'Feminine Mystique' at 50

*The Feminine Mystique*, in other words, didn't enter the world as the long-awaited wonder we remember it as today. To re-create the scene, I dug up a few snap judgments from critics, published just after the first edition of *The Feminine Mystique* arrived in 1963.

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***"Any single pattern for women, or anyone else for that matter, is bound to be wrong for many."***

**MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIVING, August 1963**

Jessie Bernard reviewed Friedan's book for *Marriage and Family Living* (which later became the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, which still publishes today).

Bernard wrote that while Friedan's theory of forced femininity was scratching at something relevant, the crisis wasn't nearly as severe as Friedan made it out to be. Bernard pushed back against Friedan by asserting that it really was a woman's choice whether she pursued a domestic life or a career. Perhaps for that reason, she

prescribed *The Feminine Mystique* as required reading for every woman about to graduate from college.

How-ever one may feel about it, this book should be on the reading list of every course on marriage and/or the family. Every college senior woman should be required to read it. It has some defects, but on the whole it offers a salutary and much needed shock to those who have, unwittingly perhaps, encouraged women to surrender their claims to identity as human beings, instead of assuring them that it is quite possible to be warmly individual human beings as well as loving wives and mothers. [...]

Any single pattern for women, or anyone else for that matter, is bound to be wrong for many. There are some women—Terman reported 35.9 per cent of those with high school educations in 1936—who have great interest in the domestic arts; some—he found 10.1 per cent—do not. It might be as hard on those with domestic interests to have to conform to a norm of commitment to non-domestic goals as it is for the non-domestic women Mrs. Friedan is talking about conformity to the feminine mystique. We need everything that Mrs. Friedan proposes. But, in addition, we need the recognition that women are different, that some are at ease with domesticity, just as some are not. There should be channels available to women suffering from what Mrs. Friedan calls the problem that has no name, to find identity in serious non-domestic commitments; but everyone should not be forced to use them.

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***"Friedan tends to set up a counter-mystique; that all women must have creative interests outside the home to realize themselves."***

**THE AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW, December 1963**

Sylvia Fleis Fava, a writer for *The American Sociological Review*, pointed out that although Friedan's mission to expose the dismal realities of housewifedom was a noble one, she risked alienating those women who would choose to live their lives in the domestic sphere.

The author documents the psychological difficulties resulting from the feminine mystique—boredom, family problems, psychosomatic complaints, and so on, and asks whether we want this straitjacket imposed on our women. Her answer, that we should take women seriously as individuals, not as women, resounds throughout the book; I heartily agree with it. The value position makes this an important book, worthy of the wide reading and discussion it is already gaining. There is one caveat, however. Friedan tends to set up a counter-mystique; that all women must have creative interests outside the home to realize themselves. This can be just as confining and tension-producing as any other mold.

Fava also pointed out that the necessary change Friedan was calling for couldn't be put into effect solely by women who changed their own behavior, no matter how determined they were. Rather, those changes had to have support at an institutional level.

The main reservation I have about the approach taken in the book is that it is so heavily psychological. This is clearest in the last chapter, in which Friedan discusses what can be done to change the feminine mystique. She recommends changes in individual woman [sic]—less attention to home-making, more commitment to serious education and creative work. These changes in attitude would culminate in a "new life plan." This neglects the fact that the changed attitudes and plans must be acted

upon in the context of the total society. The woman who develops the new life plan will find few institutionalized channels by which it can be put into effect. Negroes, too, have begun to change their attitudes and goals and to find that this is not enough without facilitating changes in social institutions. This does not deny the necessity of bringing about social change, but in the process the psychological frustration and conflicts may be as great, though of a different kind, as those experienced before the individual decided on a new life plan.

***"The sicknesses that Betty Friedan describes with so much penetration and courage are the products of a diseased social organism."***

**INTERNATIONAL SOCIALIST REVIEW, Winter 1964**

Evelyn Reed of the *International Socialist Review* took Fava's concerns about *The Feminine Mystique* a step further. Like Fava, she believed Friedan had missed the point: There were bigger, darker forces at work that made it so the "problem with no name" couldn't just be smoothed over by applying Friedan's tired prescriptions of education and awareness.

But according to Reed, the problem with no name was a side effect of capitalism.

Betty Friedan's diagnosis of the disease is superior to her remedy for it. She suggests that more serious education and study, together with interesting, well-paying jobs, will open the door of the trap. This is the same kind of limited, individual solution that the feminists formerly proposed—and that subsequently proved so ineffective. Some fortunate women can do what the author has done—turn around, make a "new life plan" and escape the domestic cage. But the life-plans for the great majority of women are determined for them by forces outside their personal control—the ruling powers.

The sicknesses that Betty Friedan describes with so much penetration and courage are the products of a diseased social organism, in which the rights, welfare and opportunities of human beings are subjected to the dictates of the profiteers. During a capitalist war women can be taken out of their homes by the millions and put to work in the factories. But when they are no longer needed as producers, they are sent back home to become primarily consumers. In both instances, what is decisive is not the needs of women as human beings but the interests of the monopolists. These masters of America shape the lives and livelihoods of womanhood and the whole family according to their own corrupt and corrupting aims.

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***"What is to stop a woman who is interested in national and international affairs from reading magazines that deal with those subjects?"***

**THE NEW YORK TIMES, April 7, 1963**

Lucy Freeman of *The New York Times*, on the other hand, thought Friedan focused too much on the culture and not enough on the individual. Who, exactly, she asked, was stopping a woman from pursuing an interest in real-world affairs?

Sweeping generalities, in which this book necessarily abounds, may hold a certain amount of truth but often obscure the deeper issues. It is superficial to blame the "culture" and its handmaidens, the women's magazines, as she does. What is to stop a woman who is interested in national and international affairs from reading magazines that deal with those subjects? To paraphrase a famous line, "The fault, dear Mrs. Friedan, is not in our culture, but in ourselves."

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***"The average girl will continue to stay home and cream her face as long as society sanctions it."***

**SARASOTA HERALD-TRIBUNE, September 1963**

This review by one Lee Metcalf of the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*—who, as far as I know, is not that Lee Metcalf—basically takes the cake when it comes to 50-years-later poignancy. Emphasis is my own:

It is obviously true that during the last 15 years many millions of intelligent girls, many of them well educated, have deliberately turned their backs on the world and gone fanatically female, devoting themselves to large broods of children and elaborate housekeeping and refusing to think of anything else. It is also true that more and more girls are marrying so young they never grow up. And it is pretty obvious that a great many of them are rather unhappy, particularly after their children go to school. It is also beginning to be recognized among the child psychiatrists that all the round-the-clock attention they have been lavishing on their children is producing rather dubious results.

But Mrs. Friedan, crusading against "the feminine [sic] mystique", does not simply ask for freedom for those women who want to work or to use their capabilities outside their homes. She goes further and demands that all women find a life purpose or career which will give them an independent identity and what she calls fulfillment. In that, she surely goes too far. How many women—and, for that matter, how many men—find that kind of career or purpose? **Rather than be a file clerk, the average girl will continue to stay home and cream her face as long as society sanctions it, just as surely as many a man would surely rather putz around the house than work on the assembly line if society would let him!**

Half a century later, the "average girl" now puts her face cream on before the commute to work: At the time of the 2010 U.S. Census, 75 percent of women between the ages of 25 and 54 were participants in the labor force.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ASHLEY FETTERS is a writer based in New York and a former associate editor at *The Atlantic*.

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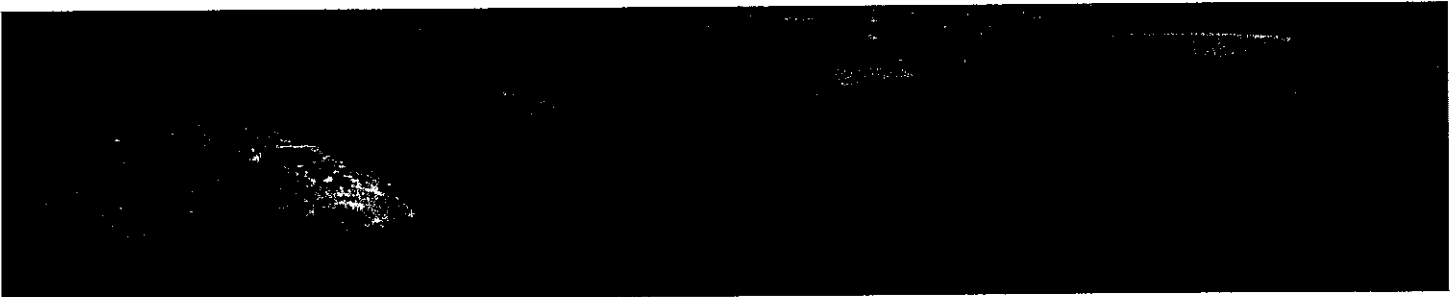
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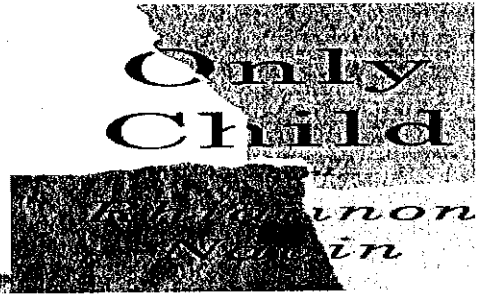


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BOOKS

# A Look Back at *The Feminine Mystique*, Which Turns 55 This Year

By LISA ROSMAN

February 19, 2018



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A few years ago, I attended an event for women in the media at which Gloria Steinem presided. She fielded all our questions graciously and thoroughly until a much younger journalist asked what she thought about “third and fourth wave feminism.” Then, the much-revered activist burst out laughing. “The tenets of *second* wave feminism have yet to be achieved.”

mobilizing as Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own," Betty Friedan's 1963 bestseller about the gas-lighting of mid-twentieth century American women is not just a primer in second-wave feminism. It spawned the movement by spelling out how, after gaining the vote and working outside the home during the World Wars, American women were coaxed into embracing housewifery as their sole occupation through a barrage of pseudo-psychology and propaganda that endorsed a "feminist mystique"- namely, that living for and through husbands and children was a good-woman ideal.

Friedan, a former magazine journalist who'd become this sort of hoodwinked hausfrau, described how post-World War II U.S. females had been pressured to marry younger, have more babies, and maintain obsessively clean households rather than pursue any independent growth. In diligently researched chapter after chapter, she showed how Margaret Meade-style anthropologists, Freudian psychologists, Madison Avenue, women's magazines, and high schools and universities had colluded to make a woman feel fundamentally inferior if she didn't crave a shiny new car, a shiny husband, four shiny children, and six kinds of shiny soap. A mass infantilization had taken place, she argued, in which women no longer aspired to be men's equals so much as their mommies and daughters simultaneously.

By detailing the mental, physical, and social diseases spawned by this commodification — a "slow death of spirit" this secular Jew equated with the march to Nazi concentration camps — Friedan created a diligently researched Sears catalog of oppression for all the women who'd been feeling numb, desperate, and empty. "Isn't it time to break the pattern by urging all these sleeping beauties to grow up and live their own lives?" she wrote. It was a call for revolution, and it came with

footnotes.

In kitchens across the nation, women left dirty dishes in the sink while they pored over her pages. Consciousness-raising groups were formed, women's strikes were enacted, husbands were left, jobs outside the home were sought, bullshit was called. In short, the national response was seismic.

For the book's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2013, a commemorative edition was released with an introduction by Gail Collins and a lengthy afterword by Anna Quinlan. In review after review, bows were made to Friedan's great influence, with single-sentence reprimands of her equation of "all women" with "straight, white, and upper-middle-class." Really, as such estimable authors as bell hooks have noted, this was not an oversight so much as an obliteration—one so glaring that later generations might be forgiven for dismissing the book as a dated, if vital, cog in resistance history. "White lady feminism" at its most problematic.

**ifty-five years  
after 'The  
Feminine  
Mystique' was  
written, gender  
equality remains  
a worthy but  
elusive goal on  
the American  
landscape."**

 TWEET THIS QUOTE

*Feminine Mystique* is worth considering once again. Friedan's myopia makes the rampantly un-intersectional feminist comic Amy Schumer look like Angela Davis. Yet that fierce specificity is key to the gut-punch the book delivers. By having the audacity to say, "This is not a dream. This a nightmare" to the exact sort of white, well-off ladies who presumably benefited from patriarchy, it pulled the rayon from the eyes of a class of Sisyphean Spaceks, essentially showing suburban empresses everywhere that they were naked. It's a brilliant, if rather inadvertent, distillation of white male supremacy, a social and economic infrastructure wholly dependent on racial, gender, and sexual myths for survival. Thus it is an indispensable blueprint of a system currently threatening to take us all out as it dies.

I've been flashing on Friedan's book in the wake of the #metoo uprising. In an afterward, the author blithely predicted that "even the Republicans" would nominate a female vice presidential candidate by 1976. Instead, what's neutral is still male in our culture, and this is apparent in the media, where male desire is championed and female desire is preyed upon, and in our mostly white-male upper government, which strips women, along with people of color, Muslims, queer people, and immigrants, of their rights daily.

Though women indeed have entered the American workplace, we often are considered "others" at best. Hence the rampant sexual harassment and assault that many of us only now feel licensed to report though Friedan and her associates launched the famous *Newsweek* lawsuit for gender discrimination nearly half a century ago. Women may be out of the kitchen, but we've never been fully welcomed anywhere else — not financially, not legally, not socially. The term "female-identified people" may be more inclusive than "women," but the fact remains that the messages internalized by our grandparents still land hard on us today.

Consider Friedan's words on female sexual gratification:

*The transcendence of self, in sexual orgasm, as in creative experience, can only be attained by one who is herself complete, by one who has realized her own identity ... women's sexual problems are thus ... byproducts of the suppression of her basic need to grow and fulfill her potentialities as a human being, potentialities which the mystique of feminine fulfillment ignores.*

Here in 2018, much has changed but male-identified people still are reduced to financial objects, female-identified people still are reduced to sexual objects, and this passage is still radical in its declaration that sex is better when both participants know and respect themselves and each other. Fifty-five years after *The Feminine Mystique* was written, gender equality remains a worthy but elusive goal on the American landscape.