

A Last Interview with Kate Millett

By Rachel Shteir



The point was “to get someplace,” Kate Millett said in an interview about second-wave feminism, five days before she died. “The point was for the impossible.” Photograph by Livia Saavedra / REA via Redux

The writer, artist, and activist Kate Millett died on Wednesday, September 6th, in Paris. She would have turned eighty-three this week. Millett is best known for the 1970 book “Sexual Politics,” a classic of second-wave feminism, which examined the “political aspect” of sex. In it, Millett uncovers the violent misogyny in novels by some of the most acclaimed champions of sexual freedom—Henry Miller, Norman

Mailer—and celebrates, by way of contrast, the work of the queer writer Jean Genet.

For the last two and a half years, I've been working on a book about Betty Friedan, the so-called mother of second-wave feminism, and I have been interviewing those who knew her. "Sexual Politics" has been described as the daughter of Friedan's "The Feminine Mystique," which was published in 1963. But Millett's study differs starkly from Friedan's polemic, which exposes the sexism of sociology, education, and advertising before ending on a triumphant, self-actualizing note. During their lives, Millett and Friedan came to represent two clashing ideologies, duelling approaches to a movement that is still a work in progress.

For a while, I gave up trying to reach Millett—I figured that, like a lot of second-wave feminists, she would be reluctant to talk about Friedan, because she probably didn't have anything nice to say. (Many of those who did agree to be interviewed started the conversation by saying that they didn't want to speak ill of the dead.) Then, in August, I spoke with Eleanor Pam, the president of the Veteran Feminists of America, an organization composed of second-wave-feminist alumni, and a close friend of Millett's. I asked her to put in a good word for me. Shortly after that, I heard from Sophie Keir, Millett's wife, and we set up the interview for September 1st, because the women were leaving for Paris the following day.

Millett's apartment was on the fifth floor of a low-rise building near Cooper Union. The large, light-filled front room was full of books and art. Keir led me down a hall to the back room, where Millett was sitting at a wooden farmer's table. She had a kind, open smile. A walker stood next to her chair, and a bandage was taped over part of her forehead. She had printed out the list of questions that I had e-mailed Keir, and she fingered the piece of paper from time to time, as if she wanted to make sure that she answered everything.

Millett told me that she remembered reading “The Feminine Mystique” alongside Simone de Beauvoir’s “The Second Sex” when she was at St. Hilda’s College, Oxford. This couldn’t be right, though: the book wasn’t published until after she’d left Oxford and moved to the Lower East Side. She had certainly read it, in any case, by the time she joined Friedan’s activist group, the National Organization for Women, in 1967, a year after it was founded. In 1968, she wrote a pamphlet for now’s education committee called “Token Learning: A Study of Women’s Higher Education in America,” which echoes Friedan’s argument in “The Feminine Mystique” that women who attend the Seven Sisters schools are training for the Mrs. degree.

Millett spoke sentimentally of that time. “We marched day after day,” she said. She reminded me that in 1968, when she entered the Ph.D. program at Columbia, no one was reading feminist books. “I was the only one who read them,” she said.

Keir had left us a pitcher of water, and we drank several glasses as we talked. In addition to working with now, Millett became involved with more radical organizations that championed gay liberation. In 1969, Friedan referred to lesbians in now who wanted to come out of the closet as “the lavender menace.” The following May Day, at the Second Congress to Unite Women, another writer and activist, Rita Mae Brown, choreographed something called the “lavender-menace zap.” The zappers cut the lights, then donned T-shirts with the phrase “lavender menace” on them, and formed a line on the stage. When the lights came up, the zappers, fists raised, began a conversation about gay women. Friedan wasn’t in attendance; Millett, who was, urged those there to listen to the protesters.

“Sexual Politics” was published in the summer of 1970, and it was an immediate hit. In August, Millett and Friedan both walked in the Women’s Strike for Equality, in New York, which some people say attracted as many as fifty thousand people. Both spoke at the rally at

Bryant Park. Millett famously announced, “We’re a movement now.” I wondered whether she remembered Friedan’s speech.

“Wow, hot dog,” Millett said, a phrase she used several times during the interview, seemingly surprised at the part she played in world-changing events. “It was huge. You couldn’t see the end of it.” Friedan, she said, “had a raspy voice. She wanted us to have a little bit of togetherness. She was an amazing speaker.”

That November, Millett spoke at a forum at Columbia. A woman in the audience who belonged to a group called the radicalesbians asked her why she didn’t say she was a lesbian. Two weeks later, *Time*, which had celebrated “Sexual Politics” as groundbreaking, outed Millett as “bisexual,” suggesting that her sexual identity gave credence to Friedan and others who worried that such alternative self-figurings would fragment the movement. A rally was soon held in support of Millett. There, Friedan was asked to wear a lavender armband as a show of solidarity. In what remains an excruciating memory for many activists, Friedan either dropped the armband or stomped on it, depending on whose account you believe.

What did Millett think of this theatrical gesture now?

“You have to be loud and outspoken,” Millett began, in reply. Friedan, she said, “hated the gay kids. They were messing up her program. We were naughty little kids. She wanted us to behave properly. We didn’t want to behave. She was ordering everyone around at all the demonstrations, and she took off the armband and threw it onto the ground.” She added, “I felt sorry for her.”

When I asked Millett why there was so much fighting in the women’s movement in the sixties, she said that it was a “popularity contest.” But she wanted to talk about the general aims of the movement, and how much remained to be done. The point was “to get someplace,” she said. “The point was for the impossible. The dream of getting along with mother, the dream of getting along with daughter.” She continued, “It

was hard to be a feminist. We were told off by guys, ‘Don’t be a feminist.’ That was what a lot of it was about in those days.”

Then she added, about Friedan, “She was such a fighter. She would fight anybody.”

Throughout the interview, it struck me how generous Millett was to Friedan. I expected there to be rancor, but there was none. Millett noted that although she had the support of her family, “Betty did not.” Even after saying that Friedan “wouldn’t go anywhere she wasn’t paid,” she added, “She did so much. You’d be surprised.” And Friedan, Millett insisted, “was never just being for herself. She was for the women’s cause. We were split,” she continued, but still, Friedan “did a good job.” And then: “I wish I had been more polite to her.”

As I gathered my things and got up to leave, Millett said that she was looking forward to her upcoming trip to Paris, where she was scheduled to talk to the French government about her 1971 film, “Three Lives,” in which three women talk candidly about their experiences.

A large, thick-haired cat jumped on the table. It purred loudly. “People have been fighting over who will get to take care of her while we’re gone,” Millett told me. And she smiled.