In an age when spelling cute clichés in block letters against a pink background smacks of Victoria’s Secret’s line of sleep and lounge wear, one might mistake the bright pink cover of Deborah Siegel’s new book for a chick advertisement. Pink is, after all, such a girly color. But the only thing this poster is trying to sell is awareness—that even the latest fashion queen to whom a single bikini wax is more important than the entire history of women’s liberation has something in common with her radical sisters.

It is only appropriate that the title of Siegel’s book, *Sisterhood, Interrupted: From Radical Women to Grrls Gone Wild*, appear like a slogan. This title references “Sisterhood Is Powerful!”—the slogan of radical women meant to raise antiwar consciousness in January 1968, and Robin Morgan’s influential anthology of the women’s liberation movement which bears the same name. And, of course, it also alludes to the breast-baring installments of *Girls Gone Wild*. But what can antiwar activism possibly have in common with shameless self-promotion? Both are associated with the infamously indefinable “f”-word—feminism.

As its title suggests, Siegel’s book is a hybrid of the personal and the political or, rather, of the compelling slogan that shaped, and was reshaped by, feminism: *The Personal Is Political*. “In the latter half of the twentieth century,” Siegel asserts, “few words have been more important to women’s equality and women’s empowerment than these.” Though less fashionable than “Sexy” or “Baby Doll,” they would also look a lot hotter on a T-shirt.

Siegel traces the development of these words from their first appearance as the title of Carol Hanisch’s article issued on an underground mimeograph in the late sixties. She notes that the slogan stuck because “the personal” and “the political” had already been merging within a broader cultural reorientation surrounding radical movements and alternative cultures. With the women’s movement picking up force in 1969, “The Personal Is Political” was redefined not only to include civil rights and antiwar initiatives but also “sex, family life, household chores, and, indeed, everyday interactions between men and women.” For Betty Friedan, who founded the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966, “the personal” came to mean advancements in the legal arena, not in the bedroom. For post-feminist Karen Lehrman, writing in 1997, “The personal [was] no longer political” and older feminism was to blame for making women into victims. More recently, journalist Jennifer Baumgardner and writer/activist Amy Richards reclaimed the old motto in order to reinvigorate the “far from won” battle for women’s social, political, and economic equality.

Siegel’s engaging narrative documents these cultural changes, as well as the problematic meaning of the “f”-word, as she delves into the relationship between the “mothers” of the feminist movement, who formed the “second wave” of activists from the mid-1960s until the advent of the Reagan-Bush era, and their “daughters”—later spokeswomen, rebels, and instigators whom Rebecca Walker (Alice Walker’s daughter) christened the “third wave.” Siegel demonstrates that disagreements arose not only
between second and third-wave feminists but also within each group: whether to limit the movement to radical inner circles or to go public and target, as Friedan hoped, “the mainstream” and “Middle America”; whether to overthrow the system or to join it; whether to bridge the orgasm gap or the wage gap. Despite their differences, these women shared a common philosophy “to eradicate sexism and better women’s lives.” That is, in fact, what Siegel means when she employs “feminism.”

In her foreword to *Sisterhood, Interrupted*, Baumgardner expresses her hope that the reader “will have a deeper sense of many of the stories that make feminist history and philosophy, and...use them to continue to figure out what feminism means to [her].” The reader is reminded of Baumgardner’s words when learning about the 1970s radical feminist hostility toward *Ms.*., the magazine for which she would serve as an editor two decades later. Founded by Gloria Steinem (who had launched her career by doing an undercover story on Hugh Hefner’s Playboy Club in NYC “dressed in a satin bustier bunny outfit”!), *Ms.* popularized women’s liberation by urging them to join the revolution; it also became a big commercial venture and the target of Redstockings, a group of radical women who revealed the magazine’s connections to the CIA and accused her of co-opting radical feminism. This was one setback among many. Siegel suggests that the radical movement suffered “due to a loss of definitional control,” with catchphrases like “consciousness-raising” and “the personal is political” “distorted beyond recognition” and, in the words of Carol William Payne, “the question of what a women’s liberation group was supposed to do” left undecided. Younger feminists still face similar issues and, Siegel hopes, they can stop blaming and start learning from their older sisters.

A study of the “internal fights over how feminism has been popularly articulated and framed,” *Sisterhood, Interrupted* is a solid introduction to feminism. Its conclusion offers, moreover, a meditation on the major issues dividing the mothers and the daughters, and will be valuable to anyone interested in the future of “women’s lib.” With a vast array of literary and cultural sources, from serious books to TV shows and blogs, *Sisterhood, Interrupted* is great for beginners as well as pros, scholars as well as activists.

And although it provides plenty of drama and a host of tragic setbacks, this book ends on an optimistic note. The media promotes “bimbo feminism” and encourages women to get bikini waxes and practice cardio striptease; critics bemoan the so-called death of feminism; still, there are, Siegel assures us, women across the nation who care about their rights even though they are never caught on camera sabotaging the Miss America Pageant, as their radical sisters did back in September 1968. Siegel cites the 2005 “Girlcott” against Abercrombie & Fitch’s line of T-shirts with sexist and racist sayings as but one of the current efforts to “wrestle with feminism” by younger women who may “call it by its name or not” but are, undoubtedly, continuing its legacy.

Because her focus is on *popular* feminism from the late 1960s through the present, Siegel does not give a thorough history of the movement. Yet the need for such a history, especially one of the U.S. women’s movement, as she herself points out, “remains profound.” Siegel sees *Sisterhood, Interrupted* as “a bridge and a call to action”—reminding us, I take it, that the pen is as mighty as the sword, and that feminism can be defended on more than one front, for “[o]urs is an unfinished revolution.”
Book Purchase URL:


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http://www.mothersmovement.org/books/reviews/07/sisterhood_interrupted.html