

Book Review: Reclaiming the F Word: Feminism Today by Catherine Redfern and Kristin Aune

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Based on a survey of over a thousand feminists, *Reclaiming the F Word* seeks to reveal the what, why and how of today's feminism, from cosmetic surgery to celebrity culture, from sex to singleness and – in this new edition – the gendered effects of possibly the worst economic crisis ever. Calls to action and practical suggestions to implement its ideology recur throughout the book, a reminder that this is as much a handbook for a movement as it is a theoretical critique of women's issues, writes **Duchess Harris**.



Reclaiming the F Word: Feminism Today. Second Edition. Catherine Redfern and Kristin Aune. Zed Books. June 2013.

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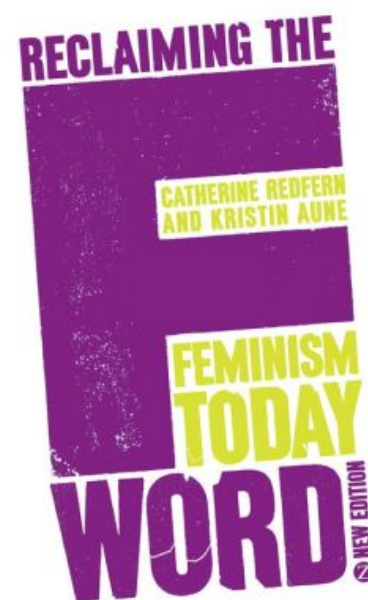
As a professor of Black feminism I am often engaged in deconstructing the myth that somehow the feminist movement is over, and we won. Young women in particular see feminism through its second wave, 1970s context, and don't understand its relevance to their life, their future, or the future of women across the world.

So it was refreshing to read *Reclaiming the F Word*, (the F-word being feminism), by [Catherine Redfern](#) and [Kristin Aune](#). Redfern first launched the website [The F Word](#) in 2001, and connected with Aune, who also had an interest in young women's attitudes about feminism, to write the first edition of this book in 2010. The F Word is their attempt to re-frame feminism into a 21st century context, and let's be honest, give it an edgy spin.

But there's depth beneath the double entendre title, and its global perspective is powerful. Based in the UK, the authors pose important contemporary questions, such as, "How did the Arab Spring uprisings across Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Syria and Yemen affect women?" To delve into this complicated issue, the authors divide their text into seven chapters. The book is ambitious and in 220 pages addresses: 1) Liberated bodies; 2) Sexual freedom and choice; 3) An end to violence against women; 4) Equity at work and home; 5) Politics and Religion transformed; 6) Popular culture free from sexism; and 7) Feminism reclaimed.

Chapter 3, which addresses violence against women, is a sophisticated exploration on how global poverty and economic inequality can put women at greater risk of violence. "Poverty can contribute to war, putting women at risk of rape or death; poverty can restrict women's ability to escape domestic violence or prostitution" (p.104). Their section on abuse and violence in intimate relationships includes the transgendered and cites a study of partner violence in Massachusetts that found that 34.6 per cent of transgender people reported being threatened with physical violence by a partner, compared to 13.6 per cent of non trans-gender persons. They also include how women with disabilities are twice as likely to be victims of sexual assault and violence (p.106).

At the end of the chapter, they challenge the reader to take action and provide five suggestions, which include giving constructive feedback on government and police campaigns on violence. Calls to action and practical suggestions to implement its ideology recur throughout the book, a reminder that this is as much a handbook for a movement as it



is a theoretical critique of women's issues.



Chapter 4, which focuses on equality at work and home, is particularly relevant for feminism today. Aune and Redfern assert that their brand of feminism includes feminist-minded men. "Feminism contends that breadwinning is no longer the sole reason for men's existence. Feminist-minded men are working towards broadening men's identities and experiences. At the annual Feminism in London conference, men provide childcare, enabling mothers to attend workshops. Feminist dads have been welcomed onto feminist parenting forums such as Mothers for Women's Lib, or have set up their own blogs, like [Feminist Dad](#) (p.134).

Aune and Redfern provide examples of how men can strive towards balancing work and home, and explain how it benefits men and their children as much as it benefits women. They suggest that society encourage men to expand their options beyond 'breadwinner', as fathers or homemakers, and take equal responsibility for housework.

Where the authors seem to try to take on too much is their chapter on popular culture. In a mere 33 pages they try to cover music, advertising, celebrity culture, and sports. They attempt to examine self-help books such as, [Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus](#), discuss reality television, talent shows, celebrity magazines, and even sports involvement. More than enough material for its own book.

The chapter's highlight was the sub-heading, 'Liberation for sale.' I appreciate their discussion of commodity feminism. They argue that in many Western countries, feminism has been co-opted by advertisers to sell women empowerment through buying products. They cite the [Dove Campaign for Real Beauty](#), which has an educational website about young women and self-image. Dove's campaign features women of different sizes, ages and ethnicities, with slogans like 'Because every girl deserves to feel good about herself and see how beautiful she really

is' and 'New Dove firming. As tested on real curves' (p.178). Aune and Redfern underscore how feminists were divided because they were happy to see a more representative group of women adorn billboards, but not satisfied that women's bodies were still being used to sell toiletries.

Reclaiming the F Word would be an excellent textbook in an undergraduate classroom. Its emphasis on feminism today speaks to a younger generation, but it also acknowledges the work of the 2nd and 3rd waves. The book is structured in a way that would promote great classroom dialogue and in-class or homework writing assignments. I'd like to end this review with the five take-away actions from the author:

- 1) Read up on feminist issues; subscribe to a feminist magazine or blog; or set up your own.
- 2) Find a local feminist activist or networking group and take part. If there isn't one in your area set one up!
- 3) Ask for feminist books to be stocked in your local, school or university library, or ask them to be added to academic reading lists. Ensure that they are representative of global feminism and not just white, western, middle-class feminism.
- 4) Ask a feminist to speak at your organization
- 5) Reclaim the word 'feminist' as a badge of honour (p.220)

When ideology becomes stagnant, it's in danger of becoming dogma. *Reclaiming the F Word* is a fresh, and welcome addition to the ever-evolving feminist movement, and offers a broader perspective that takes into account the lives and experiences of women across the globe.

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