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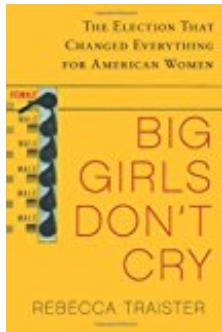
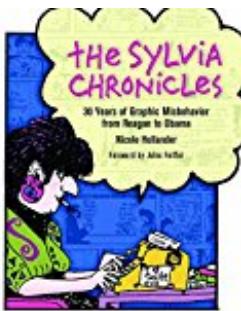
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The Bombshell

Very Like A Sloth



Feminism is very like a sloth; in order to take a step forward, she first takes several steps backward. It seems after a long while in retro mode, feminism may be experiencing one of her periodic advances. This is the heartening message of two feminist political thinkers, one a cartoonist, Nicole Hollander, author of *The Sylvia Chronicles: 30 Years of Graphic Misbehavior from Reagan to Obama*, the other, Rebecca Traister, a journalist covering politics and gender for *Salon*, and author of *Big Girls Don't Cry: The Election that Changed Everything for American Women*. Both authors, each in her inimitable way, paint a vivid sketch of the contemporary American cultural and political landscape from a feminist perspective. Hollander's book is a selection of her cartoon strips, mostly featuring her bombshell of a character, the scathing, hilarious, middle-aged yet ageless, *über*-woman Sylvia; Traister's book is the riveting account of the 2008 election from an earnest, fair-minded, super-informed and informative, thirty-something feminist passionate about the political. With mid-term elections looming, and the times we live in more terrifyingly whacko by the minute, I am grateful to both of these women for their uplifting visions of the future of feminism.

Hollander's brand of uplift comes via Sylvia's often radical, always outrageous putdowns of today's world. With her Roman nose, her big hair, and a cigarette dangling from her mouth, Sylvia calls it as she sees it -- and it's not pretty. Her disdain has diverse targets but her preferred hit is anyone and anything in the category of card-carrying member of "them": the white male establishment. In a 1983 strip lampooning "scientific" studies about gender difference (for more on this subject, see [my last column](#)), Sylvia responds to a news report asserting "Culture alone doesn't make us who we are; the brain is differently wired in men and women," with the quip "In men the wires are loose." Accused of reverse sexism, Hollander, in the running commentary accompanying the graphic strips, retorts: "I think men have to suck it up for a couple of years until sexism really is dead, not just nodding off."

Sylvia's vitriol is hardly restricted to "them." Taking a swipe at a new generation of social critics calling themselves "Post-Feminist," she gives her writing students an assignment: "Post-Feminism" is a popular topic in the press. Can you say 'Post-Feminism?' Can you use it in a sentence? Complete the paragraph below. 'I had to get the microfilm to Max in New York before my next rendezvous with the one-eyed man, but I was afraid to trust it to the US Mail. I decided to send it Post-Feminism. Hurriedly, I...' Hollander herself asks, "When did we get to the Post-Feminist era? Was I asleep, in a coma, or otherwise engaged?... When my local dry cleaner charges the same price to launder and press women's blouses as men's shirts, I'll know we have arrived."

Hollander takes on myriad issues, from gays in the military to hormone replacement treatment, from the Iraq/Afghanistan wars to sex and romance. She offers a uniquely jaded sneer at every political and cultural personality of the past three decades from Phyllis Shlafly to Sarah Palin to Martha Stewart: "When I watch Martha, I wonder what a cooking show hosted by Joan Crawford would be like."

If Sylvia's graphic narrative has an indelible soft spot for "our smartest, sexiest, and most bad boy president, sigh," Bill Clinton, then Rebecca Traister's engrossing book indulges to mostly positive effect her near obsession with his wife. *Big Girls Don't Cry* is a thorough dissection of Hillary Clinton's bid for President, including Traister's personal responses to her subject and countless details tracing the peaks and valleys of that roller-coaster of an election. From Hillary's hiring of Mark Penn as her campaign strategist to Gloria Steinem's infamous op-ed piece pitting race against gender, to Hillary's teary-eyed moment in New Hampshire, to her stirring speech at the Democratic National Convention in Denver, Traister's narrative, full of inside story, back story, and hindsight, is quite a ride. Along the way, Traister makes forays into the history of feminism from Sojourner Truth and Elizabeth Cady Stanton to the rise of a burgeoning, influential feminist blogosphere with websites such as *Feministing* and *Jezebel*. The book contends that the prominent role of so many powerful women in the 2008 election -- Hillary Clinton, Michele Obama, Katie Couric, Sarah Palin, Tina Fey, to name only a high-profile few -- has done much to re-invigorate feminism.

In only one chapter does Traister seem to lose her way: when grappling with Sarah Palin her otherwise crystalline prose becomes muddled and unsure of itself. Here was a woman who used her considerable power to ensure most other women would never come near any notion of legal parity, while her own life was virtually an advertisement for the successes of feminism. She even claimed the label "feminist." After a post-election fade-out, Palin reappeared blaring her paradoxical feminism. Her Machiavellian usurping act made feminists of all sorts re-examine the concept. Last month, *Slate* published a piece entitled "Who Gets to be a Feminist": women pundits from Katha Pollitt to Katie Roiphe to Anna Holmes were asked to define what it means to be a feminist. The answers varied considerably; collectively they provided ample evidence that feminism in all of its guises is indeed, as Traister claims, thriving.

My favorite of the *Slate* responses began, "Anyone who wants to call her or himself a feminist 'gets to' be one. In turn feminists 'get to' tell the self-described feminists who actually work in opposition to the furthered empowerment of women that they are full of shit." The author

asserted that any movement trying to represent different races, sexualities, ethnicities, nationalities, classes and so on must by definition constantly “reimagine, redefine, and reposition itself.” The piece was signed Rebecca Traister.

Recently, I asked my fourteen-year-old son if he would call himself a feminist. “Yeah, sure,” he said rather absentmindedly, “I’m a feminist.” Seeing my glee, and in homage to Sylvia as well as to the sloth, he felt the need to add, “but, of course, all women are bad drivers and belong in the kitchen.”