



# Reading Women: How the Great Books of Feminism Changed My Life

By Stephanie Staal

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When Stephanie Staal first read *The Feminine Mystique* in college, she found it “a mildly interesting relic from another era.” But more than a decade later, as a married stay-at-home mom in the suburbs, Staal rediscovered Betty Friedan's classic work—and was surprised how much she identified with the laments and misgivings of 1950s housewives. She set out on a quest: to reenroll at Barnard and re-read the great books she had first encountered as an undergrad.

From the banishment of Eve to Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, Staal explores the significance of each of these classic tales by and of women, highlighting the relevance these ideas still have today. This process leads Staal to find the self she thought she had lost—curious and ambitious, zany and critical—and inspires new understandings of her relationships with her husband, her mother, and her daughter.

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

More than a decade after her graduation from Barnard College, journalist Staal (*The Love They Lost*) revisits feminist literature to conduct "a highly personal investigation" into the "balance between selfhood and womanhood." Her marriage is limping along, and motherhood and housework have intruded on her professional life. Contrasting her new responses to such feminist classics as Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* with those of her 19-year-old self and to those of today's students, Staal despairs over the "objectifying" of self she observes in young women today, but discovers that "absolutes that once dominated my thinking had been rubbed down by experience." Staal offers an interesting overview of feminist history and writings; however, her exploration of transformations in her life is superficial (her marriage was healed by "coming closer together through the thousands of tiny moments that make up a day"), and she learns the fairly trite lesson that "life is unpredictable, relationships are complex, and the mind cannot always rule the heart." (Feb.)

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From [Booklist](#)

An immersion in feminist literature clarified Staal's personal philosophies as an undergraduate at Barnard College in the 1990s and shaped her subsequent career as journalist and writer. Moreover, a reintroduction to these seminal works saved her from the postnuptial and postpartum ennui and isolation she encountered as a new wife and mother. Lacking a sense of identity beyond these traditional roles and hoping to reignite her youthful sense of purpose, Staal took the gutsy step of returning to Barnard to audit the feminist texts courses that once played such a pivotal role in her life. In reading and analyzing the influential works of such luminary feminist thinkers as Mary Wollstonecraft, Betty Friedan, Kate Chopin, Simone de Beauvoir, and Katie Roiphe, Staal examines what it means to be a woman in the twenty-first century and asks if and how these writers are still relevant today. Intimate in its reflections and keenly perceptive on a larger scale, Staal's erudite literary memoir refreshingly embraces women's eternal quest for self-knowledge. --Carol Haggas

Review

### J. Courtney Sullivan

"If you could enroll in your favorite Women's Studies class again ten years after graduation, armed with everything you know about the complexities and compromises of adult life, what would you make of the feminist ideals you once held dear? That's exactly what Staal endeavors to find out in this brave and compelling book, which is one part memoir, one part astute literary analysis. As she struggles to make sense of love, life, marriage, and motherhood on her own terms, the author traces the history of women's words over centuries—from Mary Wollstonecraft and Virginia Woolf to Erica Jong and Katie Roiphe. I cherished every page."

### Debora Spar, president of Barnard College

"A swift, enchanting, and informative sweep through the feminist canon."

### Katie Crouch

"*Reading Women* is terrific. Stephanie Staal's exploration of the great texts of the women who have walked before us is fresh, funny, and a wise reminder that now, more than ever, we need to feed the feminist within."

**Booklist, February 15, 2011**

“Intimate in its reflections and keenly perceptive on a larger scale, Staal’s erudite literary memoir refreshingly embraces women’s eternal quest for self-knowledge.”

**Users Review****From reader reviews:****Frances Feist:**

Have you spare time for just a day? What do you do when you have far more or little spare time? Yep, you can choose the suitable activity for spend your time. Any person spent their very own spare time to take a stroll, shopping, or went to the actual Mall. How about open or read a book allowed Reading Women: How the Great Books of Feminism Changed My Life? Maybe it is being best activity for you. You realize beside you can spend your time together with your favorite's book, you can cleverer than before. Do you agree with it is opinion or you have some other opinion?

**Gregory Mackenzie:**

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