

Three Lively Feminist Lives

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Germaine: The Life of Germaine Greer

Elizabeth Kleinhenz

(Sydney: Penguin Books, 2019, 432pp., \$24.99) ISBN: 9780143782858

Winning for Women: A Personal Story

Iola Mathews

(Clayton, Victoria: Monash University Publishing, 2019, 328pp., \$29.95)

ISBN: 9781925835151

Unfettered and Alive: A Memoir

Anne Summers

(Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2018, 496pp., \$39.99) ISBN: 9781743318416

These three books chronicle the lives of Australian feminists Germaine Greer, Iola Mathews and Anne Summers. By way of brief introduction: Summers is one of Australia's best-known feminists. She was part of the collective that founded Elsie, the first women's refuge in Australia, and in 1975 she authored the Australian feminist classic *Damned Whores and God's Police*.¹ Summers also worked as a journalist in Australia and internationally, and as a political advisor at the highest level of government to improve the lives of Australian women. *Unfettered and Alive* is the second volume of her autobiography, which begins in 1976 where her first, *Ducks on the Pond* (1999), ends.² Iola Mathews started her career as a journalist at *The Age* and was one of the founding members of the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL), an organisation that sought reform of party politics along feminist lines. She also worked at the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) where she pursued equal pay and paid parental leave. Germaine Greer wrote what is sometimes called 'the classic text of the [women's] movement' *The Female Eunuch* (1970) and is a global celebrity, thinker and provocateur.³

1 Anne Summers, *Damned Whores and God's Police* (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1975).

2 Anne Summers, *Ducks on the Pond: An Autobiography, 1945–1976* (Melbourne: Viking, 1999).

3 Elizabeth Kleinhenz, *Germaine: The Life of Germaine Greer* (Sydney: Penguin, 2019), 5.

As these books reveal, the lives of these women were tangentially intertwined. Summers and Mathews worked together at the Office for the Status of Women, and Mathews describes Summers as a frank-speaking, supportive, ‘tall woman with a formidable intellect’.⁴ Summers met Greer only once, at a party thrown by a Sydney Push member to celebrate the birthday of Chairman Mao. Summers had drunk too much Jim Beam: ‘a drink I have never tried before (or since)’. She threw up in front of Greer, who looked at her with a mixture of ‘disdain and compassion’.⁵ Mathews never met Greer, except in print when she read *The Female Eunuch* (1970). Mathews admits the book was life changing for many women, but she was deterred because of ‘its angry, in your face tone’.⁶ To reduce their connections to the times they encountered each other would be to deny their most profound entanglement: all three women were driven to spend their lives agitating for greater freedoms for women and all were central to, and shaped by, the Women’s Liberation movement.

As an historian of Women’s Liberation, I asked a particular question of these books, namely what they add to our understanding of Australian women’s liberation history. I discovered that these volumes offer an insight into the profound change the Women’s Liberation movement made on women’s lives, but also how slow and uneven this change could be—even for those at the centre of this social movement. These books also reveal how important the global currents of Women’s Liberation were to the Australian movement and the difficult relationships between individual feminists and the rest of the movement.

The early lives of all three women stand in stark contrast to what they later achieved as feminists. Kleinhenz paints a picture of Greer’s childhood, the drama of a violently abusive mother and an emotionally absent father who pathologically lied, played out against the backdrop of lower middle-class Melbourne suburbia.⁷ Summers grew up in the ‘staid’ suburbs of 1950s Adelaide, and her father was a violent alcoholic.⁸ This is considered in the first volume of her autobiography *Ducks on the Pond*, but her upbringing

4 Iola Mathews, *Winning for Women: A Personal Story* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2019), 141.

5 Anne Summers, *Unfettered and Alive: A Memoir* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2018), 349. The Sydney Push were an exuberant, libertarian group. On Greer’s relationship to the Push see Elizabeth Kleinhenz, *Germaine: The Life of Germaine Greer* (Sydney: Penguin Books, 2019), 64–74.

6 Mathews, *Winning for Women*, xii.

7 Kleinhenz, *Germaine*, 11–44.

8 Summers, *Unfettered and Alive*, xii.

shadows *Unfettered and Alive* too.⁹ Mathews' family was more nurturing and was peppered with unconventional women, although her father still upheld the rigidly gendered values of the time where to be a real woman you had to be 'a homemaker' who 'made a man feel good'.¹⁰

Historians have established that the Women's Liberation movement swept profound changes throughout Australia at the level of politics, society and culture.¹¹ These three volumes reveal that on a personal level this change was often uneven and frustratingly slow, even for those who were at the helm of the movement. Mathews, who had been a successful journalist and central figure in WEL, movingly describes the difficulties of raising two children at home, while her husband furthered his career as a politician in the Australian Labor Party.¹² Despite her desire to live as a liberated woman, she found herself on the edge of a breakdown, frustrated she was unable to live as she wanted. While she had a feminist awakening, political and social structures were slower to change. It was difficult for women to pursue a career and have children because maternity leave could not be shared between partners. Her book satisfyingly charts her central role in championing paid parental leave policies, which were finally enshrined in law in 1990.¹³ Summers recalls her shock at not being able to place a deposit on a house in the late 1970s because, some 10 years after the Women's Liberation movement had taken hold, banks still upheld the sexist 'blanket rule' that meant '[w]omen could not borrow' and needed a male guarantor.¹⁴ In Greer's case, it was men in the counter-culture who were resistant to change, even after *The Female Eunuch* had sent shockwaves across the world. Greer had an exploitative experience after she had sent self-made pornographic images to anti-censorship magazine *Suck*—including one of her in a 'yoga-pose ... splayed legs thrown back over her shoulders'—on the understanding they would be published

9 Ibid., 163.

10 Mathews, *Winning for Women*, 5.

11 See, for example, Marilyn Lake, *Getting Equal: The History of Australian Feminism* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999); Michelle Arrow, *The Seventies: The Personal, the Political and the Making of Modern Australia* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2019); Michelle Arrow and Angela Woollacott, eds., *Everyday Revolutions: Remaking Gender, Sexuality and Culture in 1970s Australia* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2019), doi.org/10.22459/er.2019.

12 Ibid., 68–75.

13 Mathews, *Winning*, 213–31.

14 Summers, *Unfettered and Alive*, 85.

alongside those of the other editors. But it was only her image that was published by the editors and then ‘hawk[ed] ... around the Frankfurt bookfair’.¹⁵

These books also reveal how profoundly Women’s Liberation in Australia was inspired by Women’s Liberation elsewhere, especially in the US, Europe and the UK. Australian feminist reading material was sourced almost entirely from overseas and all three had read, or tried to read, Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949).¹⁶ All were profoundly influenced by Betty Friedan. Indeed, Greer suggests that she wrote *The Female Eunuch* in critical response to *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). For Williams, it was Friedan’s *The Second Stage* (1981) that spoke to her, with its belief that ‘hope lay with the new breed of younger men who were pushing prams and ... washing up’.¹⁷ Often international literature was directly translated into movement tactics at home. Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1975) inspired Summers, anti-carceral activism, as well as her award-winning journalism about the routine violence meted out to prisoners in New South Wales jails.¹⁸ Summers later worked as editor-in-chief for glossy feminist magazine *Ms*, and comments that it was ‘something of a status symbol for Australian feminists to brandish the latest issue of [the] magazine’. But it was more than this. Mathews and other WEL members did the hard work of translating the *Ms* magazine survey of US political candidates’ attitudes toward women’s issues across contexts, rolling an equivalent survey out in Australia.¹⁹

As the Women’s Liberation movement was inspired by texts from elsewhere, many feminists in the 1960s and 1970s went abroad. Many opted for the UK but also Europe and the US, as both Greer and Summers did.²⁰ Greer travelled to Cambridge, where she began postgraduate study and Summers to New York, where she pursued her dreams of writing, working as a journalist and eventually for *Ms*. Greer grew up thinking of England as ‘the centre’ and so was inspired to leave by the ‘uncomfortable

15 Kleinhenz, *Germaine*, 157.

16 Summers, *Unfettered and Alive*, 438–9; Mathews, *Winning for Women*, xi; Kleinhenz, *Germaine*, 304.

17 Mathews, *Winning for Women*, 117.

18 Summers, *Unfettered and Alive*, 21, 23.

19 Summers, *Unfettered and Alive*, 209; Mathews, *Winning for Women*, 25.

20 This phenomenon is explored in Rebecca Jennings and Liz Millward, “A Fully Formed Blast from Abroad”? Australasian Lesbian Circuits of Mobility and the Transnational Exchange of Ideas in the 1960s and 1970s’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 25, no. 3 (2016): 463–88, doi.org/10.7560/jhs25304; Summers, *Unfettered and Alive*, 65; Kleinhenz, *Germaine*, 84.

feeling that her own country could never fully nourish and sustain her'.²¹ Greer's perspective is one of 'cultural cringe' explained by A A Phillips in his pathbreaking 1950 essay.²² Historian Katie Pickles explains this as the understanding that 'Australia has no worthwhile culture distinguishable from Britain, that it held no ... vitality and that ideas must be sought from elsewhere'.²³ However, when living in England, Greer's 'Australianness' was a great boon as she was not beholden to the stringent British class system, as revealed when she talked her way onto a PhD program at the University of Cambridge.²⁴ Women more oriented to the movement, such as lesbian-feminist activist Jill Johnston, were more than a little perturbed when the 'glamorous, impudent foreigner from Australia' was the drawcard to the famous Town Hall Debate with Norman Mailer in April 1971.²⁵

Summers' account of leaving Australia is more ambivalent. On one hand she says, 'I thought I came from a lively and interesting place, I was well versed in ... the concept of the cultural cringe' and 'rejected the idea that Australians had anything to apologise for'.²⁶ But still she left, because to 'make it' in New York was not the same as succeeding in Sydney. She suggests that her 'outsider status' along with her 'courage enabled her to succeed'. She, and fellow Australian Sandra Yates, 'achieved what no American woman had done', and independently bought out *Ms*, along with the teen magazine *Sassy*.²⁷ However, this outsider status led to the resale of both *Ms* and *Sassy* after just two years. This was partly a result of having underestimated how successful an organised consumer boycott of *Sassy* by Women Aglow, a right-wing women's group, would be: 'we were blindsided ... there were just too many things we didn't understand about America'.²⁸ She travelled back to Australia to begin her work as political advisor to the new prime minister, Paul Keating.

21 Kleinhenz, *Germaine*, 84.

22 A A Phillips, 'The Cultural Cringe', 1950, meanjin.com.au/blog/the-cultural-tinge-by-a-a-phillips/.

23 Katie Pickles, 'Transnational History and Cultural Cringe: Some Issues for Consideration in New Zealand, Australia and Canada', *History Compass*, 9, no. 9 (2011): 658–9, doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-0542.2011.00794.x.

24 Kleinhenz, *Germaine*, 85.

25 Jill Johnston, *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973) 19; quoted in Kleinhenz, *Germaine*, 177–8.

26 Summers, *Unfettered and Alive*, 59.

27 *Ibid.*, 247.

28 *Ibid.*, 275.

While the lives of all three women were profoundly changed by the Women's Liberation movement, their books make clear the difficult relationship these feminists had with it. Mathews' and Summers' recollections offer insight into the wide-ranging debate in Australian feminism between women who favoured reformist tactics, sometimes called 'femocrats', and those who felt that change could only occur through a grassroots movement external to the state.²⁹ Mathews, who agitated for change from inside what were often very hierarchical structures such as government departments and trades unions, recalls the difficulties of working with grassroots collectives who valued consensus over efficiency.³⁰ Summers' discussion of working for the Office for the Status of Women reveals the difficult task of representing all Australian women, such as when she was faced with understandable scepticism from non-Anglo women that she, a white woman, could understand and adequately represent their issues to government.³¹

Given the rich seam of scholarship discussing the way that the women's liberation movement negotiated—and sometimes failed to negotiate—race and racism, it is worth noting that aside from the anecdote above, Summers' and Mathews' works are largely silent on this question.³² Toward the end of *Germaine*, Kleinhenz discusses Greer's widely criticised culturally relativist view on female circumcision and her controversial views on Aboriginal Australian politics expressed in her essays *White Fella Jump Up* (2003) and *On Rage* (2008); but these opinions seem to be just two more explosive media controversies among many.³³ Kleinhenz does intriguingly mention Greer's earlier relationships with Aboriginal people and her travels with Aboriginal rights activist and poet Roberta 'Bobbi'

29 See, for example, Hester Eisenstein, *Inside Agitators: Australian Femocrats and the State* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), xv, 67–131; Sara Dowse, 'The Women's Movement's Fandango with the State: The Movement's Role in Public Policy Since 1972', *The Australian Quarterly*, 54, no. 4 (1982): 324–45, doi.org/10.2307/20635188; Marian Sawyer, *Sisters in Suits: Women and Public Policy in Australia*, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990); Angela Woollacott, 'Being a Women's Adviser at the State Level: Deborah McCulloch and Don Dunstan in 1970s South Australia', *Australian Feminist Studies*, 33, no. 95 (2018): 97–113, doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2018.1498736.

30 Mathews, *Winning for Women*, 109–10.

31 Summers, *Unfettered and Alive*, 159.

32 See, for example, in the Australian context: Christina Ho, 'Diversifying Feminism: Migrant Women's Activism in Australia', *Signs*, 33, no. 4 (2008): 777–84, doi.org/10.1086/528742; Jackie Huggins, 'A Contemporary View of Aboriginal Women's Relationship to the White Women's Movement', in *Australian Women and Contemporary Feminist Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 70–9; Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin' Up to the White Woman: Aboriginal Women and Feminism* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2000); Tikka Jan Wilson, 'Feminism and Institutionalized Racism: Inclusion and Exclusion at an Australian Feminist Refuge', *Feminist Review*, 52, no. 1 (1996): 1–26, doi.org/10.2307/1395769.

33 Kleinhenz, *Germaine*, 321–2, 347–53.

Sykes.³⁴ Given this, as well as Greer's convivial relationship with African-American feminist Florynce Kennedy, explored by historian Rebecca Sheehan, and her visit to Iran at the invitation of the Women's Association in 1974, I wondered if more could be said about negotiations of race and the women's movement in all three texts.³⁵

Summers' and Kleinhenz' books discuss the difficulties of negotiating fame and celebrity within the Women's Liberation movement. When Summers was appointed editor-in-chief of *Ms*, she also had difficulties with the American Women's Liberation movement, particularly 'feted local celebrity' Gloria Steinem.³⁶ Steinem, a founder of *Ms*, continued to have a significant amount of unspoken control throughout the time Summers was editor.³⁷ These relationships between Summers and famous American feminists were made more complicated as she was tasked with making a failing magazine, based on the collectivist principles of the 1970s, function in the more capitalistic, less collectively minded 1980s.³⁸ *Germaine* recalls Greer's savvy use of the media, much to the chagrin of other feminists. Kleinhenz teases out the question of whether or not Greer developed this media image for herself, or whether it was to enable feminist ideas to reach beyond the confines of the movement to ordinary women. Kleinhenz quotes Greer who said, 'the only reason ... I ever submit to the commercialisation of Germaine Greer is to help women in the home ... to spread the movement on the widest possible base'.³⁹ While this intention may have been true at one time and reflected in the widespread success of *The Female Eunuch*, Greer's relationship to the movement for gender justice has only become more vexed due to her use of the media. Her position on transgender issues, which Kleinhenz discusses towards the end of the book, reveals a significant failure to listen and learn, in order to generate publicity and maintain her status as a provocateur.⁴⁰

34 Ibid., 346.

35 Rebecca J Sheehan, 'Intersectional Feminist Friendship: Restoring Colour to the Second-Wave Through the Letters of Florynce Kennedy and Germaine Greer', *Lilith*, 25 (2019): 76–92. On Greer's tour to Iran see: Rachel Buchanan, 'The Iran Album (1974): Some Sleeve Notes', *Archivaria*, 85 (2018): 124–54; Nima Nighibi, *Rethinking Global Sisterhood: Western Feminism and Iran* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007) 74–108.

36 Summers, *Unfettered and Alive*, 247.

37 Ibid., 247, 225.

38 Ibid., 205–85.

39 Kleinhenz, *Germaine*, 183.

40 Ibid., 357–60.

Each of these books makes a worthy contribution to the history of the Australian Women's Liberation movement. Considered together they offer insight into the way that Women's Liberation played out in the personal lives of individual women who were central to it. They also reveal the importance of global flows to Women's Liberation in Australia and the interesting, complex and intimate relationship between these feminists and the rest of this movement for social change.

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