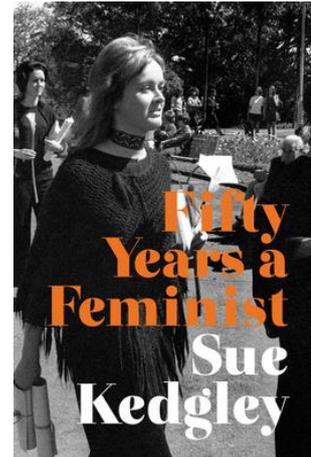


Fifty Years a Feminist

Sue Kedgley

Massey University Press, 2021

Book review by Prudence Stone



Sisterhood *is* powerful: Sue Kedgley makes that clear in her new book ***Fifty Years a Feminist***. I found this not just an exciting read, full of fun stories of meeting, planning, arguing, gathering, marching, but an inclusive read. I may not have been at Auckland University in 1971, or working for the UN in my thirties, but in that global movement that Sue was leading, I was taking part, I too was frustrated, confounded, undertaking my feminist crusades and breaking my own personal glass ceilings. That's what I found compelling from start to finish; the book really helped me re-member myself a feminist, and in remembering, really made me proud.

What I also appreciated throughout her story was that Sue's sisterhood was never exclusive. I enjoyed the reflections she had about working shoulder to shoulder with good men, ahead of their times, capable of seeing sexism and patriarchy as holding all of humanity back and willing to lend their tremendous social influence on other men in the public realm. Men like John Lennon and Kofi Annan, to drop just a couple of names. Sue unflinchingly insists sexism and patriarchy was and is always oppressive to all humans.

Just as unflinchingly, Sue insists feminism isn't formulaic and as a movement made considerable mistakes of its own. To begin with, she recalls "we made mistakes. We took it for granted our experience of sexism was universal". Her accounts of hosting Germaine Greer while on tour in New Zealand, or the mysterious shift in alliance of one former feminist colleague, Connie Purdue, are intriguing because they capture awkward early moments of discourse between the leaders of a movement otherwise insisting on sisterly solidarity.

What is particularly interesting is Sue's discomfort with being called a leader of the New Zealand feminist movement. This is despite her involvement with the Auckland University group that drew up the women's liberation manifesto, set up the women's liberation group on campus, and were invited to join the American feminist group, the National Organisation of Women:

"Like other women's liberation groups, ours had no formal structure, no formal membership nor any recognized leader. We didn't want to replicate men's hierarchical structures and so being structureless and leaderless was considered essential...Looking back, it's amazing that we achieved as much as we did, given that we were never quite sure who would turn up to our meetings from one week to the next" (Kedgely, p. 66)

In her frustration, Sue recalls being mentored on the old adage: if you don't put forward a leader, others will choose one for you. Although she's modest and turns a blind eye to her own beauty, I believe it's precisely this attribute that explains both why the media chose to spotlight her and why Sue felt so awkward with that. Oh, the irony! Standing up for a woman's right to be treated as people with views worth listening to without reference to appearance or good behaviour, but

gaining media attention while older, academic, or Māori women were everywhere with just as much to say on the feminist agenda, but without the pretty face.

The truth is, Sue was the quintessential *soldier*; brave, resilient and unflinchingly loyal to social justice and equity, with a sense of entitlement that emboldens you to assume you can get away with stuff you're not supposed to. These qualities are what led Sue past the front line of gendered relations in 1971 into no-woman's land.

In the book, Sue mentions a psycho-social phenomenon for second-wave feminists I had almost completely forgotten about. The 'click', that moment that came to so many girls growing up Pakeha in Aotearoa New Zealand in the middle of last century, who consciously named themselves feminist thereafter. The 'click' would come after years of believing that while there is a brother or a father or an uncle or any of their men friends in your environment, your life, your needs and your desires, must come last.

The click comes with that first, incredulous 'why?' For Sue, it came through reading her first book of feminist literature, ***Sisterhood is Powerful***, edited by Robin Morgan. In perfect form, she would read it with a sister-friend and "spend hours...discussing its ideas and relating it to our everyday lives". Sue's book is full of the most intimate memories like these; I was inspired to recall where I was and how old, and in turn found myself devouring her stories and easily relating them to my everyday life too.

I am 43 years a feminist. I thoroughly enjoyed remembering my life and my feminist struggles through Sue's account at the vanguard. For me, the click came at the age of 5 when my mother insisted I was to wear a girls' uniform on my first day of school. I was a girl? I had been convinced I was a boy, because I identified with my family members who seemed the happiest, who had the most power. I had so been looking forward to going to school that first day, but instead my mind was consumed with the monster realisation that nobody blinked to see me in a girls' uniform.

After her click, Sue recounts, she began to see sexism everywhere she looked. The truth is, sexism was everywhere in Pākehā New Zealand - all that changed was your own capability to see.



Sue (second from right) with National Council of Women NZ Wellington branch members at the book launch.

I love the way Sue recounts her feminist life - from that feminist click during her Auckland University days to working for the United Nations in New York, then back again to NZ and politics within local, then national government - as a journey of emotional responses and joyously wicked and creative collaborations with others to overcome, or sometimes fail to overcome, each new sexism she was confronted personally or confounded ethically by. This is what I relate to, this feeling of being a sexist space-age traveller, each new obstacle on your horizon needing careful navigation to get past intact.

Now grey and still beautiful, Sue looks back on a career deeper than simply feminist; a “last minute mother”, a writer, journalist and documentary maker, an environmentalist and animal welfare activist, a successful politician and influential board member, still involved in feminism while celebrating the new guard of tech-native millennials now at its helm. There is still so much to do and there should be no inference from the book’s title that Sue rests at 50 years. Now comes the wisdom from all that experience to advise us where to from here, in her usual upfront fashion. It’s in light of this that I wholeheartedly recommend this book as a gift, particularly to all brothers, fathers, uncles or any other men friends in your environment.