

## Essential Feminism

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How did I miss out on the legendary Ellen Willis? I'm embarrassed to admit that before reading this stunning, provocative, erudite, fun, challenging, witty, dire, brave, and above all incisive collection of her journalism and essays, I was unaware of one of the great feminist writers on the politics and culture of our times. Intelligently edited by her daughter, Nona Willis Aronowitz, *The Essential Ellen Willis* is a riveting chronicle of the U.S. from the sixties to post 9/11 as seen through the perspective of a radical feminist. In her analysis of everything from Bob Dylan to the Velvet Underground, from Woodstock to Clarence Thomas's sexual harassment of Anita Hill, from Tom Wolfe to *The Sopranos*, from bell hooks to the Million Man March, from Monica Lewinsky to *The Bell Curve*, from the Vietnam War to the invasion of Iraq, in her pieces on abortion, childcare, marriage, sex, the family, rape, and pornography Willis never fails, while presenting the many sides of an issue, event, or person, to surprise, amuse, and above all, elucidate. Astonishingly, little of Willis's work feels dated, much of it as polemical and relevant as ever.

Born in 1941 to a middle-class Jewish family, Willis grew up in Queens. She studied English at Barnard, got married, and moved to Berkeley, where she embarked upon a PhD in comparative literature. By twenty-four, she'd dropped out of graduate school, divorced, and was living in the East Village, convinced she wanted to write for a living. She became a staff writer at *Fact* magazine and wrote freelance for various publications. In 1967, her trenchant assessment of Bob Dylan in *Cheetah* was noticed by William Shawn, editor of *The New Yorker*; he hired her to report on rock music and counterculture. She left *The New Yorker* in 1975 for the *Village Voice*, a publication more in keeping with her political and social views. Deeply involved with feminist activism, Willis founded the radical feminist group Redstockings with Shulamith Firestone in 1969 and in the mid-1970s formed the pro-choice street theater protest group No More Nice Girls. She eventually became a professor at NYU's journalism school and established the Center for Cultural Reporting and Criticism.

The first piece in the book, "Up from Radicalism: A Feminist Journal" relates how Willis became a radical feminist. A girl intuitively early on, she says, who are the rulers and who are the ruled -- how she then responds to patriarchy and male dominance is at the heart of feminism. A stringent, wondrous feminist inquiry underlies everything Willis writes. Coming of age in the fifties, she "followed all the rules -- build up their egos, don't be aggressive, don't flaunt your brains, be charming, diet..." By 1964, she'd joined the Civil Rights movement. Based on her readings of Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse, she began to form her own ideas about patriarchal sexual repression as social control, particularly of women.

The "liberated woman," like the "free world," is a fiction that obscures real power relations and defuses revolution. How can women, subordinate in every other sphere, be free and equal in bed? Men want us to be a little free -- it's more exciting that way. But women who really take them at their word make them up-tight and they show it -- by their jokes, their gossip, their obvious or subtle put-downs of women who seem too aggressive or too "easy."

Willis fully developed these ideas in "Towards a Feminist Sexual Revolution" and "Lust Horizons: Is the Women's Movement Pro-Sex?" -- both seminal essays written in the early eighties in which she posits her conviction that a politics of sexual liberation must assume that sexual expression and satisfaction is as crucial to women as it is to men. She was under no delusion, however, that the sexual liberation achieved for women by feminists in the sixties was anything approaching an unmitigated success. The coinciding sexual libertarian movement was "conspicuously male-dominated and male-supremacist" and women were further abused and exploited under the guise of becoming "liberated." Today, slut-shaming, "she was asking for it," "good girls don't have abortions," female sexuality as a public prerogative of patriarchy, all of these misogynistic attitudes aimed at repressing and controlling female sexual desire are still very much with us.

In "Radical Feminism and Feminist Radicalism" (1984) Willis addresses the complicated and thorny subject of how radical feminism collapsed in large part by coming to be associated, both from within and from without the movement, with "man-hating," a legacy feminism has yet to shed. In "Sisters Under the Skin?" (1982), she unpicks the equally barbed issue of black women's disenfranchisement from a feminist movement perceived as serving upper-middle-class white women exclusively. In "The Family" (1979), she insists that without a serious critique of that institution "the best we'll ever get is a jerry-built system of day care centers designed to allow women to keep their shit jobs, and here and there the inspiring example of a 'nurturing father' who expects the Medal of Honor for doing what mothers have always done."

Willis has a genius for dissecting a subject, illuminating its facets, then clarifying its significance in a larger context. Her lucid prose is replete with gems:

"Fashion, cosmetics, and feminine hygiene ads are aimed more at men than at women. They encourage men to expect women to sport all the latest trappings of sexual slavery expectations women must then fulfill if they are to survive." ("Women and the Myth of Consumerism," 1970)

"A woman is usually aware, on some level, that men do not allow her to be her 'real self,' and worse, that the acceptable masks represent men's fantasies, not her own. She can choose the most interesting image available, present it dramatically, individualize it with small elaborations, undercut it with irony. But ultimately she must serve some male fantasy to be loved and then it will be only the fantasy that is loved anyway." ("Janis Joplin," 1980)

"These days the formula is familiar: women we are told (often by women themselves) are now free enough so that they can choose to be sex objects/wear six-inch heels/do the housework without feeling oppressed. The unspoken question, of course is whether women can refuse to

be sex objects/wear six-inch heels/do the housework without getting zapped." ("The Family,"1979)

"To experience male dominance is one thing, to understand that it is political, therefore changeable, is quite another." ("Sisters Under the Skin?" 1982)

I suspect that Ellis is not as well known as, say, Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer, Elaine Showalter, Naomi Wolf, or Camille Paglia because she never published a book in her lifetime. In 2011, Willis's rock criticism was published in a collection called *Out of the Vinyl Deeps* and nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award. I am grateful that Willis's daughter thought this single volume of her mother's work too partial and unrepresentative. She has given us an anthology that provides a sweeping cultural, political, and psychosexual panorama of our immediate history with a meticulous, complex interpretation of that view. "What we need," Willis wrote, "is not a violent revolution but a mass transformation of consciousness." Her collected work, essential to an understanding of what went wrong and what went right for feminism's second wave, encourages us to imagine radical change.

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*What Women Want: An Agenda for the Women's Movement* by Deborah Rhode, a Stanford law professor, and former director of Stanford's Institute for Research on Women and Gender, is a solid presentation of where the feminist movement is today (nowhere good) and offers practical agendas and legal reforms going forward. She has chapters on work and family, reproduction justice, sexual abuse, and the appearance industry; in each she delineates where women stand legally and socially and what can be done to improve our lot.

Sadly, devastatingly, one of the biggest problems feminists face today is semantic. Since the seventies, the word "feminist" has been on a downward spiral that still hasn't hit bottom. In a survey of registered voters, sixty-three percent believed women are not treated equally in the workplace but only fourteen percent considered themselves a feminist and only seventeen percent would want their daughter to be one.

Thankfully, Rhode's book provides a map for how we can continue this seemingly endless but crucial journey toward fairness for women. "No just society can afford," she writes, "the inequalities that women still face in status, power, income, and physical security." Though Rhode lacks Willis's uniquely engaging voice and deep philosophical inquiry, hers is nevertheless a very important book, indeed essential.

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