



Susan Brownmiller in 1988. Her “Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape” was ranked by the New York Public Library as one of the 100 most important books of the 20th century. Credit...Jill Krementz, all rights reserved

Section Navigation
Account

Susan Brownmiller, Who Reshaped Views About Rape, Dies at 90

Her book “Against Our Will” argued that rape was a crime of power and violence, not passion; it led to laws that made it easier to prosecute rapists.

Susan Brownmiller in 1988. Her “Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape” was ranked by the New York Public Library as one of the 100 most important books of the 20th century. Credit...Jill Krementz, all rights reserved

By [Katharine Q. Seelye](#)

- May 24, 2025

Susan Brownmiller, the feminist author, journalist and activist whose book “Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape” helped define the modern view of rape, debunking it as an act of passion and reframing it as a crime of power and violence, died on Saturday. She was 90.

Alix Shulman, a longtime friend, confirmed Ms. Brownmiller’s death at a hospital in New York, which she said came after a long illness.

“Against Our Will,” published in 1975, was translated into a dozen languages and ranked by the New York Public Library as one of the 100 most important books of the 20th century.

Among other things, it offered the first comprehensive history of rape across the centuries, starting with ancient Babylon, and examined its use as a wartime military tactic to further subjugate the losing side.

The book’s publication — along with real-time reports of mass rape in war-ravaged Bangladesh — joined a tide of events that were reshaping society’s attitude toward rape.

The ascendant women’s movement was already opening the public’s eyes about sexual violence. Anti-rape groups had started to form in the early 1970s. Groundbreaking works like [“Our Bodies, Ourselves”](#) (1971) were empowering women to take control of their bodies and their sexuality. When “Against Our Will” arrived, the country seemed ready to grapple with its implications.

Numerous rape-crisis centers were opened, self-defense classes gained new popularity, and several states rewrote their laws to make it easier to prosecute rapists. Rape within marriage became a crime. Many jurisdictions abolished the “corroborating witness rule,” which required the testimony of bystanders for a rape conviction. (The woman herself was not necessarily considered believable.) Several states passed rape shield laws, which prevented people’s sexual history from being used against them in court.



Among other things, “Against Our Will,” published in 1975, offered the first comprehensive history of rape across the centuries. Credit...Simon & Schuster
But it was the personal feminist ideology suffusing “Against Our Will” that catapulted the book to the top of best-seller lists and simultaneously infuriated critics, on the left as well as the right, who called it an anti-male polemic.

As a young, liberal intellectual in New York, Ms. Brownmiller believed she knew all about rape — that it happened only to women who behaved badly, and that the men accused of it, often Black, were usually framed.

But after she talked with friends who had been raped, her perspective changed. Instead of looking at sexual violence through a liberal political lens, she saw it through a feminist one — and understood it to be the ultimate tool of male oppression.

Her book upended several male-generated myths. No, she wrote, women did not secretly wish to be sexually assaulted, and, yes, it was physically possible to be raped against one’s will.

“Chilling and monumental,” the lawyer [Mary Ellen Gale wrote](#) in The New York Times Book Review. Time magazine said, “The most rigorous and provocative piece of scholarship that has yet emerged from the feminist movement.” It named Ms. Brownmiller one of its 12 women of the year.

While she had never been raped herself, Ms. Brownmiller realized that she had been profoundly affected by the threat of it simply by being a woman. That led her to some startling pronouncements.

“Man’s discovery that his genitalia could serve as a weapon to generate fear must rank as one of the most important discoveries of prehistoric times,” she wrote, equating that revelation with the discovery of fire.



Ms. Brownmiller in an author’s photo from the mid-1980s. Credit...John Sunderland/The Denver Post, via Getty Images

The book’s most famous — and disputed — assertion was this: Rape “is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all men* keep *all women* in a state of fear.” (Italics hers.)

The early praise soon gave way to outrage over the book’s feminist dogma. Even admirers squirmed at Ms. Brownmiller’s assertion that “all men” threatened “all women” with sexual violence; the statement led to her being harassed on the lecture circuit for years.

One of her harshest critics on the left was [Angela Davis](#), a Black militant and avowed Communist. In a scathing analysis, Ms. Davis said that Ms. Brownmiller had misinterpreted historic cases involving Black men and white women (especially the cases of the [Scottsboro Nine](#) and [Emmett Till](#)) and had concluded, wrongly, that the Black men were at fault. “In choosing to take sides with white women, regardless of the circumstances,” Ms. Davis wrote, “Brownmiller herself capitulates to racism.”

On the right, [Joseph Sobran](#), writing in *National Review*, mocked Ms. Brownmiller’s premise. “What she is engaged in, really,” he wrote, “is not scholarship but henpecking — that conscious process of intimidation by which all women keep all men in terror.”

In 2015, on the 40th anniversary of the publication of “Against Our Will,” the news media caught up with Ms. Brownmiller. Then 80, she stood by her book but was highly critical of contemporary young women who, she said, seemed to think they could drink as much alcohol as men and dress provocatively but not take responsibility if they were sexually assaulted.

As Ms. Brownmiller [told New York magazine](#) that year: “My feeling about young women trapped in sex situations that they don’t want is: ‘Didn’t you see the warning signs? Who do you expect to do your fighting for you?’”

She expanded on that view in an [interview](#) with Al Jazeera, saying that women were “in denial” about what they could and could not do.

“They don’t want to feel that special restrictions apply to them,” she said. When her interviewer said women might be surprised to hear her say that, because they want to feel empowered and believe they can do what they want, she responded: “Women have a false sense of empowerment because the truth is, they can’t do everything men can do. Because there are predators out there.”

Her views stunned many a budding feminist. A [critical piece by Amanda Marcotte in Slate](#) branded Ms. Brownmiller a “former feminist hero.” Ms. Brownmiller, she wrote, should be talking about, and to, men instead of believing that rapists “are like the weather and it’s the victim’s fault for not bringing an umbrella.”

Image



Ms. Brownmiller in 1974. “I have always considered myself a strong woman, although I understand that the strength I possess is a matter of style and, secretly, of theatrical bravura,” she wrote in the introduction to “Against Our Will.” Credit...Associated Press

Brooklyn-born

Ms. Brownmiller was born Susan Warhaftig in Brooklyn on Feb. 15, 1935, to lower-middle-class Jewish parents, Samuel and Mae Warhaftig. Her mother was a secretary, her father a sales clerk at Macy’s.

She attended Hebrew school, and although she never emphasized her Jewish heritage in her writings, she acknowledged its influence. “My chosen path — to fight against physical harm, specifically the terror of violence against women — had its origins in what I had learned in Hebrew school about the pogroms and the Holocaust,” she wrote.

She attended Cornell for two years and returned to New York to pursue what was then her passion, stage acting. The role she dreamed of playing was Alma Winemiller in Tennessee Williams’s “Summer and Smoke,” and she considered taking Winemiller as her stage name, according to Claire Bond Potter, who is writing a biography of Ms. Brownmiller.

But as she imagined her name appearing in a playbill, she thought “Susan Winemiller as Alma Winemiller” would look weird. From Winemiller, she moved to Brownmiller,

which became her stage name in the mid-1950s while she was taking acting lessons. She started writing under the name Brownmiller and adopted it legally in 1961.

Her auditions rarely led to roles; she never played Alma Winemiller. Ms. Potter said in an interview that she knew of only one small Off Broadway part that Ms. Brownmiller landed. She found the rejections intolerable and soon abandoned the theater for full-time magazine writing.

“Her therapist, Kurt Adler, suggested that she switch to writing because the rejections came in the mail and were less personal,” Ms. Potter said.

Ms. Brownmiller’s career included stints as a researcher at Newsweek, a staff writer for The Village Voice and a news writer for ABC-TV. She also freelanced for several magazines.

But at heart she was an activist; her passions were politics and civil rights. In sympathy with the sit-ins to desegregate lunch counters in the South, she organized a picket line at a Woolworth store in New York. She registered Black voters in Harlem and in Meridian, Miss. She spearheaded feminist gatherings and helped coordinate an infamous 1970 [sit-in at Ladies’ Home Journal](#) to protest the magazine’s focus on beauty and housework and the dearth of women on its editorial staff.

“I have always considered myself a strong woman, although I understand that the strength I possess is a matter of style and, secretly, of theatrical bravura,” Ms. Brownmiller wrote in the introduction to “Against Our Will.”

“I am combative, wary and verbally aggressive,” she added.



Ms. Brownmiller, left, and Sally Kempton on “The Dick Cavett Show” in 1970. They appeared as representatives of the women’s movement, and Ms. Brownmiller had an angry confrontation with another guest, Hugh Hefner, the publisher of Playboy. Credit...ABC Photo Archives/Disney General Entertainment Content, via Getty Images

Those traits were on vivid display in 1970 when [she attacked Hugh Hefner](#), the publisher of Playboy, on “The Dick Cavett Show.” She criticized him for building an empire based on the oppression of women, denying them their humanity and degrading them by “making them look like animals.” In her final fusillade, she told Mr. Hefner that she was waiting for “the day that you are willing to come out here with a cottontail attached to your rear end,” just like the cocktail waitresses, known as bunnies, at his Playboy Clubs.

Mr. Hefner was speechless. He said later that he “didn’t have the language to respond to that kind of thing.”

Ms. Brownmiller became a vociferous opponent of the multi-billion-dollar pornography industry. She believed strongly that its dehumanization of women was a major contributor to sexual violence.

Image



Ms. Brownmiller, center foreground, led a protest against the pornography industry on 42nd Street in Manhattan in 1979. Credit...Associated Press

As a member of a group called Women Against Pornography, she even ran educational tours of then-seedy Times Square, with its myriad porn shops and neon signs offering “Girls Girls Girls.” “Positioning herself on a corner, tour guide style, Miss Brownmiller gestured up and down West 42d Street, commenting on the prurient points of interest,” [The Times reported in 1979](#).

“Her delivery was so professional that several tourists stopped to listen,” the paper said.

Feminists Divided

Ms. Brownmiller and others called for banning pornography, a stance that caused an ideological split within the women’s movement. On the other side were so-called sex-positive feminists and others who saw a ban as prudish and a violation of free speech. Ms. Brownmiller stuck to her guns for a time, but the anti-pornography crusade ebbed and went down in feminist history as a lost cause.

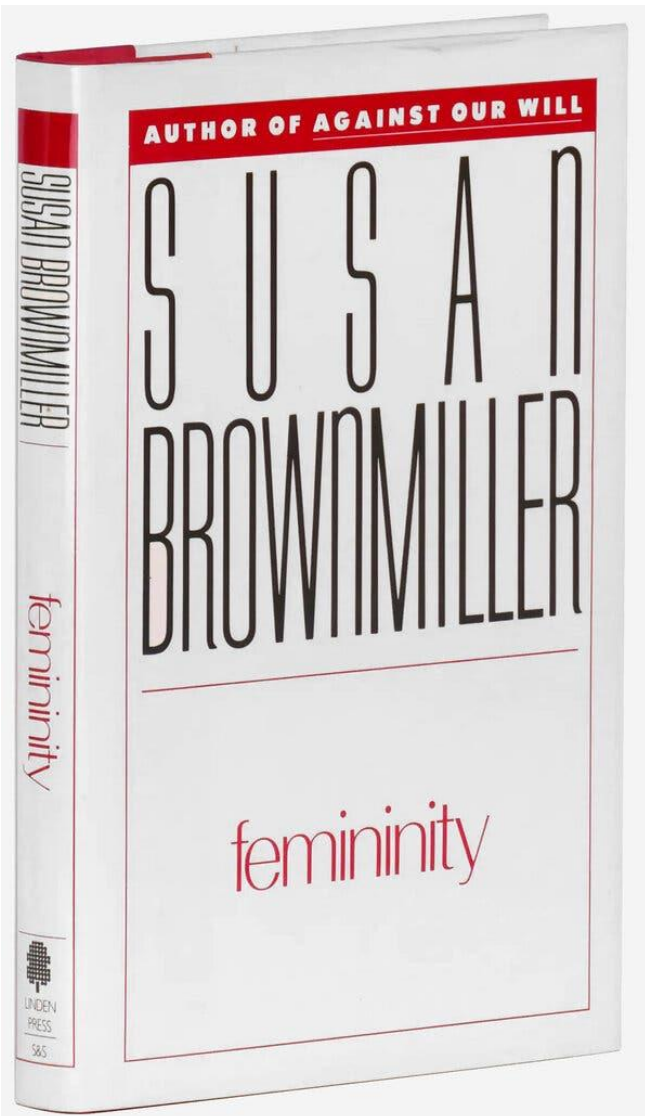
Image



Ms. Brownmiller, center, with Gloria Steinem, left, and Bella Abzug in 1979 speaking about the organization Women Against Pornography. She believed pornography was a major contributor to sexual violence. Credit...Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Ms. Brownmiller leaves no immediate survivors. Over the years, she lived with three different men, but she never wanted children, she said (she had three abortions), and never married. She once said that she believed in “romance and partnership” and wanted to be “in close association with a man whose work I respect,” but that she was “not willing to compromise.”

She devoted her life to writing and taught at Pace University into her 80s. She wrote scores of magazine articles and half a dozen books, starting in 1970 with a children’s book about Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman elected to Congress. Her 1984 book, [“Femininity.”](#) deconstructed the meaning of that word.

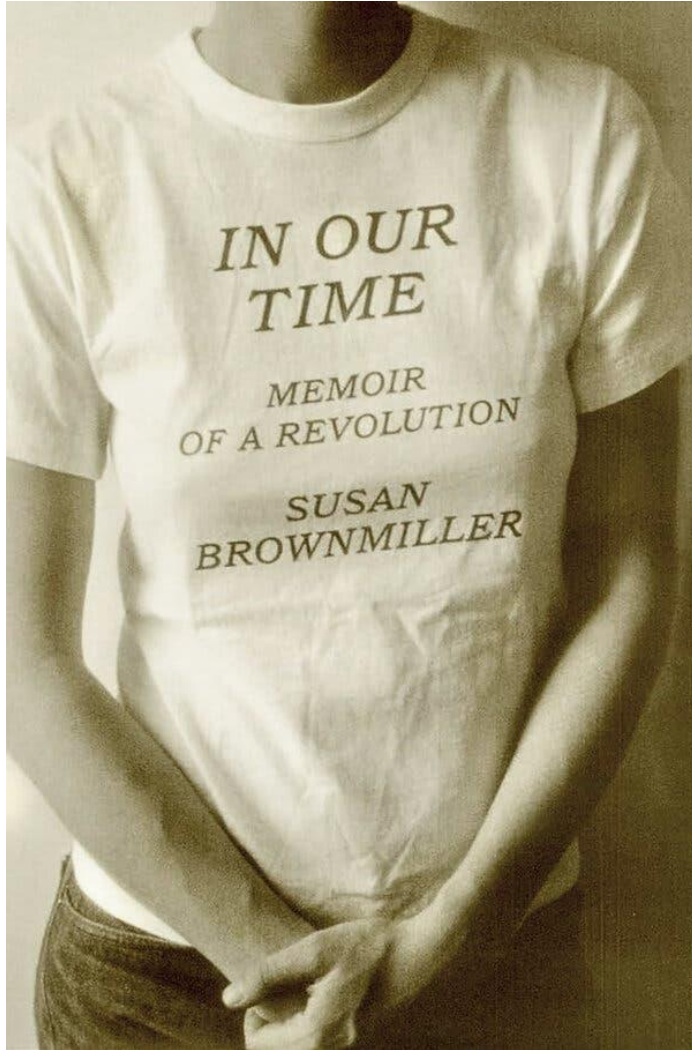


Ms. Brownmiller's "Femininity," published in 1984, deconstructed the meaning of that word. Credit...Linden Press

Ms. Brownmiller ventured into fiction with "Waverly Place," a poorly received 1989 novel that sprang from her obsession with the [sensational 1987 domestic violence case](#) of Joel Steinberg, a Manhattan lawyer who savagely pummeled his partner, Hedda Nussbaum, and killed their illegally adopted daughter. In a foreshadowing of what her later critics would call her victim-blaming, Ms. Brownmiller [argued](#) that Ms. Nussbaum was not a passive victim and should have been held partly accountable for the girl's death.

Her subsequent books included "Seeing Vietnam: Encounters of the Road and Heart" (1994) and "In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution" (1999), an insider account of the women's movement.

Image



A T-shirt referencing Ms. Brownmiller's 1999 book "In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution." Credit...The Dial Press

But nothing won her the lavish recognition she had received with "Against Our Will."

The book began to take shape after she attended a consciousness-raising session in 1970. She then helped organize a rape "speak-out" and a rape conference and knew immediately that this would be her subject.

In 1971, just as Ms. Brownmiller was starting her research, Pakistani invaders in Bangladesh raped between 200,000 and 400,000 women. The assaults left at least 25,000 women pregnant. Many of them were ostracized by their families, leading to [thousands of abortions](#) and numerous cases of infanticide and suicide.

Ms. Brownmiller noted that this pattern had occurred throughout history, but she said this was the first time that the world had acknowledged the atrocity of wartime rape in real time. (It was not until 2008 that the United Nations passed a resolution defining rape as a weapon of war.)

Ms. Brownmiller was among those who took a course in jujitsu and karate, until she broke a collarbone. But she had attended class long enough to learn that a well-placed kick and the strategic use of a sharp knee could inflict serious pain on a man, right where it hurt.

“Fighting back,” she concluded in “Against Our Will,” would be her ongoing battle cry.

“On a multiplicity of levels,” she wrote, “that is the activity we must engage in, together, if we — women — are to redress the imbalance and rid ourselves and men of the ideology of rape.”

Aishvarya Kavi contributed reporting.

[Katharine Q. Seelye](#), an obituary writer, was a reporter for The Times for 28 years. She previously covered national politics and New England.