

## Book review: The Great Feminist Denial

**Book author: Monica Dux and Zora Simic**

**Publisher: Melbourne University Publishing**



The authors of *The Great Feminist Denial* note that when you get to a certain age, you have the opportunity to not only reflect on your life thus far, but to see it as part of history.

This is the building block of Monica Dux and Zora Simic's ground-breaking examination of how the label 'feminism' has been used as an object of blame for many of the gender-based ills that this particular 'ism' has fought so long against.

In probing many women around Australia on their thoughts on what feminism means, they meet with a wealth of responses, which mostly fall into a small number of common challenges:

- Feminism has achieved everything it needs to, and is now largely irrelevant.
- Feminism has failed to deliver in certain key regards.
- Feminism presents an 'old school' mentality – one that divides and blames – and so does not represent modern women's issues.
- Feminism is actually to blame for causing many contemporary gender problems.

There are many well-articulated theses in *The Great Feminist Denial*. Of them, one argument runs clear throughout the book: that feminism has become whatever the media, numerous governments and myriad interest groups want it to be.

Further, these voices have – since at least the mid-90s – become adroit at constructing a 'straw feminism' that they then cut down. In particular, the garden-variety 'feminism' that is mockingly built up is the 'hairy legged lesbian': hell-bent on destroying good old traditional values, corrupting young females,

blaming men for everything, and out-right party-poopers when it comes to letting women have a little fun and wear short skirts.

The authors spend the first part of the book in careful, measured and clear consideration of just what happened during the 1990s that turned feminism into such a dirty word. Their observations – of key players including Anne Summers, Eva Cox, Germaine Greer, John Howard and Helen Garner – amounts to a truly remarkable piece of historical analysis.

Any reader will likely find themselves gasping with a sense of deep reflection, kind of like waking from a muddled dream and having someone ready to make it all make sense. Where some recent books on gender offer a metaphorical coffee with a close girl-friend, Monica Dux and Zora Simic go one step further: they also offer a brutally wise old nanna-figure who can tell it like it is, sans rhetoric or cliché.

The second part of the book is devoted to four key debates that surround feminism today: single women ('feminism stole my baby'), motherhood (women and work), raunch culture and the co-opting of feminism by myriad interest groups.

For each of these 'hot topics', the authors detail the ways in which straw feminisms have been readily fabricated and knocked down. In doing so, they debunk numerous historical myths and tease out the clichés within the debates.

Throughout the book, the authors are open about their own personal experiences, and how these inform their arguments. Within the multiplicity of their own lives, they articulate a single truth: that feminism is not, and never has been, a monolithic, consistent creation. It is, however, a loose umbrella term for an endless array of disparate voices that are all concerned with a single issue: gender equity.

Monica Dux and Zora Simic also discuss the various strains of feminism, ranging from that concerned with institutional barriers, to schools of thought that champion the individual as the locus of (potential) power.

The authors never seem to articulate their own political persuasion here, and probably for good reason: perhaps they are keeping open their arsenal of critical weapons (perhaps an admission to the idea that, indeed, some of the old methodologies of feminism need rethinking).

As for myself, someone schooled (during the 1990s) in a feminism that highlighted the systematic, structural and institutional barriers to a more gender-equal society, I'm perhaps prejudiced towards this kind of political paradigm. Given the weight of the arguments in the book, my suspicion is that Monica Dux and Zora Simic also advocate this basic point of critical departure above others.

There are many more things to be said in praise of *The Great Feminist Denial* –

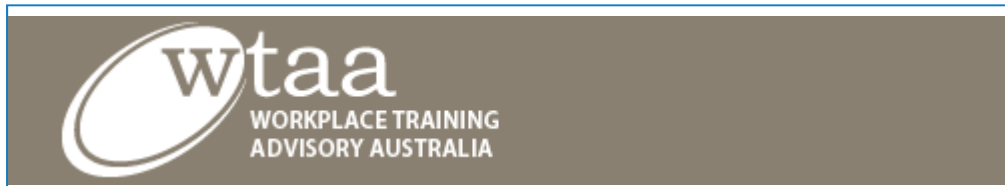
as but one example, the astute point that within the debates about women's choices concerning motherhood and careers, there is a great absence of debate around women's rights.

Suffice to say, the book (and, by definition, its authors) is clearly an outstanding contender for the perhaps uncomfortable role of standing as the most important contemporary book in Australia on feminism and gender politics.

A final note on audience. Following the fatwa after the release of *The Satanic Verses*, Salman Rushdie lamented the sad fact that many of the people the book was intended to give voice to were also those who both failed to read it and turn against it so vehemently. Sadly, given the dirty 'F' word in Monica Dux and Zora Simic's book, it may suffer a similar fate.

**Our rating: 10/10**

***By Ben Zipper, Editor, Australian Women & Leadership Forum™ e-newsletter ([www.womensforum.com.au](http://www.womensforum.com.au)).***



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