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The Feminine Mystique (50th Anniversary Edition)

The Feminine Mystique Betty Friedan

"If you've never read it, read it now."
—Arianna Huffington, *O, The Oprah Magazine*

Introduction by Gail Collins
Afterword by Anna Quindlen



Synopsis

“If you’ve never read it, read it now.” —Arianna Huffington, O, The Oprah Magazine Landmark, groundbreaking, classic — these adjectives barely do justice to the pioneering vision and lasting impact of *The Feminine Mystique*. Published in 1963, it gave a pitch-perfect description of “the problem that has no name”: the insidious beliefs and institutions that undermined women’s confidence in their intellectual capabilities and kept them in the home. Writing in a time when the average woman first married in her teens and 60 percent of women students dropped out of college to marry, Betty Friedan captured the frustrations and thwarted ambitions of a generation and showed women how they could reclaim their lives. Part social chronicle, part manifesto, *The Feminine Mystique* is filled with fascinating anecdotes and interviews as well as insights that continue to inspire. This 50th anniversary edition features an afterword by best-selling author Anna Quindlen as well as a new introduction by Gail Collins.

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Customer Reviews

“Lively, astute, and ferocious. . . . *The Feminine Mystique* should be required reading for anyone who cares about women.” — Rachel Shteir, *Chronicle of Higher Education*

“Brilliant. . . . [Friedan] succeeded where no other feminist writer had. She touched the lives of ordinary readers.” — Louis Menand, *The New Yorker*

“If you want to understand the passion that helped fire up the modern women’s movement, there may be no better place to start than with *The Feminine Mystique*.” — Lynn Neary, NPR

First published in 1963, *The Feminine Mystique* ignited a revolution that profoundly changed our culture, our consciousness, and our lives. Today it newly penetrates to the heart of issues determining our lives -- and sounds a call to arms against the very real dangers of a new feminine mystique in the economic and political turbulence of the 1990s. Three decades later, the underlying issues raised by Betty Friedan strike at the core of the problems women still face at home and in the marketplace. As women continue to struggle for equality, to keep their hard-won gains, to find fulfillment in their careers, marriage and family, *The Feminine Mystique* remains the seminal consciousness-raising work of our times. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I had read this book when it first came out and it was interesting to compare my earlier thoughts with this 50 year edition. It is amazing how much of it is relevant today. The problem which had no name became the feminine mystique. Why are so many housewives unhappy? Their goal was to marry well, have children and live in a nice house in the suburbs but having achieved that they realized that their identity was only as wife and mother. The book offers ways to change.

Once (or a few times at most) a generation, there comes a book of such importance that it changes the course of history. *THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE* is one such book. It may have been written over 50 years ago, but everyone, men and women, are still dealing with the cultural ripple effect it stirred. And what's more, despite feminism having moved on, it remains relevant. The Freudian obsession with sex and all-devouring consumerism it unmasked continue on unabated. In that respect the 30 year retrospective included in this edition provided a nice moratorium on where we are post-mystique. There's probably a lot I could go into on how this book is still applicable, but the best thing to do would be to read it for yourself if you haven't already.

It is completely understandable why this book was a huge best seller and a society changing item at the time of the 60s, basically beginning the 2nd feminist wave. This book uses all different types of arguments, including ethos, pathos, logos and sometimes reverse pathos: taking away credibility from somebody who originally had much praise for their work. Friedan is an amazing author who knows how to pull at the heart strings and also make the mind think when it comes to questioning one's own country and its ideals. I was reading this book for a project I was doing in class on modern day feminism in the United States and this was intensely

helpful. The issue brought up in feminism today is the saying, “Women have it better in society today; there is nothing to fight for anymore.” But going back through this book I realized a number of similarities between the issues that the hippies of the sixties fought for and the issues the millennial women continue to struggle with. In order to explain modern day feminism, one needs to realize the history and the base of the problem and this book is definitely one of the great sources to look into when arguing with even the most stubborn misogynist or misandrist.

Betty Friedan (1921-2006) was an American writer, activist, and feminist, who became one of the leading figures of the feminist movement with the publication of this book. She was founder of, and first president of the National Organization for Women (NOW). She also wrote *A Fountain of Age*, *Life So Far: A Memoir*, *It Changed My Life: Writings on the Women’s Movement*, and *Beyond Gender: The New Politics of Work and Family*. [NOTE: page numbers below refer to the 420-page 1975 Dell paperback edition.] She wrote in the Preface to this 1963 book, “Gradually I came to realize that something is very wrong with the way American women are trying to live their lives today. I sensed it first as a question mark in my own life, as a wife and mother of three children almost in spite of myself. It was this personal question mark that led me, in 1957, to spend a great deal of time doing an extensive questionnaire of my college classmates, fifteen years after our graduation from Smith. The answers given by 200 women made me realize that what was wrong could not be related to education. There was a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform, the image that I came to call the feminine mystique. I wondered if other women faced this schizophrenic split. And so I began to hunt down the origins of the feminine mystique, and its effect on women who lived by it, or grew up under it. But the puzzle did not begin to fit together until I interviewed eighty women at certain crucial points in their life cycle. These women, some tortured, some serene, gave me the final clues, and the most damning indictment of the feminine mystique.” She begins the first chapter [“The Problem That Has No Name”] with the statement, “The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban housewife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries ate peanut butter sandwiches

with her children, chauffeured Boy Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night---she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question, *“Is this all?”* (Pg. 11) She begins the third chapter with the statement, *“I discovered a strange thing, interviewing women of my own generation over the past ten years. When we were growing up, many of us could not see ourselves beyond the age of twenty-one. We had no image of our own future, of ourselves as women.”* (Pg. 62) Later, she adds, *“What if the terror a girl faces at twenty-one, when she must decide who she will be, is simply the terror of growing up as women were not permitted to grow before?... What if those who choose the path of feminine adjustment are simply refusing to face the question of their own identity? Mine was the first college generation to run head-on into the new mystique of feminine fulfillment. There was a sense that we would be New Women. Forty percent of my college class at Smith had career plans. But I remember how some of the seniors, suffering the pangs of that bleak fear of the future, envied the few who escaped it by getting married right away.”* (Pg. 68-69) She argues, *“Powerful forces in this nation must be served by those pretty domestic pictures that stare at us everywhere, forbidding a woman to use her own abilities in the world. The preservation of the feminine mystique could have implications that are not sexual at all. America depends rather heavily on women’s passive dependence, their femininity. Femininity makes American women a target and a victim of the sexual sell.”* (Pg. 196) She asserts, *“The feminists fought for and won the rights to new, fully human identity for women. But how very few of their daughters and granddaughters have chosen to use their education and their abilities for any large creative purpose, for responsible work in society? How many of them have been deceived into clinging to the outgrown, childlike femininity of Occupation: housewife?”* If women do not put forth, finally, the effort to become all that they have it in them to become, they will forfeit their own humanity. A woman today who has no goal, no purpose, no ambition patterning her days into the future is committing a kind of suicide. Only by such a personal commitment to the future can American women break out of the housewife trap and truly find fulfillment as wives and mothers---by fulfilling their own unique possibilities as separate human beings. (Pg. 324-325) In a rather more controversial section, she suggests, *“there is an uncanny, uncomfortable insight into why a woman can so easily lose her sense of self as a housewife in*

certain psychological observations made on the behavior of prisoners in Nazi concentration camps. Those who adjusted to the conditions of the camps surrendered their human identity and went almost indifferently to their deaths. Strangely enough, the conditions which destroyed the human identity of so many prisoners were conditions similar to those which destroy the identity of the American housewife. (Pg. 294) She continues, "is her house in reality a comfortable concentration camp? Have not women who live in the image of the feminine mystique trapped themselves within the narrow walls of their homes? They have learned to adjust to their biological role." (Pg. 296) She concludes this chapter, "The suburban house is not a German concentration camp, nor are American housewives on their way to the gas chamber. But they are in a trap, and to escape they must finally exercise their human freedom, and recapture their sense of self. They must refuse to be nameless, depersonalized, manipulated, and live their own lives again according to a self-chosen purpose. They must begin to grow." (Pg. 298) She concludes, "when women as well as men emerge from biological living to realize their human selves, those leftover halves of life may become their years of greatest fulfillment. Then the split in the image will be healed, and daughters will not face that humping-off point at twenty-one or forty-one. When their mothers' fulfillment makes girls sure they want to be women, they will not have to beat themselves down to be feminine; they can stretch and stretch until their own efforts will tell them who they are. They will not need the regard of boy or man to feel alive. And when women do not need to live through their husbands and children, men will not fear the love and strength of women, nor need another's weakness to prove their own masculinity. They can finally see each other as they are. And this may be the next step in human evolution. Who knows what women can be when they are finally free to become themselves? Who knows what women's intelligence will contribute when it can be nourished without denying love? Who knows of the possibilities of love when men and women share not only children, home, and garden, not only the fulfillment of their biological roles, but the responsibilities and passions of the work that creates the human future and the full human knowledge of who they are? It has barely begun, the search of women for themselves. But the time is at hand when the voice of the feminine mystique can no longer drown out the inner voice that is driving women on to become complete." (Pg. 363-364) Certainly, one can criticize Friedan's book as being too "culture-specific" (i.e., upper-class white ivy league

college-educated women); but everyone must appreciate that hers was a strong voice giving a name to a definite problem---that has, of course, been much more exhaustively defined in the subsequent women's movement. (Friedan herself has greatly broadened her scope in her subsequent books, it should be noted.) Although some parts of the book may seem too genteel in these "Third Wave" and "postfeminist" days, other parts still blaze with the fiery truth they originally articulated. This book remains absolute must reading for anyone studying the women's movement, or the position of women in society.

A must read for both sexes. Guys read and learn. We had to fight our way back into relevance. Now it's your turn to figure it out. When we realize that men and women were created equal, and mutual respect and communication is key we might have a starting point. Antiquated religious, political and social idiocies have to be seen for what they are, fear and loathing of women and what's considered not the norm. Let's find the middle path. Men aren't better than women, women aren't better than men, wtf?!?! How exactly did that become the issue? And by the way, look at where it got us. Let's think for ourselves. Let's take responsibility for our own lives. Don't make it about how terrible mommy and daddy were to us, or that the bible tells you so, or that the all might self interest groups and corporations through social media told you so, or that your neighbor told you do. You do you for you and your boyfriend/girlfriend/life partner/wife/husband/children/pets.

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