

REVIEW OF DUCKS ON THE POND. AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY 1945-1976. ANNE SUMMERS Viking, 1999. ISBN 0 670 88262 3. 436 pages (including index) RRP \$39.95

© Moira Rayner. www.moirarayner.com.au. Ducks on the Pond by Anne Summers. Eureka Street 1999

It isn't easy to review an autobiography fairly, especially if one doesn't warm to its central character.

Anne Summers was an active Australian feminist in the 1970s; a power broker in the Hawke and Keating administrations in the 1980s and 1990s, helping to make Australia a world leader in women's issues. Her book Damned Whores and God's Police, re-cast Australia's social history by including women in it.

Admirable but aloof, Summers earned young women's ire, five years ago, by arguing that they took the achievements of '70s feminists for granted and had dropped the baton in their focus on personal satisfaction. The response proved that Australian feminism is alive and evolving. Summers' autobiography is a major contribution to its history.

But it is autobiography. Summers' focus on her own role would incline a non-initiate to believe that feminism really flowered in Sydney, fertilised by Adelaide: there were active, effective women's movements across this country, and this is the story of Anne Summer's life journey through the baby-boom and into the revisionist era.

The test of a good autobiography is to come out knowing its subject and author better, seeing how her life reflects in her personal rear-vision mirror, as the car bumps along. In this sense, the book succeeds.

Summers is pitilessly honest about both her own weaknesses and others'. She is particularly scathing of the perceived inadequacies and personal malice (towards herself) of Elizabeth Reid, whom Gough Whitlam appointed as Australia's first Women's Adviser. Summers is still, on the face of it

justifiably, angry that Reid neglected to persuade Bill Hayden (then Minister for Social Security) or his advisers (particularly that well-known lefty scribbler, Paddy McGuinness) to fund the struggling Elsie, Australia's first refuge for battered women. She is furious that Reid dismissed the concerns and activities of Summers' Sydney women's group as 'middle class'. Her faithful reporting of Reid's cruelly condemnatory review of Damned Whores and God's Police, shows that it still hurts.

Ironically, given her own struggle for acceptance by Sydney feminists, Summers goes on to attribute what she judges as Reid's failures to the advisor's inability to engage the support of Summers' powerful network. Later, it was widely said that the "NSW feminists" became the de facto 'board' to whom the head of the federal Office of the Status of Women, which Summers herself later led for three years, was de facto accountable.

'Ducks on the pond,' the warning cry of Australian shearers that a woman has entered their all-male preserve, is an apt title for a book which is, on a personal level, a history of exclusion and a weary struggle for acceptance.

The young Anne Summers was not conventionally pretty, nor was she self-assured. She had felt adored by her father, which made his rejection, when she became an adolescent and he a vitriolic drunk, dreadful, and virtually precipitated her out of the home into premature independence, and a long alienation from her family, at 16. Summers herself links this with her drive to establish Elsie, and make it work. She later links her inability to trust and accept intimacy to this early influence.

Quite clever, but poorly prepared for University by her Convent education, the young Anne Summers was an outsider. Her early life was characterised by calculated, risky incursions for the prize of acceptance by social groupings she admired. Never an easy woman, outspoken yet easily hurt, Summers consciously sought first to enter, then to create her own, networks of influence: the first, to hone her own skills and confidence; and the latter, to

drive that spike into the establishments that excluded her. Both helped assuage her sense of aloneness. Her surprise and delight when she first learned that she would be missed by her South Australian colleagues was quite touching. She also learned early that being powerful requires the other, on being part of a network: first at her South Australian University and, later, after missing out on a regular column with The Australian (pipped at the post by Wendy Bacon), when she mused that if she had been Sydney-based and -connected she might have swung it. So she ensured that she was.

What distinguishes Anne Summers from those ambitious women who tread on others' faces as they scrabble upwards is her imperative to change the world for others, too. I warmed to the woman I had thought of as the Snow Queen - a frosty, hypercritical [NOTE to editor - do not correct to read **'HYPOcritical'**] powerbroker - when Summers described her rage at the official bullying of the Aboriginal community she lived in for a year; and of being driven to help, in the most practical way, the miserable and powerless women who needed Elsie so badly. She then won me completely as she wrote, at the end of this book, of the long suffering and gentle death through cancer of her beloved 15 year-old brother, and of healing her relationship with her father.

This is a book well worth the reading.