

# How Our Best Feminist Work Goes Out of Print and Stays There

by Phyllis Chesler



Edith Wharton

Many (white, male) writers throughout history have suffered from both poverty and plagiarism. If they were not born rich, they all had day-jobs. Many were never paid for their published writing. Some had to pay to be published. Writers—even the Greats—also suffered scathing reviews. Some were censored. Their books were burned. Some were imprisoned, sent into exile, or murdered for their Thought Crimes against religion or against the state.

In our time, our work, especially our best and most radical feminist work, simply goes out of print and stays there. It dies softly. It does not get translated into other languages. We are lucky if it is noted at all, even if only to be critically savaged. More often, it is simply not reviewed. The tree falls, no one hears the sound.

When people ask me how long it took to write my first book [\*Women and Madness\*](#), I usually answer: My entire life. And although it became a bestseller, it also led to countless sorrows for me. My university colleagues feared, envied, and perhaps even hated me for my sudden prominence. They made my academic career a permanently uphill ordeal. Some feminists scorned the success; those who had demanded that I publish “anonymously” and donate the proceeds to the “revolution” stopped talking to me.

However, buoyed by a rising feminist movement, I coasted my

way through the many patriarchal assaults and university-based punishments launched against me. I'd learned that one hits one's target by the strength of one's opposition. I was not looking to please patriarchal ways of thinking but to transform them.

But, despite publishing quite a lot—I also perished, institutionally speaking. It took me 22 years to become a Full Professor, my tenure was challenged again and again, as were my promotions (which determined one's salary and one's pension). I never received a serious i.e. a tenured job offer at any other university.

Nevertheless, that first book of mine was embraced by millions of women. It was reviewed prominently, positively, and often. However, it was also damned. Psychologists and psychiatrists were offended, enraged. I was certainly not invited to lecture to such groups, at least not until feminists had more senior roles within them.

An author rarely learns why a particular person has been assigned a review or why they've undertaken it. Here's one story of mine that I've never before shared.

How naive I was. My God! I'd insulted and thus enraged an entire profession—actually an entire global civilization. I'd called out the patriarchy and given women a vision of radical liberation. Many of the Insulted-and-Enraged remained silent but at professional meetings, as well as behind closed doors, they described me and all feminists as “hysterical man-haters,” “strident” harpies, who suffered from “penis envy,” were “crazy,” needed medication, hospitalization, or a good fuck.

These were the women and men who reviewed feminist works. (They preceded the scathing reviews penned by feminists about their ideological opponent's works.)

What I'm about to share is a rather bizarre, Byzantine, only-

in-Manhattan tale, one that unfolds over a 33-year period. I don't think the story is unique. What's unique is that I was finally able to connect the dots.

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All the players have died. I'm still here and writing about it.

In 1973, *Partisan Review* ran a very negative review of *Women and Madness*, written by Dr. Louise J. Kaplan, a psychoanalyst whom I did not know and whose work I knew nothing about because she had not yet published anything. I was surprised that such a classically liberal and somewhat neoconservative journal had bothered to review a radically feminist work. How had this come about?

Here's how. Sociologist Norman Birnbaum, a repulsive man in every way, once tried to date me, impress me, by telling me how many important literary figures he knew. Nevertheless, I spurned him.

Reader: She spurned him.

Thus, he handpicked Dr. Louise and used his close association with *Partisan Review* editors to seal the deal.

In the spring of 1973, seven months after my publication date, Dr. Louise criticized *Women and Madness* for its "statistical analysis" which was "simplistic and superficial." She attributed the book's support among feminists to its having taken "the ultimate radical stance, particularly (in relation) to bisexuality, lesbianism, and (in the) definitive rejection of maleness." She chided the book as a "prototypical female monologue...a ladies-magazine smorgasbord of Demeter, Sylvia Plath, the penis-envy paragraphs of Freud, the usual bits from Reich..."

I do not believe this is the book I wrote but, as they say,

critics are entitled to their opinions.

Years later, Edith Kurzweil, the editor of *Partisan Review*, whom I had subsequently befriended and whose Holocaust-era book I had later reviewed, admitted that Dr. Norman, who was very friendly with her and her husband William Phillips, had arranged Dr. Louise's review.

As I reviewed my archives for my 2018 book, [\*A Politically Incorrect Feminist\*](#), I found a scathing review of *Women and Madness*, published in the *Village Voice* on October 11, 1973—and written by Dr. Louise's husband, Dr. Donald M. Kaplan, a professor at N.Y.U.'s prestigious postdoctoral program in psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. His critique is oddly placed in a non-academic venue. I had totally forgotten about this and may not even have read it at the time.

Dr. Donald's review characterizes the book's ideas as immature, "scattered, impetuous, and sensational;" its author as an "intellectual hustler" whose statistics are "incomplete," and purposely "deceptive;" an author who "favor(s) lesbianism as a definitive solution to the problem of gender differences," "equates psychosis and social heroism... (and views) madness as a form of positive, militant feminism."

This author does no such thing but, like his wife, this reviewer is blinded by his fear of "a homosexual Amazon community," which he views as my feminist Rx.

Well, in retrospect, I had a fair point, didn't I?

Between 1978-1995, Dr. Louise published four books. In 1991, she produced *Female Perversions: The Temptation of Emma Bovary*. It was made into a movie starring Tilda Swinton.

Despite her own success, Louise was not done with me. In 2004-2005, unbeknownst to me, we were both working with the same editor at the same publishing house.

By now, Louise's husband had been dead for more than a decade and she had become known as a feminist. Ironically, just as Second Wave feminism had initially disgusted her—now, more than thirty years later, she had become a celebrated *left-wing* feminist.

Perhaps Louise was now trying to defend a feminism that, in my view, had become hopelessly Stalinized and opposed to Western Enlightenment values. I said so in my 2005 book, [\*The Death of Feminism: What's Next in the Struggle for Women's Freedom\*](#).

This book-baby was stillborn, because suddenly, the editor cancelled my book tour and stopped sending out galleys to reviewers. I only found out about this at the lovely book party that the publisher was already committed to give me—when the lead publicist burst into tears and told me that all publicity had been cancelled; she did not know why.

I asked my editor about this directly. At first, she only told me that “one of her other authors” had told her that I disliked her and that I was very unhappy. I could barely breathe but I found a list of her other authors, saw Louise's name on it, and quickly faxed the editor a copy of Louise's old *Partisan Review* piece.

The editor was dumbstruck but, to her credit, immediately admitted that “quite frankly” she'd been “gas lighted.” It was too late to save my book—and too late for her to back out of the latest edition of *Women and Madness*, which she was also publishing with a new Introduction; too late to back out of publishing Louise's book *Cultures of Fetishism* which came out in 2006.

*The Death of Feminism* critiqued Western feminists for their multi-cultural relativism (which is not the same as multi-cultural diversity); for their peer-pressured deep-dive into postmodernism, anti-colonialism, and anti-imperialism; for their mindless embrace of Islam—as if a religion was a

race—and an endangered and persecuted race at that. Not as an increasingly supremacist, totalitarian ideology which silenced all Muslim dissent via torture and murder.

I also documented the failure of academic and activist feminists to understand honor killings and honor-and-shame tribal societies and thus, I explained their abandonment of “brown and black” women trapped in such cultures. I also noted the escalation of intolerance among feminists and their peculiar concern with the alleged occupation of a country that did not exist (Palestine) than with the very real occupation of women’s bodies world-wide. A virtue-signaling anti-racism had already trumped anti-sexism among feminists and the consequences are still being felt today.

Yes, I wrote about all this back in 2005. Unfortunately, the book received only a handful of reviews and found no foreign publishers. It was taken out of print which is where it remains. I believe that copies may still be obtained online.

But just Imagine: If we’d all been able to have a public and ongoing conversation about what I’d written about. We’d be sixteen-seventeen years into one of the most important conversations for 21st century feminism.

And this is only one example of the kind of crazy shit that can, perhaps, routinely happen to a feminist writer.

And there is more, so much more.

And I’m a “successful” feminist writer. Just think about those who are not visibly “successful,” but whose work is excellent but has been forgotten, “borrowed,” not cited, laid to rest before it could do its considerably good work in the world. I think about this all the time.

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