

Contemporary Feminist Reads: Three Mini-Reviews

We Should All Be Feminists
Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

2015 saw a marked uptick in explicitly feminist texts in pop culture with films like *Mad Max: Fury Road* and shows such as *Supergirl* and *Jessica Jones*. Although I was thrilled to see these stories become so prevalent, I was also frustrated: they offered up only the most rudimentary forms of feminism, lacking the nuance and sophistication that the topic deserves (of those three examples, *Jessica Jones* provides it with the most breadth and depth). I didn't realize my mistake until someone pointed out to me that these texts were not targeted at people who have been studying feminism for years, but rather at people who were just discovering it for the first time. Everything made more sense in that context.

The same applies to *We Should All Be Feminists*, which is a modified version of a TEDTalk given by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in 2013 (hence its length, a mere sixty-four pages). This is a text that should be mandatory reading for all students of middle-school age or anyone looking for the feminist equivalent of a square one; it's a no-nonsense introduction to what feminism actually means and why we need it. Adichie hits a single point and hits it hard, which is both the strongest and weakest aspect of the work.

It's a shame that Adichie doesn't take advantage of the book format to expand more thoroughly upon the points she brought up in her talk. Her central thesis is concerned with raising our children free of the gender expectations and prejudices ingrained in our society—which is an admirable and necessary goal, but I also would have liked to see suggestions for concrete actions we can take right now. Broader considerations of sexual identities are also missing, a needless omission in *We Should All Be Feminists* as a published text.

That said, *We Should All Be Feminists* is required reading. Simone de Beauvoir's 1949 treatise *The Second Sex* still stands strong as the definitive work of feminist philosophy, but *We Should All Be Feminists* is closest thing we have to a definitive introductory text in the early 21st century. It can be read in an hour or less and is entirely worth your time.

American Housewife
Helen Ellis

A collection of twelve satirical stories that pokes fun at (you guessed it) the stereotypical American housewife, *American Housewife* is a bitter novelty that succeeds mainly thanks to its brevity. The book comes in at less than two hundred pages and is effectively paced, with an interspersion of snappy one- to three-page stories (commonly known as “flash fiction”) balancing out the lengthier entries. It's surprisingly rare for a short story collection to have such a keen sense of rhythm, and *American Housewife* benefits immensely from it.

The quality of the stories varies wildly. The best entries, “What I Do All Day” and “My Novel is Brought to You by the Good People at Tampax,” are respectively the first and last in the book; the former is *American Housewife* at its most subtle (a cutting bit of satire is orchestrated through a recurring glitter motif), and the latter at its most hyperbolic (corporate sponsorship and social media are lampooned as Tampax plays puppeteer to a struggling novelist). At her best, Ellis treads the line between funny and chilling to great effect.

Unfortunately, the stories fail as often as they succeed—perhaps more. With the exception of “What I Do All Day,” the flash fiction entries would be better suited as mildly-

clever Facebook statuses than as stories in a published book. Even more cringe-worthy is the longest entry in the collection, “Dumpster Diving With the Stars,” a satirical take on reality television that drags on for more than forty pages and is neither funny nor insightful. It’s an anchor that weighs the entire collection down. Ellis simply does not demonstrate the range or precision that are needed for an exemplary collection of short stories.

That’s why the brevity works. I couldn’t in good conscience recommend *American Housewife* if it was any longer than it is, but the book is so tidy and (most of) the stories compact enough that it makes for a light, acerbic read with just enough laughs and just enough attitude to justify its existence.

Headscarves and Hymens: Why the Middle East Needs a Sexual Revolution
Mona Eltahawy

I’m somewhat conflicted regarding the subtitle of this book; it may be too easy for Western readers to dismiss it based on what appears to be a subject irrelevant to them. I say this not because every book needs to attract a Western audience, but because this is an important book for everyone—not just those with connections to the Middle East—to read. On the other hand, *Headscarves and Hymens* has a specific geographic focus and has no interest in straying elsewhere (barring a brief chilling section in which Eltahawy reminds readers that misogyny in the Middle East and misogyny in America aren’t as disparate as we might like to think). The majority of this book is about Egypt; its implications are worldwide.

Eltahawy features plenty of horrifying statistics in *Headscarves and Hymens*, but I appreciated more her personal anecdotes and highlighting of specific people and stories that have been instrumental in the struggle for women’s rights in the Middle East. The tale of Aliaa Elmahdy, a twenty-year-old Egyptian woman who posted a nude photo of herself on her blog in 2011, is particularly enthralling in light of the verbal attacks she received from both conservatives and liberals. Eltahawy also references in passing perhaps a dozen feminist writers of fiction and poetry throughout history in the Middle East, many of which I hadn’t heard of and added with delight to my “to-read” list. (Take note of these as you read; *Headscarves and Hymens* unfortunately does not provide a comprehensive list of the writers mentioned by Eltahawy, which I would have greatly appreciated in lieu of flipping back through hundreds of pages in search of her references.)

Like *We Should All Be Feminists*, *Headscarves and Hymens* stumbles as a call to action. Eltahawy ends the book on a figurative shrug, assuring readers with her fiery confidence that the revolution is happening and will continue to happen. Progress is coming. It’s a fine note on which to conclude, but I again felt useless—why, for example, spend an entire essay hammering home the prevalence and monstrosity of female genital mutilation in the Middle East if there’s nothing we can do but wait for it to end? The closest Eltahawy has to an implicit answer is social media, which she emphasizes frequently throughout the book as a powerful tool for bringing people together and inciting change. Perhaps that will have to do.

I’d like to encourage readers not to dismiss *Headscarves and Hymens* on the basis of its Middle Eastern focus. It’s an unusually passionate piece of nonfiction that speaks to issues haunting the world stage—of which we are all a part—and a powerful feminist text that absolutely everyone should read.

Reviews by Aaron Larson