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‘Judith Brett, Fearless Beatrice Faust: Sex, Feminism and Body Politics’

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Judith Brett, *Fearless Beatrice Faust: Sex, Feminism and Body Politics* (Text Publishing Company, 2025), 291pp. Paperback. A\$36.99. ISBN: 978-1-9230-5831-6.

Judith Brett's *Fearless Beatrice Faust: Sex, Feminism and Body Politics* masterfully accomplishes what it sets out to do: 'Writing Bea's life was a way of exploring changes in understandings of sex and gender since the 1960s and the ideas they continue to provoke' (p. 5). Brett examines 'Bea' Faust's influential, albeit chaotic, life as an activist, public intellectual, and writer, with an engaging analytical style sometimes absent from biography as a genre. At times, Brett is generous with her subject in ways I found difficult to sympathise with; upon reflection, this is what makes it such a compelling biographical account. Brett expertly navigates Faust's complex and challenging behaviours, exploring them as reflective of time and place, without forgiving her extreme views on still-condemnable topics.

Establishing herself as an early feminist campaigner from the 1960s, and a founder of the Women's Electoral Lobby in 1972, Faust's life becomes an avenue through which to explore the profound changes in Australian public and political life in the ensuing decades. From her early childhood experiences of growing up in a ruptured, often unaffectionate family, through formative years of schooling and university, to her activism in the 1960s, Brett paints Faust's first decades as simultaneously normal and exceptional, carefully establishing quirks of her personality necessary for understanding her in later life. We get a deep sense of Faust's inner world, situated amongst a nuanced history of Australian feminist debates, public intellectual lives, and political interventions that continue to shape much of how we think about sex and the body today. Brett's exhaustive engagement with private and public archives, alongside interviews from significant people in Faust's life, is on clear display, and a commendable achievement for the sheer volume of material alone.

Faust's critical opinions on sex and the body were seemingly inexhaustible: from abortion law reform to paedophilia, to women's orgasms and victim-feminism. Brett recounts Faust's life through each of these topics, following a largely chronological structure, but most compelling are the chapters on abortion (Abortion Law Reform and Civil Liberties, and Abortion Law Repeal) and the Women's Electoral Lobby. Perhaps this is because they read the most like 'traditional' forms of history, rather than biography, with myriad characters, events, and places to situate Faust amongst her contemporaries. Though, the biographical detail is captivating in its own way, as Brett paints a rich picture for us of Faust's character: brash, determined, stubborn, passionate, well-intentioned, and sometimes foolish (are not we all?). Interestingly, she was never fully aligned with the women's liberation groups of the 1970s as she was considered too 'reformist', nor was she selected for political positions including the women's affairs adviser to the Prime Minister (eventually going to Elizabeth Reid), as she was considered too unpredictable. It was Faust's determination to include men in conversations about women that saw one book reviewer label her 'a bridge between the sexes' (p. 168). This is an apt characterisation of Faust, a sympathiser of men and women alike, that Brett carefully negotiates.

Brett's work is remarkable as biography, and an important contribution in conceptualising life in mid-to-late twentieth century Australia. What Brett captures is a formidable figure determined to bring the private lives of sex, feminism, and body politics to public spheres, not to shame or intimidate, but to promote understanding between the sexes. Faust's success in delivering on those desires is debateable, but

her status as an indefatigable sexual revolutionary is cemented in Brett's exceptional biography.

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