

# The New Criterion

## Books

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### Shorter notice

by [Ellie Thermanen](#)

On *The Essential Feminist Reader*, edited by Estelle B. Freedman.

*Estelle B. Freedman, editor*

The Essential Feminist Reader.

Modern Library, 444 pages, \$17.95

In case anyone needed further evidence that the bell tolled for an authentic feminist movement decades ago, they need look no further than the newest anthology of feminist writings out this month from Random House's Modern Library imprint. The collection is edited and introduced by Stanford University's Estelle Freedman, who aimed to compile writings that trace "the woman question in early-modern Europe to the feminist debates of the past century [in the] variety of philosophical and literary texts [that] document this rich literary tradition."

Including works drawn from more than six centuries of "feminist" writing (or at least, writing by and about women—not necessarily the same thing), the anthology certainly covers a lot of territory in its aim to document "both persistence and change in feminist thought." An excerpt from Christine de Pizan's fourteenth-century humanist discourse on biblical, mythical, and contemporary visions of women's education appears alongside rants from the U.S. Guerrilla Girls, a group who gained notoriety in the 1980s for dressing up in gorilla suits in order to "confront" a supposedly patriarchal art world.

Freedman's approach to the task of anthologizing the literary history of the feminist movement seems to have involved little more than a popularity contest. Accordingly, she subscribes to the sanctification-of-oppression school of thought. She has chosen her texts—a *Who's Who* of trendy figures from Hélène Cixous and Audre Lorde to Adrienne Rich—with an eye for their celebrity value at the expense of historical or literary merit. Naturally, this is most evident in the selections from late twentieth-century writers, when feminist ideology and victimology merged with academia to produce the impenetrable mash-ups that currently pass for scholarly prose.

All this was predictable. What makes it ludicrous is Freedman's total abandonment of literary discrimination. For example, Freedman blithely places Kathleen Hanna/ Bikini Kill (author of the 1992 "Riot Grrrl Manifesto") in the same league as Mary Wollstonecraft. Need convincing that this is absurd? Consider this articulation of the group's *raison d'être*: "we don't wanna assimilate to someone else's (boy) standards of what is or isn't cool."

At a time when news of "honor" killings of young Islamic women, the physical mutilation of girls in Africa, and the large-scale murder of Chinese girls appear weekly in headlines, one might think that a sense of perspective about what represents a true "feminist" issue might be more appropriate. The

juxtaposition of the anthology's concluding entry—the “Statement on the Occasion of International Women's Day” by the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan in 2004—with the penned narcissism that precedes it is hard to stomach. Freedman's literary tour is little more than a waddle through the ideologically (and grammatically!) “transgressive” rants of comfortable western women who, relative to their contemporary counterparts elsewhere in the world, have little to complain about. If Freedman had actually been interested in assembling a true reflection of serious feminism, the Afghani women's statement would have been more than an afterthought. Readers interested in a rigorous evaluation of historical and modern feminism would do well to look elsewhere.

Ellie Thermansen

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