



The Women's Room

Marilyn French

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The bestselling feminist novel that awakened both women and men, *The Women's Room* follows the transformation of Mira Ward and her circle as the women's movement begins to have an impact on their lives. A biting social commentary on an emotional world gone silently haywire, *The Women's Room* is a modern classic that offers piercing insight into the social norms accepted so blindly and revered so completely. Marilyn French questions those accepted norms and poignantly portrays the hopeful believers looking for new truths.

The Women's Room Details

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From Reader Review *The Women's Room* for online ebook

Hannah says

What can I say? *The Women's Room* was a rollercoaster ride of a book. It's unapologetically depressing from the very start, almost too brazenly in-your-face till midway, where Mira's life starts seemingly (dare I say it) conforming (!) to stereotypical feminists of the 70s. Then suddenly, about 100 pages till the end of the book, it's like one bomb drops after the other and by the end of it all, the reader is left as weary as Mira's narrative. I understand how this book would have been highly influential in the 70s (when it was published), and reading it now makes me feel like a spoon-fed brat who never had it hard and could only fathom such trials via trashy magazines and self-induced illnesses. French throws the book at its readers like a hot pot of spaghetti sauce. It's really up to you to enjoy what's left on your face, or clean up the mess.

Nicole says

I don't know what this was, but it wasn't a novel.

Certainly not a good one. People say, the men in it are not developed, I say, yeah, neither are the women. These aren't people, they are cases in point. It's long, it's heavy-handed, it's off-putting, it's profoundly depressing, and whatever its intentions, it leaves a reader with the impression that the women's movement has left women more unhappy than ever (which I doubt very much is what French was hoping to accomplish).

I am also extremely tired of having this exchange (the flip side of the identity politics coin which says you have to hate certain books because of who wrote them or what they are about or because they contain opinions that you find objectionable, now we also have to love a bad book because of its special pet issue, as if novels were like little morality skits, simpleminded, preachy, unconcerned with language or complexity, like treatises only without the benefit of argument, evidence, clarity):

Nicole: I didn't like this book.

Interlocutor: You know the women's movement changed my life.

Look at the exchange again. There are some major things wrong with that response. Most notably, this book is not the women's movement, the women's movement is not this book. The women's movement is not this bad book that I didn't like.

Megan Baxter says

In one of those odd synchronicities, I was midway through the first half of this book when my husband and I watched the second-to-last episode of *From Earth to the Moon*, *The Original Wives' Club*. What struck me about the women in the episode was that, although the show painted it as the extraordinary sacrifices these women made to support their astronaut husbands, most of what they showed was exactly mirrored in *The Women's Room* as the things that most suburban housewives did.

Note: The rest of this review has been withdrawn due to the changes in Goodreads policy and enforcement. You can read why I came to this decision [here](#).

In the meantime, you can read the entire review at [Smorgasbook](#)

Amy Conchie says

My mother gave me 'the Women's Room' with the caveat that when she first read it it made her so angry that she wouldn't speak to my father all weekend (the poor man did nothing!). It is this brand of feminism that, as a practical but vocal advocate of women's continual advancement, thoroughly riles me up. The worthless proselytizing characters are barely more than two-dimensional; the plot conveniently buckles in order to ensure they receive the most punishment at the hands of their oppressors. The book is filled to the brim with silly, ridiculous scenarios that cannot be taken seriously (I recall a woman having a panic attack over a dream about sanitary napkins... For goodness' sake!) and implausible relationships in which Gender and Sex overshadow every other natural instinct. It is ludicrous to think that anyone ever took this pile of tosh seriously. I wish for once that a female author would level the playing field by writing a bold, well-planned literary epic to rival Ulysses, Moby Dick, Gravity's Rainbow, Infinite Jest, 2666, etc., because the only way we will advance is by stepping up to the plate--not complaining that society wants us to wash it.

KW says

In retrospect, I can say that, while "The Women's Room" wasn't always an enjoyable book, it was an important book, a narrative worthy of my time and attention in that it is a significant perspective of the life of the middle-class woman pre- and post- second wave feminism. It is often difficult for young adult women to appreciate our nearness, in terms of decades, to an American system which legalized and regulated the condemnation of the single woman. However, Marilyn French creates engaging snapshots of countless marriages defined by men, and particularly women, who are constrained emotionally, ideologically and rationally by gender roles. Emphasized is the helplessness of any women forced to divorce, and more than one character is described as mentally broken by the stressors of being thrust into poverty with children and limited job training. Leave well enough alone the outrage of being intellectually or physically belittled or quieted; it seems that the greatest facet of marriage in the 1940s and 50s was the element of discipline, namely a man's ability to keep his wife well-behaved and productive at any cost. "Punishments" for any behavior less than pleasing was divorce, isolation, emotional frigidity, physical harm and institutionalization. These are stories of women who, behind the facade of the upwardly-mobile white middle class, are kept for, literally, the fee of their life and well-being.

It is evident that French felt a duty to tell more than one story in this novel. For that reason, chapters are filled to capacity with scene after gory scene- suicide attempts, violent encounters, economic ruin, and episode after disgusting episode of Eisenhower-era masculine complacency. For that reason, the prose is often rushed and dense to the point of overcapacity. However, the storytelling is riveting enough to hit the point home- we could do worse than to remember that the sources of stories such as these are never far away, that this degree of marginalization is as current as today.

G.G. says

Samantha Ellis struck a chord when in *How to Be a Heroine: Or, What I've Learned from Reading too Much* she observed:

It might seem odd that I was reading all these books about how to put down your dishcloth and leave your husband. I didn't have a husband. It was my mother's life I was trying to leave.

Yes, I realized, that's why we were all reading *The Women's Room*.

Dottie says

One of a circle of neighbors who for a period of months sometime in the seventies gathered nearly every afternoon to talk and have a drink before dispersing to prepare meals for families loaned me this book or recommended it - I think I went and bought my own copy to read. I began it about 4:30 one day and think there may have been pizza at my house for dinner that evening because I barely stopped reading from the moment I began to the moment I finished -- which was around 10:30 the next morning.

This was the first book in years which demanded that immediate attention and it has stayed strong since. Not only that, I have since read a great many of French's works -- and I can't recall any disappointments.

Louise says

It had been a really shocking experience for a girl of 16 in Tehran to read the story of a woman in the 60s who had almost the same situation the women today in Iran have.

I had read a room of one's own & so many other feminist (?) books by the time, but I can not say that they had that great effect on me... It was so awakening.

Paul Bryant says

HELPFUL HINTS

Room – an excellent movie from 2015 about a kidnapped woman

The Room – a 2003 contender for the worst film ever, a cult classic

The Room – a painfully horrible 1971 novel about an insane person by Hubert Selby Jr

A Room of One's Own – a 1929 essay by Virginia Woolf arguing for the need for both fictional and literal space for women artists

A Room with a View – a 1908 novel by EM Forster. I haven't read it yet

A Room with a View – a rather lovely song by Noel Coward – the intro contains the lines:

*I've been cherishing through the perishing
winter nights and days a funny little phrase
That means so much to me that you've got to be
With me heart and soul- for on you the whole thing leans*

You don't get that kind of grammar in modern songs

Room at the Top – a vicious British social satire from 1957

The Beautiful Room is Empty – Edmund White's brilliant autobiographical novel from 1988

The Women's Room – a devastating feminist novel from 1977 which maybe these days might come across as all obvious stuff I guess. I read it in the 1990s and I thought it was great. Hey, the 1990s – that's a long time ago now. Time marches on and all, but I bet the stuff in this book has hardly changed a bit.

Kogiopsis says

One of the things that I noticed in skimming other reviews of this book is that it seems to be extremely polarizing - either people love it and hold it up as a seminal feminist text, or they hate it (for much the same reason). Plainly speaking, your opinion on feminism will likely be your opinion on this book. It doesn't pretend to be apolitical in the least.

In that respect, as I write this review in 2015, I find myself wondering if this book is actually relevant anymore. It's definitely something that had value when it was published, but both the world and feminism have moved on: the focus of this book on middle-class white women is no longer as relevant when the forefront of activism is now intersectional. As a polemic, *The Women's Room* is much more narrow-focused than modern feminism; appropriate, given that it comes from a time when feminism was less developed and less visible.

Honestly, if you want to learn about the history of feminism - go for it and read this book; it's well-written and reflective. If you're interested in what it looks like now, though, you'll want to start with modern internet discourse.

Rebecca says

Wow. I'm not sure how to encapsulate this important 500-page feminist novel in a review, so I'll keep my comments brief and just suggest strongly that anyone with an interest in feminist thought or feminist history must read this incredibly raw, honest and ominous novel.

It's one of those vital books that has fallen off of our radar. Apparently it was extremely popular when it came out in 1977, but I'm aghast that my generation has, for the most part, not even heard of it. Though a

historic novel, its content is not outdated. French gives us a vivid look into second wave feminism and a group of women immersed in patriarchy.

If I have a reservation about this novel, it is that it is, perhaps, too raw for young feminists today, and we live in an era when patriarchy is far less overt and more difficult to identify. It would be easy to dismiss this book as outdated and irrelevant. But if we are honest with ourselves, I think we'll see a lot of truth in these characters who are flawed and broken, strong and visionary.

It is a sad novel, a hard one to read. But I'm telling you, it's vitally important.

Alice says

What I learned from this book:

- I am about as privileged as is possible in terms of when and where I was born.
 - This fact isn't going to shield me from the more insidious forms of subordination that still permeate most things.
 - Generational patterns are really difficult to break, and if we think "everything's different now" we're overlooking some pretty big similarities.
 - There's still a hell of a lot of work to do.
 - I really don't want to get married.
-

BohoAutumn says

I doubt that many young (this generation) readers could relate to this book. And I think that is wonderful - because it is due to this book, others like it, and all the women of the past who questioned and caused changes that this generation can feel freer as women.

But it is also risky to dismiss it. We need to go beyond the specifics of the 50s/60s/70s woman and to the fundamentals.

Today, in 2012, in developed countries, women still do the majority of the housework, still do the majority of the childcare, are still paid less for the EXACT SAME work, still accept giving up their dreams for male partners, are few and far between in high-status jobs, and are the sex most murdered and raped.

A very important work - both telling the reader of today just where her freedom came from, and just how much is still yet to change.

Srtapizca says

las mujeres castradoras son las que se niegan a fingir que los hombres son mejores que ellas y mejores que las mujeres en general. La simple y pura verdad, es decir, que los hombres son iguales, puede socavar una cultura de una forma más devastadora que cualquier bomba».

En 1963 se publicaba *La mística de la feminidad* de Betty Friedan, quien un tiempo antes ya nos hablaba de lo que ella denominó "el mal que no tiene nombre". Este mal no era otra cosa que el vacío, la frustración que sentían muchas mujeres que abandonaban una vida profesional para ser las perfectas madres y esposas protagonistas de un anuncio de detergente de los años 50. Mujeres que tras casarse con el "hombre ideal" y vivir en un barrio de adosados con porche delantero, esperan a que todos duerman para beberse una copa de bourbon y dejarse llevar por sus pensamientos. Es así como conocemos a Mira la protagonista de este libro. No se si es la protagonista o no, porque el libro está lleno de historias de las mujeres que acompañan a Mira, primero adosadas en el mismo barrio y después en la universidad.

"Mira pensaba que cada una de ellas era más importante para las demás que sus propios maridos. Se preguntaba si podría haber sobrevivido sin ellas. Las quería".

Un libro cargado de sororidad, de feminismo y de diálogos trepidantes para debatir

El says

Occasionally I hear a misinformed person who says something along the lines of "Feminism is no longer needed in our society" and a piece of me dies each time I hear it. I read quite a bit, and it's when I read things like French's 1977 novel *The Women's Room* that makes me realize just how important feminism and the Women's Movement has been in America. Because it's not so much that I can read this book and say "Wow, it's so good this shit doesn't happen anymore" - it's because I can read this book and say "Wow, it's still horribly relevant today."

I can pick up this book that was published a year before I was born and read this story that starts in the 1950s and I can still relate to the experiences the women experience - if not directly in a personal sense, then because I know people who match the experiences in the book. That's messed up, right? Because it's 2016 and people want to think things are so much better than they used to be. This isn't to say things haven't been improved, but when we're still discussing a political candidate's stance on women's reproductive rights, then shit hasn't changed nearly as much as we like to pretend it has.

The narrator is possibly French herself, though it's hard to say. The narrator has a sort of omniscient presence throughout the story - she talks about herself as part of the "we" (as in the group of women), and then also talks about instances in individual women's lives that she could not have been privy to, so it's understood then she is retelling what her friend told her. I found this an interesting narration technique because it requires the reader to look at the story through their own eyes. But I also found it frustrating because I wanted to know about the narrator herself - we learned so much about the main character, Mira, throughout the years, and about the other women in the group, but the narrator is sort of a mystery because she doesn't talk about herself as an individual outside of the group. Again, I feel this was probably French's way of allowing the reader to have a position in the story, so each reader brings their own experiences to the table, but I'm not entirely certain it was completely successful.

This is not a short book, and it feels longer as one reads because there is so much time and ground covered here. Beginning in the 50s and ending some time in the 70s, the narrator and Mira encounter so many different people and opportunities. There are not a lot of moments of brightness or hope here, and that can be tedious to read. But that was also French's point - there's a lot of darkness and despair in the world, and more so for those who are a minority as there's also a level of distrust involved. Mira struggles to find her tribe, so to speak, and she finds it, and in that sense it's where this story is particularly interesting to me.

Women are constantly labeled as being catty, or manipulative, or untrustworthy, especially towards one another. We are frequently tearing each other down when we should be building each other up. Mira experiences a little of all of this, participates accordingly on occasion, and grows and evolves, which is required of every woman, even today. Her first strong female relationships are in connection to their husbands and children, so the women have very few of their own personalities outside of their marriages. They have discussions that revolve around their husbands and children. They come to realize in their own ways on their own time how detrimental that is to their own growth, and they each react differently to this realization.

As time progresses, Mira grows and meets new people in each new stage in her life. They help her learn the problems with a patriarchal society, something she has probably always had within her, but never had the confidence to evaluate on her own. It's encouraging to see the different female relationships over time grow from something rather superficial to deeper, warmer experiences.

These relationships are still not perfect, but truthfully there is never any perfect relationship. But they are still strong women and their ties are strong, and that is something I found especially appealing.

There are quite a lot of points that I'd like to make about this book, but I failed to write this review at the time of finishing it, and a lot of my original points are now missing in the shit-hole that is my memory. It's a powerful book, and I'm glad to have read it. It's frustrating that the men-folk in this book were one-dimensional in comparison to the women, but I understand that was probably French's intention as well - here finally was a novel that showcased women in their habitat, and not just women the way men view them. After a long history of novels involving women and their relationships to men, it was refreshing to read a novel about women first and foremost.

It's a shame that so much of this novel is still relevant, and that many of the experiences these women have are experiences so many women still experience now in 2016. I would love to see a change. I feel French's novel was a large step in the right direction, but then... I'm not sure what happened. It doesn't seem that this book is popular amongst readers anymore, and I think that's a shame.

Beth says

An important book for me (and for more than a few women I know). The Women's Room is sort of Betty Friedan/The Feminine Mystique in novel form. The depictions of the middle-class lives of women and mothers in the 1950s and early 1960s are compelling. The stories of the women who moved in or into other realms in the later 1960s and through the 1970s show that sexism certainly didn't evaporate with feminism or with women's moves out of an entirely domestic sphere.

Trevor Maloney says

"The Women's Room" is considered one of the most important novels of the feminist movement. If you are interested in the feminist movement, you might consider reading it just for that reason. However, in my view, there is good reason to read it beyond that. I would especially encourage men to read this book. Until I read "The Women's Room," I don't think I had ever read a novel that focuses so exclusively on the lives of women. This may say a lot about my reading habits, and/or my education, but I think it also says a lot about

our culture; that a highly educated man with an at least somewhat refined cultural sensibility can still be a highly educated man with an at least somewhat refined cultural sensibility while not having read a novel that really digs into the lives and psyches of women until he's 36 years old.

From the author's 1993 introductory essay:

"Men can complacently continue to exalt rationality, power, possession, and hierarchy, and to justify domination as a necessary and natural principle, unhampered by the criticism of women or men who entertain a different value system. Men in power do not even hear radical criticism because they have pre-labeled it invalid, soft-headed, or insane. Because the dominant class controls the discourse, only the independently thoughtful even perceive the insanity of our present culture."

Elyssa says

I first read this in college and a few times after that. It really brought to life the concepts outlined in *The Feminine Mystique*. It illustrated the roots of the feminist movement, which were mostly based on women's discontent and emptiness about being limited to the role of wife and mother. The characters are pretty much middle class white women, which is not the voice of all feminists at that time, but still an interesting one.

Mandy says

Plus ça change....I didn't expect this key text of the feminist movement to have the same impact on me that it did all those decades ago, but in fact it had even more of an impact on me this time, because I've now had children and a lot of the book - the best part of it actually - is about being a mother, and the conflicts that arise from that. But what really struck me was how little things have changed in women's personal lives. In theory we now have equality, and in theory can aspire to anything we want. But in practice life can be just as difficult as it ever was, and old attitudes die hard. Many men still think that women are inferior. Many still think that the woman's place is in the home with the children. Many women think this too. Maybe it is? "I hate discussions of feminism that end up with who does the dishes," she said. So do I. But at the end, there are always the damned dishes."

So many of the issues raised in this book are as relevant and as pertinent as they were back in the 60s and 70s, especially childcare v career, attitudes to rape and so on, and it is well worth a re-read.

Because the sad truth is...plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.

Anita Fajita Pita says

It's hard for me to review this book. French manages to cover ground that hasn't been covered before: Women. Seriously, that's it. It seems so simple, right? But it isn't. *The Women's Room* follows Mira through life. It begins in a basement women's bathroom as Mira perches on the edge of a toilet, hiding in the stall. Hiding from what? Why? This is a heavy read, it takes time and it takes a toll. But it's worth it.

Our undisclosed narrator is both sorry for and ashamed of Mira. So our narrator takes us on an explanation tour of Mira and Mira's life so that we can understand why she is the way she is, and how a grown woman ended up hiding and crying on a toilet in the basement of a university. Let me give you a hint: it's society.

And by society I mean the patriarchy. This is a fantastically feminist book.

Mira started out so wonderfully! She was bright, eager, happy, and full of life. It is our unfortunate duty to witness her corruption and ruination by everything and everyone in her life. By expectations and social norms, gender roles (damn them), and every man, woman, and child that claims a space in her life. She is tossed into the choppy seas of America and relentlessly beaten against the rocks of society. It's just life.

But not just Mira's. We are introduced to a handful of friends in many different phases of her life, and then we are given a sneak peek into their living room windows as well. We can see that everyone has their own problems to deal with. Some are the same, some are different. Everyone handles everything they way they would, which is not to say the way you or I would.

That's it. The beauty of this entire book is that in every situation of Mira's life, and the offshoots of her friends' lives, the reader can find a piece of themselves or a piece of their mother, or their friend. **Every experience hits home.** Never have I ever read a book that represented so many different women and their relationships with themselves and each other so well and realistically. After a while, you might feel like you're just listening to your mom talk, or your friend, or your aunt. Real women. Not women from stories. I mean, it's practically revolutionary, and it's just a book full of stories of lives. Women's lives. Written nearly 20 years ago. Wow.

Please read this book. Witness a lifetime of all the little things that "aren't a big deal," but aren't they, really? Still? Still.
