

'Feminine Mystique' at 50: Timelessly revolutionary

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The manifesto still rings true today, says columnist Anna Quindlen.



(Photo: Marilyn K. Yee Getty Images)

Story Highlights

- Betty Friedan's feminist classic, 'The Feminine Mystique,' turns 50
 - Columnists Ann Quindlen and Gail Collins add to anniversary edition
 - Friedan's groundbreaking 1963 book led the way for feminism
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Fifty years ago, on Feb. 19, 1963, Betty Friedan launched a movement by publishing her ground-breaking manifesto *The Feminine Mystique*. The book quickly became the bible for '60s housewives who wondered if their suburban life of carpools and TV dinners was all there was.

Overnight Friedan became their pioneering voice, inspiring women to reclaim their lives from what Friedan called "the problem that has no name."

A 50th anniversary edition of the landmark feminist classic is being published this week by W.W. Norton, with a new introduction by *New York Times* columnist Gail Collins and afterword by columnist and novelist Anna Quindlen.

"We're celebrating the 50th anniversary because *The Feminine Mystique* actually changed the world we live in and continues to make people think about the lives they lead," says editor Amy Cherry. "We consider those enough reasons to honor this book, even if it weren't this historic anniversary."

As Collins writes: "If there's a list of the most important books of the 20th century, *The Feminine Mystique* is on it. It also made one conservative magazine's exclusive roundup of the '10 most harmful books of the 19th and 20th centuries,' which if not flattering is at least a testimony to the wallop it packed."

Over five decades, Friedan's treatise has sold more than 3 million copies and has been published in 20 different languages and remains a staple in feminist studies courses.

Based initially on a survey Friedan sent to Smith College alumnae for a reunion of her class, the book is filled with stories from wives and mothers who felt frustrated with their lives but didn't know exactly why. At the time, Friedan was a 42-year-old mother and housewife with similar doubts.

The Feminine Mystique Betty Friedan 50 years

'The Feminine Mystique' by Betty Friedan has been released with an intro by Gail Collins and afterword by Anna Quindlen.

Throughout *The Feminine Mystique* — a term she used to describe the insistence that women adhere to traditionally "feminine" roles — Friedan lists a variety of reasons for a woman's identity crisis that played out in the 1950s and early 1960s.

The book was published in the middle of a New York City newspaper strike, which meant having to find readers without the benefit of major reviews. It wasn't until two months later that *The New York Times* published a 240-word review calling the book "highly readable" and "provocative." It also deemed some of Friedan's claims "superficial."

But with the help of excerpts printed in *McCall's* and *Ladies' Home Journal*, popular magazines Friedan had criticized as contributing to the feminine mystique, her book caught fire among women who had never before dared to ask the question, "Is this all?" Friedan went on to found NOW, the National Organization for Women.

In her afterword, Quindlen says the book "now feels both revolutionary and utterly contemporary ... millions of individual transformations later, there is still so much to learn from this book. ... Those who think of it as solely a feminist manifesto ought to revisit its pages to get a sense of the magnitude of the research and reporting Friedan undertook."

Upon Friedan's death in 2006, *Time* named her Person of the Year, with author Naomi Wolf noting, "If American women look at their lives today, they are seeing Betty Friedan's legacy in action."