

Book review: Isobelle Barrett Meyering – *Feminism and the Making of a Child Rights Revolution 1969–1979*

by *Barrett Meyering, I.*
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The publication of *Feminism and the Making of a Child Rights Revolution 1969–1979* is a compelling theoretical revision of childhood during the 1970s. Through the expansion of historical accounts and endeavours of the women’s liberation movement, Isobelle Barrett Meyering powerfully examines how feminist activism significantly shifted the trajectory and autonomy of “the child”. She intrepidly reassesses the union of child rights/socialisation with feminist politics that saw a “total revisioning of the adult-child relationship” (p. 80) and makes a resounding effort to account for the challenges that persisted and continue to persist for women and children alike.

In challenging the “straw feminist” – a figure bounded by women’s self-governance and anti-natal positionings – Barrett Meyering extends understandings of feminist theory and activist initiatives comprehensive of childcare and feminist schooling, “non-moralistic” sex education and reproductive rights, imperative protests/forums relating to sexual abuse and broader social issues, to frame the joint provision of motherhood and children’s liberation. For the reader, perhaps familiar with the two conflicting “feminist ideals” of the time, the book confronts the very notion of women’s rights existing as inherently “child-free” (p. 38), appealing to Shulasmith Firestone’s (1970) radical call for a feminist revolution to equalise parenting and reconfigure constraints associated with motherhood. Barrett Meyering exposes the “intersecting oppression” (p. 17) for both women and children and therefore the near impossibility of separately advocating for children’s rights within political spheres.

Barrett Meyering draws attention to addressing the “nuclear family” paradigm as a starting point for challenging and deconstructing social structures. As she asserts early in the book, the movement’s intention to transcend the nuclear family not only was associated with challenging expectations of “childrearing” for women but also played a role in revolutionising practices like childcare. Moreover, her exploration of sexism in schools is curious and provides a nuanced analysis of sex-role conditioning, particularly the “un-doing” of sexism through feminist teachings, literature and alternative schooling. The adult-child power imbalance continues to resurface throughout her historical account, and despite immense efforts of women to advocate on behalf of children, in doing exactly that is what Barrett Meyering suggests incited further complexities for their advocacy efforts.

Childhood remains highly contested, and child sexual freedoms are subject to persistent debate as Barrett Meyering points to in her analysis. In the chapters *What Every Girl Should Know* and *Exposing Abuse*, Barrett Meyering sensitively navigates conflicting demands of the time that lobbied for both child sexual freedom and sexual vulnerability pertaining to abuse,



which she notes “complicated the agenda of children’s liberation” (p. 133). She accounts for radical calls, some of which were made by children themselves, for comprehensive sex education, reducing the age of consent, and reproductive rights/choice, with feminists largely becoming the “arbiters” of sexual liberties for children. The author balances this with increasing attention to child sexual abuse and exploitation, and although it seemed to challenge advocacy for children’s sexual liberation, she carefully reiterates its place in strengthening feminist attempts to confront the marginalised position of the child.

By pointing to the movement’s race and class exclusivity, Barrett Meyering voices divergent concerns for Aboriginal and migrant women in comparison to white, middle-class women who dominated the liberation landscape. The author mentions Indigenous activists who drew attention to dis-similar values of child-care, horrific “healthcare” sterilisation and abortion procedures and overrepresentation within institutions that systematically functioned to oppress Aboriginal women and children. Although not explored extensively in her discussion, Barrett Meyering mentions the role of white women in taking up causes on behalf of Aboriginal women and children that brought with it discernibly dangerous impacts. The lack of documented cultural perspectives points to the importance of additional research around systemic barriers that functioned to limit cultural agency to advocate and protect children during the time.

Feminism and the Making of a Child Rights Revolution 1969–1979 presents a topical and insightful exploration that attests to the collective impact of the feminist “cultural renaissance” in Australia. Isobelle Barrett Meyering eloquently unravels the intersection between feminism and child rights and powerfully reiterates the ongoing importance of engaging in debates and frameworks consistent with the rights of children. Her personal reflection at the end of the book is thoroughly earned, and the reader is given insights into Barrett Meyering’s own experience of childrearing which incites a delicate connection to the movement itself and its vision for the future.

Brooke Manning

The University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia

About the authors

Brooke Manning is Research Assistant and Academic in the SSESW. She has a B.Ed. (Primary, 1st Class Honours) from the University of Sydney. Brooke has taught in a variety of public schools in NSW and now teaches within the healthcare sector.