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Shteir, Rachel. *Betty Friedan: Magnificent Disrupter*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023

Reviewed by Elaine Margolin, Hewlett, NY

Rachel Shteir seems protective of the subject of her new illuminating biography, “Betty Friedan: Magnificent Disrupter,” put forth by Yale University Press, the Jewish Lives Series. One senses Shteir holds a certain affinity for Friedan despite being clear-eyed about her unappealing traits and erratic behavior.

Friedan was a complicated woman prone to mood swings and hot-tempered outbursts and was often tone-deaf to the feelings of others. But none of this stopped her from writing her masterpiece, “The Feminine Mystique,” in 1963, which spoke to countless women about an unhappiness they felt and had no words for.

Friedan got the idea for her book after giving her fellow Smith graduates a questionnaire about their level of contentment fifteen years after they graduated. The results revealed most were yearning for more, although they weren’t sure precisely what it was. Friedan pitched the idea for an article about her survey to all the women’s magazines she was already writing for. None of them were interested. So, she decided to write a book about it by herself. It took five years and began with these unforgettable words: “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 the women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban woman struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured cub scouts and brownies, lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—Is this All?” The book touched a deep chord and catapulted Friedan into international fame. Her book was released when young women were dropping out of college in droves to get married afraid that too much education would make them less desirable to the opposite sex. They began having more children and paid an inordinate amount of attention to the immaculateness of their homes. But this couldn’t erase the voices inside of them that said, “I want something more than my husband and my children and my home.”

Friedan never expected to become so famous or controversial. She grew up in Peoria and always had a contentious relationship with her mother and sister. Her father, who was eighteen years older than her mother, was a jeweler who ran his own store. Betty wasn't a healthy child and was plagued by asthma. She was always unhappy with her appearance, and later in life, would often wear tightly fitted clothes and low-cut blouses to get attention. Unfortunately, this often prompted many to laugh behind her back. But Friedan was less interested in being a pleaser and didn't care too much about what others thought about her. She liked the male attention it brought on. She was an early and voracious reader devouring the works of Sigmund Freud, and then James Baldwin and countless others who took hold of her imagination. She excelled in math and physics. She flirted for a time with several left-wing causes. And began to think about becoming a journalist. But in Shteir's telling, we sense there was always a persistent unhappiness that ran through her.

She married Carl Friedan in 1946. At first, they hit it off spending nights having passionate sex and talking for hours about politics and theatre and whatever else was racing through Friedan's overactive mind. They quickly had three children, two sons and a daughter, and this didn't seem to slow her down. Even before "The Feminine Mystique," she was making money writing freelance articles for women's magazines. Sadly, the marriage soon disintegrated. Her husband began having affairs. Friedan began to have affairs also and began taking too many diet pills and overdrinking. She began seeing what would become a series of therapists she sought to help her find some balance. One of them, Dr. William Menaker, found her to be a sympathetic person who was capable of love despite her tormented childhood and bad marriage. Her instability increased and she began acting out towards others who had done nothing to provoke her. Carl Friedan has written about how during her most tumultuous periods, he was the parent who put the children to bed while telling them about the three great Jewish men the world had already given us: Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud, and Carl Marx. The only thing Friedan claimed could calm her racing mind was writing, about which she wrote "I have never experienced anything as powerful, truly mystical, as the forces that seemed to take me over when I was writing." She would continue to write throughout her life, although the books that followed "The Feminine Mystique" never claimed as much attention as her first opus.

Friedan's book had invigorated a national movement for women's rights. She was cofounder of the National Organization for Women, working with Gloria Steinem, Bella Abzug, Andrea Dworkin, Kate Millett, and others who wanted the feminist movement to move beyond Friedan's emphasis on middle-class married white women. They were concerned with the problems gay women faced, and poor women, and women who were traumatized by sexual assaults and misconduct. But Friedan felt these issues were distractions to her focus on helping women find a creative work life of their own, getting them the right to have their own credit line, and the right to be paid the same as men for equal work. Even on abortion, she was cautious about her comments and insisted women should have the right to have an abortion but countered her assessment with comments about the joy she received from having children. She was consumed by the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, which would put into law these essential changes. Sadly, it still has not passed. The other issues feminists were clamoring her about seemed to her to be risky distractions that nibbled away at the center thrust of her activities. She once referred to lesbian feminists as the lavender menace, which she apologized for later in life. As she did for her other verbal assaults that hurt many who felt ousted from her cause. Younger feminists seemed to be caught up in the deteriorating effects of pornography on men, and still others were concerned with the way black women were treated in our society in almost all arenas. Friedan never really countered their arguments or explained her rationale. That wasn't her style. Instead, she simply stated in 1960 that she wanted to "make society regard women as people too." Friedan believed some of the loose talk about the need for the destruction of the patriarchy being voiced by more radical feminists was dangerous and could destroy the progress they were making on many fronts. Almost before anyone else, she began speaking about childcare, and flexible work hours, and parental leave.

When she was in her fifties, Friedan began to introduce herself "as a woman, an American, and as a Jew." Though never religious, she felt her passion, strength, and curiosity came from her Jewish heritage. She spoke proudly of all the Jewish grandmothers who struggled valiantly in sweatshops where they didn't even speak the language to give their children and grandchildren better lives, there was genuine pathos in her voice when she spoke about Jewish suffering, she was also drawn to the human potential movements that were sprouting up everywhere promising some kind of self-understanding and joy they usually couldn't deliver. She had many serious boyfriends

after her marriage and reveled in the attention of her male suitors. She began to take notice of the antisemitism that ran through the feminist movement and was irritated by it and surprised, considering so many leaders and innovators were Jewish. She started to write about the various stages of her life in different books, always trying to somehow get back to her tension with her mother and somehow dissect the animus that seemed to run through it. They would reconnect late in life, but it is unclear if she had any real clarity about why her mother and seemed to be unable to show and express love to one another. Nor did she ever really understand what was behind her tensions with her sister. Like so many families, these secrets are rarely worked through.

One finishes this delightful well-researched piece of work sated but somehow still hungry for more. There is something about Shteir's reticence to put herself into these pages that irritates the reader even while understanding that as a biographer, she has no mandate to do so. But somehow it seems imperative that she would. We want to know how feminism changed her life. Shteir has written several well-received books, and teaches dramatic criticism at DePaul University, but it is difficult to find any other writings of hers that address her personal decisions in terms of family, children, or career choices, and the role Betty Friedan's feminism might have played in influencing her one way or another. We wonder if she has suffered making her way as a woman in what is still a man's world. What familial pressures laid most heavily upon her? What regrets does she carry? Shteir stays mum as it is her right to do so.

Still, the problem with so many women's lives is the secrets we have kept from one another and from ourselves. The suffering we have endured silently. I had my first and only child at thirty-two in 1989 and was completely unprepared for the shock of transitioning to a full-time mother; a decision I chose because my mother expected me to; and I was too timid at the time to consider any other viable options. I remember the waves of shame running through me as I cried violently in the first weeks after my son's birth, feeling I had been stripped of all that made me what I had come to know as me; a person capable of taking care of myself and who reveled in my independence. I didn't understand why I was so thrown, nor what was missing from my life that had been present just weeks ago. It would be a long rocky road until I could figure it all out, and one that brought me to extensive reading and writing, and a more satisfying career as a book critic for almost three decades. My mother is dead now, but I can still see her outraged face telling me I was acting like a brat and had no right to complain or question anything about my life. I had a

healthy child. I should get on with things and be sure to keep my husband, now the sole breadwinner, happy. I started my career again slowly and without making any declarations to my mother about my decision to go back to graduate school, and the writing that followed. I finally understood I must follow my internal compass and balance motherhood and a creative work life but knew my mother would never understand. Or perhaps it stirred up feelings inside of her she had long since suppressed. It no longer mattered.

But part of my freedom was won with the help of women like Betty Friedan who put into words what I couldn't say to my mother after my son was born. She was, indeed, a magnificent disrupter!