

A STRANGE STIRRING

The *FEMININE MYSTIQUE*
and American Women at
the Dawn of the 1960s


Stephanie Coontz

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**AMERICAN WOMEN at the DAWN**  
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Advance Praise for *A Strange Stirring*:

"As was written about *The Feminine Mystique*, *A Strange Stirring* is 'a journalistic tour de force, combining scholarship, investigative reporting and a compelling personal voice.' Stephanie Coontz has made a significant contribution to our understanding of the most transformative movement of our lifetimes. Much of what Coontz reports regarding the prevailing ethos of the 1950s as a time of conformity, cultural conservatism and social repressiveness will be fascinating and eye-opening for younger readers.

This book is a must read for men as well as for women. And the transformational desire for a work/family balance in life is now reflected not just by gender, but by generation, as both men and women 'need to grow and fulfill their potentialities as human beings,' as Friedan wrote almost a half a century ago."

—Christie Hefner, former chairman and chief executive officer of Playboy Enterprises and longest serving female C.E.O. of a U.S. public company

"*It Changed My Life* was the title of the book Betty Friedan wrote after her transformative 1963 *The Feminine Mystique*. And change she did the lives of American women. Now in her biography of a classic, Stephanie Coontz imaginatively explores the impact of Friedan's book. Weaving a rich fabric from what women said in letters and interviews, from articles in popular magazines, current scholarship, and her own astute reading of the 1963 work, Coontz compellingly reveals how generations of women—from the flappers of the 1920s to the bloggers and helicopter moms of today—have responded to the challenges modern women face."

—Daniel Horowitz, author of *Betty Friedan and the Making of The Feminine Mystique*

"This book offers a nuanced perspective on the women's movement by ending the invisibility of African-American women."

—Donna L. Franklin, author of *Ensuring Inequality: The Structural Transformation of the African-American Family*

Other books by Stephanie Coontz:

*The Way We Never Were:
American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*

*Marriage, a History:
How Love Conquered Marriage*

*The Way We Really Are:
Coming to Terms with America's Changing Families*

*Social Origins of Private Life:
A History of American Families, 1600–1900*

*American Families:
A Multicultural Reader*

*In loving memory of my mother,
Patricia Waddington*

"The thoughts I had were terrible. I wished for another life. I woke up and started to clean and wash clothes and was miserable. No one seemed to understand. My friends didn't feel that way. I just assumed I'd be punished in some way. That's what happens to women who are selfish. My friends said you're so selfish."

CONSTANCE AHRONS dropped out of college to have a child, and as a young wife and mother in the early 1960s was seeing a psychiatrist for depression. Halfway through *The Feminine Mystique* she got up and flushed her tranquilizers down the toilet.



"There were only two times I understood my mother—when I read the Book of Job and when I read The Feminine Mystique."

KATHY HESKIN's severely depressed mother wrote her a passionate but "bewildering" six-page letter about *The Feminine Mystique* when Kathy was a teenager. Only years later did she read the book herself.



"It left me breathless . . .," recalled Glenda Schilt Edwards, who was twenty-eight when she read the book shortly after it was published. *"I suddenly realized that what I thought might be wrong with me was, in fact, right with me!"*



"I was trapped in what felt like hell. I had been forced to drop out of school. . . . There were no domestic violence programs and no one ever talked about the issue. . . . I thought I was the only one being beaten and there was something terribly wrong with me. I was ashamed."

ROSE GARRITY married at age fifteen, dropped out of school after just one week in the tenth grade, had her first child at age seventeen, and then had four more in the next five and a half years. She was being regularly beaten by her husband when she read the book, "and it was like the curtain was thrown back on the 'wizard!'"



"I had everything a woman was supposed to want—marriage to a nice, dependable guy (a good provider), a wonderful little kid, a nice house in the suburbs—and I was miserable."

CAM STIVERS was a twenty-five-year-old wife and mother who thought her life "was over" until she read the book in 1963.

Author's Note

WHEN I FIRST AGREED TO WRITE ABOUT THE IMPACT OF THE 1963 BEST seller *The Feminine Mystique*, I wasn't sure of my ultimate focus. Would the book be about Betty Friedan, the author? Would it be about the feminist movement she helped to organize? Would it be about the ideas of *The Feminine Mystique* itself?

But as I read and reread Friedan's book and other works on the 1950s and 1960s, and especially when I began to interview women who bought the book at the time, the answer emerged. I wanted to tell the story of the generation of women who responded most fervently to what Friedan had to say—a group of women whose experiences and emotions are poorly understood today, even by their own daughters and granddaughters.

Many books have been written and movies made about “the greatest generation.” But the subjects of these stories are almost invariably men—the army, navy, and air force men of WWII (only 2 percent of the military in that era were female); the “Mad Men” of Madison Avenue who pioneered America's mass consumer culture in the days of Eisenhower and Kennedy; the ordinary husbands and fathers who created a middle-class life for their families after the privations of the Depression and the war.

What do we know about those men's wives and daughters? As their husbands and fathers moved into a new era, many women felt suspended between the constraints of the old sphere of female existence and the promise of a future whose outline they could barely make out. They were, as one of the women I interviewed told me, “a generation of intelligent women, sidelined from the world.” Some were content to provide love and comfort when the men came home. But others felt that something was missing from their lives, though they could seldom put their finger on it.

These women—mostly white, mostly middle class—were at the eye of a hurricane. They knew that powerful new forces were gathering all around them, but they felt strangely, uneasily becalmed. They knew they occupied safer ground than their African-American, Latina, and white working-class counterparts, but knowing that only made them feel all the more guilty about their fears and discontents.

To modern generations, these women's lives seem as outmoded as the white gloves and pert hats they wore when they left the shelter of their homes. Yet even today, their experiences and anxieties shape the choices modern women debate and the way feminism has been defined by both its supporters and its opponents.

Tracing the history of these women and discovering why, despite their privileges, they felt so anxious about their femininity and so guilty about their aspirations was a revelation to me. I came to see how their struggles with their roles and self-images as wives and mothers helped pave the way for succeeding generations of women to have a greater range of choices—choices not free of cost, but requiring far less sacrifice of personal identity and sense of self-worth. And uncovering the pain so many of these women felt was a vivid reminder of what can happen—and still does happen—when their granddaughters and great-granddaughters give up on the dream of combining meaningful work with a fulfilling family life.

My examination of the women and men who read and responded to *The Feminine Mystique* began, as all research on Betty Friedan and her times must, at the Schlesinger Library, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with its rich store of letters that Friedan received and wrote. I also combed through the oral histories my students and I had taken over the past two decades to find relevant stories from people who had formed families in that era.

In seeking other individuals to interview, I purposely avoided people who had known Friedan personally or had become leaders of the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s. I use few quotes from such individuals in this book and did not seek interviews with them, although I make extensive use of the tremendously helpful conversations I had with groundbreaking women's historian Ruth Rosen.

To find interview subjects, I posted requests on women's magazines' Web sites; spread the word on professional, religious, and women's studies listservs; and recruited students to ask friends and relatives whether they had heard of or read *The Feminine Mystique*. Staff members at The Evergreen State College were especially generous in relating their own encounters with the book or sending me to their mothers and their mothers' friends they had heard mention the book. Almost everyone I interviewed provided me with still more names.

Unless otherwise noted, the individuals whose full names I use were personally interviewed by me or responded to a detailed e-mail survey and gave me permission to use their names. When a first name and last initial are used, these are pseudonyms for persons who asked not to be named, or for someone described in one of my or my students' oral histories. Quotes from unnamed individuals are from the letters Friedan received, now housed at the Schlesinger Library, although I do identify some of the public figures who wrote to her, such as Helen Gurley Brown, Gerda Lerner, and Anne Parsons.

To make this book more readable, I have substituted a lengthy bibliographic essay for endnotes and pared the number of references to other authors' works in the text. But every page of this book owes a tremendous debt not only to the women and men who shared their stories with me but also to the many historians and sociologists who have made it their life's work to research these matters. I hope readers will look at my bibliography to get a sense of the rich work that has already been done in this field.

Introduction

NEARLY HALF A CENTURY AFTER ITS PUBLICATION, BETTY FRIEDAN'S 1963 best seller, *The Feminine Mystique*, still generates extreme reactions, both pro and con. In 2006, it was ranked thirty-seventh on a list of the twentieth century's best works of journalism, compiled by a panel of experts assembled by New York University's journalism department. But when the editors of the right-wing magazine *Human Events* compiled their own list of "the ten most harmful books of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" in 2007, they put *The Feminine Mystique* at number seven—not far below Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.

The Feminine Mystique has been credited—or blamed—for destroying, single-handedly and almost overnight, the 1950s consensus that women's place was in the home. Friedan's book "pulled the trigger on history," in the words of *Future Shock* author Alvin Toffler. Her writing "awakened women to their oppression," according to a fellow leader of the National Organization for Women, which Friedan helped establish a few years after *The Feminine Mystique* hit the best-seller list. Following Friedan's death at age eighty-five in February 2006, dozens of news accounts reported that *The Feminine Mystique* ignited the women's movement, launched a social revolution, and "transformed the social fabric" of the United States and countries around the world.

Opponents of the feminist movement are equally convinced that *The Feminine Mystique* revolutionized America, but they believe the book changed things for the worse. Prior to Betty Friedan, wrote one author, middle-class women "were living in peace in what they considered to be a normal, traditional, worthwhile lifestyle." Since *The Feminine Mystique*, "life has never been the same." In her 2006 book, *Women Who Made the World Worse*, *National Review*'s Kate O'Beirne complained that Friedan

persuaded women that “selfless devotion was a recipe for misery.” Laura Schlessinger, of the *Dr. Laura* radio show, has charged that *The Feminine Mystique*’s disparagement “of so-called ‘women’s work’ . . . turned family life upside down and wrenched women from their homes.” And Christina Hoff Sommers of the American Enterprise Institute wrote in September 2008 that although *The Feminine Mystique* was correct in pointing out that postwar America took the ideal of femininity “to absurd extremes,” the book was also the source of “modern feminism’s Original Sin”—an attack on stay-at-home motherhood. Friedan’s book “did indeed pull the trigger on history,” Sommers concludes, but in doing so, she “took aim at the lives of millions of American women.”

Even people who have never read the book often react strongly to its title. In addition to interviewing people who had read *The Feminine Mystique* when it first came out, I asked others who had never read it to tell me what they knew about it. Their responses were surprisingly specific and vehement. The book was “full of drivel about how women had been mystified and tricked into being homemakers,” opined one woman. Another reported that the book explained how women’s sexuality had been controlled through the ages and assured me that Friedan had called for an end to marital rape and sexual harassment—ideas that do not appear anywhere in the book’s 350-plus pages. The grandmother of a student of mine insisted that this was the book that “told women to burn their bras.” Another student’s mother told her that *The Feminine Mystique* documented how women in the 1950s were excluded from many legal rights and paid much less than men—although in fact the book spends very little time discussing legal and economic discrimination against women.

Interestingly, many women I talked with were initially sure they had read *The Feminine Mystique*, only to discover in the course of our discussions or correspondence that they actually had not. When they tried to explain the gap between what they “remembered” and what I told them the book actually said, they usually decided that the title had conjured up such a vivid image in their minds that over time they had come to believe they had read it.

As a matter of fact, I was one such person. I first heard of *The Feminine Mystique* when I was an undergraduate at the University of California at Berkeley in 1964. But I didn't hear about it from "Berkeley radicals." Instead, it was my mother, a homemaker in Salt Lake City, Utah, who told me about it. She had attended the University of Washington at the end of the 1930s and married my father in the early 1940s. While Dad was away during World War II, she had done her part for the war effort, working in a shipyard. After the war ended, she quit work to follow my dad around the country as he went to college on the GI Bill, attended graduate school, and established himself in his career.

Mom spent most of the 1950s raising my sister and me. But by the early 1960s, with me away at college and my sister in junior high school, Mom began to get involved in civic activities. Soon she took a paying part-time job as executive secretary of a community group.

Once a week she would call me at college and we would fill each other in on what we were doing and thinking. At one point she asked anxiously whether I thought she could handle going back to school to get her master's degree. At other times she proudly detailed her most recent accomplishments. Once she recounted how bored, lonely, and insecure she had felt as a housewife. The cause, she had recently discovered, was that she had succumbed to an insidious "feminine mystique," which she had recognized only when she read this new book by Betty Friedan.

"Do you know that sociologists misrepresent research to make women feel guilty if they aren't completely happy as full-time housewives?" she asked. Wasn't it scandalous that when a woman expressed aspirations for anything else in her life, psychiatrists tried to make her think she was sexually maladjusted? Was I aware that advertisers manipulated women into thinking that doing household chores was a creative act, and had housewives spending more time on it than they really needed to? "They can make a cake mix that tastes perfectly fine if you just add water. But the box tells us to add an egg so housewives will feel we're actually baking!"

I remember listening to my mother's grievances with a certain amount of impatience, feeling that they were irrelevant to my own life. My friends

and I certainly weren't going to be *just* housewives. Looking back, I am ashamed to admit that at the time I believed it was largely a woman's own fault if she wasn't strong enough to defy social expectations and follow her dreams. But it is even sadder to realize, as I did while conducting interviews for this book, that most of these women also believed their problems were their own fault.

I was vaguely aware that women had once organized a long, hard fight to win the right to vote, but that was in the distant past. Far from identifying with other women, I—like many other independent women my age—prided myself on being *unlike* the rest of my sex. In the memorable words of feminist activist and author Jo Freeman, we grew up “believing there were three sexes: men, women, and me.” We knew we didn't want to follow in our mothers' footsteps, but it did not yet occur to us that it might require more than an individual decision to chart our own course, that we would need an organized movement to pry open new opportunities and overturn old prejudices. The only movement that really meant something to us in the early 1960s was the burgeoning civil rights movement.

It took a few years for female civil rights activists such as myself to begin to see that we too were subject to many societal prejudices because of our sex. Only gradually, quite a while after the book had inspired my mother and many other housewives, did my friends and I begin to use “the feminine mystique” as a useful label to describe the prejudices and discrimination we encountered.

In fact, it was soon so useful that at some point, long ago, the phrase “feminine mystique” became such a part of my consciousness that I was absolutely sure I had read Friedan's book. So when JoAnn Miller, an editor at Basic Books, suggested that I write a biography not of Betty Friedan the author, but of the book she wrote, I jumped at the chance. I was certain that rereading this groundbreaking book would be an educational and inspiring experience. I also decided that I would assign *The Feminine Mystique* to my students to gauge how they would react to a book that had been so influential to an earlier generation.

After only a few pages I realized that in fact I had never read *The Feminine Mystique*, and after a few chapters I began to find much of it boring and dated. As it turned out, so did my students. The book seemed repetitive and overblown. It made claims about women's history that I knew were oversimplified, exaggerating both the feminist victories of the 1920s and the antifeminist backlash of the 1940s and 1950s.

I was interested by Friedan's account of how she had "lived according to the feminine mystique as a suburban housewife" and only gradually come to see that something was wrong with the way she and other American women were being told to organize their lives. But although the story of her journey of discovery was engrossing, her generalizations about women seemed so limited by her white middle-class experience that I thought the book's prescriptions for improving women's lives were irrelevant to working-class and African-American women.

And Friedan's warnings about "the homosexuality that is spreading like a murky smog over the American scene" sounded more like something that would come out of the mouth of a right-wing televangelist than a contemporary feminist. So too did her alarmist talk about permissive parenting, narcissistic self-indulgence, juvenile delinquency, and female promiscuity.

My initial reaction became more negative when I went on to discover that Friedan had misrepresented her own history and the origins of her ideas. Checking her account of the publishing history and reception of *The Feminine Mystique* against the actual historical record, I discovered disturbing discrepancies. I was put off by her egotism, which even her most ardent admirers have acknowledged was "towering," and disliked her tendency to pump up her own accomplishments by claiming that the media, and even her own publisher, were almost uniformly hostile to her views.

I was also indignant that Friedan portrayed all women in that era as passive and preoccupied with their homes. What about the African-American women who had led civil rights demonstrations and organized community actions throughout the 1950s and early '60s, standing up to racist mobs and police brutality—women such as Rosa Parks, Daisy Bates,

Introduction

Ella Baker, Septima Clark, Dorothy Height, and so many more? What about the female labor organizers of the 1950s or the thousands of mothers who risked arrest in 1959 and 1960, pushing their children in strollers, to protest the mandatory air raid drills that they believed taught Americans to accept the possibility of nuclear war?

But gradually my appreciation of the book grew, as I talked to people who had read the book when it was first published in the early 1960s, went through the letters Friedan received after its publication, and revisited the era in which Friedan wrote. Paradoxically, the less relevant the book seemed now, the more grateful I became to Friedan for reaching out to the many women who, like my mother, had found it a revelation at the time—women who told me over and over that *The Feminine Mystique* transformed their lives, even that it actually “saved” their lives, or at least their sanity. A half century after they read the book, many of the women I talked to could still recall the desperation they had felt in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and their wave of relief when Friedan told them they were not alone and they were not crazy.

Most of the women who wrote to Friedan after her book was published in 1963 and became a paperback best seller in 1964, and most of the nearly two hundred people who took part in my own surveys, were the wives and daughters of families that had lived through World War II. They—or their parents—were born between about 1915 and the late 1930s. Memories of the Great Depression were still vivid in their family culture. They—or their parents, older siblings, or husbands—had experienced the hardships and the solidarities of World War II. The older ones had raised their families in the 1940s or the 1950s and the younger ones had been teenagers in the 1950s.

In the ensuing years, some authors have labeled the older members of this group as “the greatest generation.” Others have called it the “silent generation.” Both these labels apply to the collective experiences of the men, as soldiers in World War II or as citizens during the Cold War and the Korean War; they have little relevance to the collective experiences of the women of that era.

The women who found solace in Friedan's ideas would not have called themselves, or their mothers, members of the greatest generation. Most felt they were the beneficiaries of their fathers' or husbands' hard work, and many wondered whether they had done anything to deserve the gains their families made in the postwar era. When they did not feel fulfilled in those families, they blamed themselves for being ungrateful or inadequate.

It is not your fault, Friedan told them, that you feel trapped and discontented. The fault lies with the way society has denigrated and wasted your capacities. Not only will you be happier yourselves, but you will be better wives and mothers if you are recognized as individuals with your own social, intellectual, and creative needs. The title of Friedan's 1960 *Good Housekeeping* article that previewed her argument in *The Feminine Mystique* put it simply: "Women Are People Too."

Strange though it may seem today, many women in the 1950s and early 1960s had never heard anyone say that out loud. Women were wives and mothers. A few, they knew, were also heroines, brave souls like the female spies who risked their lives for the Allies in World War II. But the idea that an ordinary woman could be a person in her own right, in addition to being a wife and mother, seemed completely new to many women.

Friedan told these women that their inability to imagine a fuller, more complete life was the product of a repressive postwar campaign to wipe out the memory of past feminist activism and to drive women back into the home. As a historian, I knew her argument ignored the challenges to the feminine mystique that already existed in the 1950s. But as I interviewed women for this book and read more about the cultural climate of that era, I came to believe that Friedan was correct in suggesting that there was something especially disorienting—"something paralyzing," as one of the women I interviewed put it—about the situation confronting women at the dawn of the 1960s. Freudian pronouncements about the natural dependence and passivity of females and the "sickness" of women who were attracted to careers may have coexisted with sympathetic assurances