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Florynce “Flo” Kennedy: The Life Of A Black Feminist Radical (Gender And American Culture)



Synopsis

Often photographed in a cowboy hat with her middle finger held defiantly in the air, Florynce "Flo" Kennedy (1916–2000) left a vibrant legacy as a leader of the Black Power and feminist movements. In the first biography of Kennedy, Sherie M. Randolph traces the life and political influence of this strikingly bold and controversial radical activist. Rather than simply reacting to the predominantly white feminist movement, Kennedy brought the lessons of Black Power to white feminism and built bridges in the struggles against racism and sexism. Randolph narrates Kennedy's progressive upbringing, her pathbreaking graduation from Columbia Law School, and her long career as a media-savvy activist, showing how Kennedy rose to founding roles in organizations such as the National Black Feminist Organization and the National Organization for Women, allying herself with both white and black activists such as Adam Clayton Powell, H. Rap Brown, Betty Friedan, and Shirley Chisholm. Making use of an extensive and previously uncollected archive, Randolph demonstrates profound connections within the histories of the new left, civil rights, Black Power, and feminism, showing that black feminism was pivotal in shaping postwar U.S. liberation movements.

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Customer Reviews

A fitting, overdue tribute to an unapologetic firebrand and tireless advocate that time almost forgot.--Kam Williams, syndicated critic
Sherie M. Randolph has written an important biography of an

important figure in twentieth-century American feminism and Black Power. I repeat 'important' because Florynce 'Flo' Kennedy self-consciously worked—actually, she agitated—at the confluence of feminism and Black Power with the conviction that racism and sexism were not only foundational in American society but also inextricably intertwined.--Nell Irvin Painter, in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* A valuable account of this lesser-known, entirely remarkable woman.--Los Angeles Times Stimulating and very readable. . . . Makes a substantial addition to the history of 20th-century social movements.--Against the Current Successfully recounts Kennedy's dynamic life: bursting with stories of rebellion and triumph, with a backdrop of historical context and, always, a hint of mystery.--ESSENCE Randolph . . . has done an important service for anyone who cares about fashioning a complete and complex record of post-World War II feminist activism--Women's Review of Books Randolph's writing is lucid, and her comprehensive political and intellectual biography of Kennedy not only restores Kennedy to the history of U.S. radicalism but it also illuminates the interconnections among movements against racial and gender oppression. . . . If you are a legal historian, scholar of African American history, or a student of feminism, this book is a must-read.--Journal of American History Breaks new ground [as the] first full-length biography of black feminist radical Florynce 'Flo' Kennedy. . . . Significantly expands the historical scholarship. Highly recommended.--Choice An excellent and welcome biography of a fearless radical activist who has been overlooked for too long.--American Historical Review [A] stirring biography. . . . This important book is the story, as Randolph handily tells it, of an extremely brave woman who used the courts as well as the media and worked with a multitude of groups to build and maintain coalitions and create lasting change.--Library Journal, starred review

Florynce Kennedy is one of the founders of modern feminism, yet too few people now know her spirit and words, her courageous and outrageous example. I was lucky to have her as a teacher and friend. You will be, too, once you meet her in the pages of Sherie Randolph's welcome and important biography." --Gloria Steinem | Florence "Flo" Kennedy absolutely shatters any notion that African American women came to feminism after white women. Sherie Randolph's biography of Flo Kennedy forces us to rethink civil rights, Black Power, and feminist history. A fascinating and revolutionary book." --Annelise Orleck, Dartmouth College, author of *Common Sense and a Little Fire*

Loved that Flo is finally getting some recognition. The story was unbiased and non-judgmental. I will use many of her tactics going forward.

Florynce Kennedy is by far the most important woman fighting for inclusive equality during the civil rights movement. After reading this book from the library I wanted it to reference for my various projects revolving around women's history! SHERIE RANDOLPH is the best!

This is an interesting book following the activist career of Florynce Kennedy. She was the first black and first woman to graduate from Columbia Law School. She started numerous black power and feminist groups and worked tirelessly to combine these causes. This book is written in the third person. For me, this made the reading tedious and slow going.

the life of Flo is remarkable!

Arrives quickly. New.

Flo Kennedy was a force to be reckoned with, dismissed by a portion of mainstream Caucasian America as a kook, yet far too clever, too cagey, and too damn smart to be wished away by those that wanted to defend the racist, sexist status quo. When I saw that a memoir of her life was up for grabs at Net Galley I requested a copy immediately, and then took a long time to finish reading it. Part of my tardiness is a stubborn dislike for the PDF format, and so I apologize to University of North Carolina Press and my readers for being so slow; yet a small part of it was the surprisingly dry quality of the memoir. Given the subject, I had expected this biography to set my hair on fire. Though she was new to Randolph, according to the introduction, Kennedy was no stranger to those of us in the Boomer generation. Her audacity, her wit, and her raw courage that at times bordered on recklessness made for great theater and fascinating press coverage. Raised by parents that taught her not to take any s--- long before the Black Power movement or even the end of Jim Crow, Kennedy pushed the margins. She studied, worked, and fought her way into Columbia Law; she defended famous individuals like Billie Holiday and Stokely Carmichael, and she did it with style. By far the most significant part of her legacy was the leadership she demonstrated in bringing together the women's movement of the late 1960s and 1970s with the Black Power movement. As a young woman sending out my own tendrils into the larger world apart from high school and my parents' home, some of the most influential feminist speeches given were by Kennedy and Gloria Steinem, and sometimes they appeared together. I never got to see them in

person, but it didn't matter that much, because I knew what they had written and what they had said, and soon I was attending meetings of NOW, the National Organization for Women, which was the leading women's rights organization in the US before their split over women in the military later in the 20th century. Because of women like Kennedy and Steinem, I fundraised my fare to national marches on the Capitol for women's right to choose whether to reproduce, and to fight for the Equal Rights Amendment. So I owe Kennedy a great deal. Kennedy's confidence and controlled rage positively crackled; she made headlines and was often seen on the evening news. Once when I told a classmate that I wanted to support a female candidate for president of the US, he told me that if I was going to vote for a protest candidate, I should shoot for the moon and vote for Flo Kennedy. He had a point. I don't agree with everything Kennedy said or did, particularly her suggestion that rather than expending great effort to end the US war against the Vietnamese people, Americans should focus their energy toward supporting Black owned businesses. Say what? But nearly everything else she did was so vastly ahead of her time that it made me gasp in awe. I understand that a memoir produced by a university press is generally going to be scholarly in nature, and that's one reason I request works like this that are associated with such reputable sources. But a scholarly treatment doesn't have to drone. By arranging a few of Kennedy's livelier quotes up front and at chapter beginnings and endings, she might receive the treatment she deserves, instead of being consigned to the dustbin of history a mere decade, give or take a year, after she wore a tee shirt reading "I had an abortion during her most senior years. So although I know Randolph is new to Kennedy and probably also has some academic parameters within which she has to work, I still feel that Flo's memoir should reflect her verve and character to a greater degree. Nevertheless reader, if you care about women's rights and the rights of African-Americans, if women's history and African-American history hold meaning and importance for you, I think you should read this memoir anyway, because as of this writing, it's really the only memoir of Kennedy that's available. You can find some of her speeches in feminist collections, but no one else has tackled this woman's life, and so until and unless something better comes along, you should get this and read it. Because a dry, somewhat conservative treatment of Kennedy is better than nothing.

Florynce "Flo" Kennedy: The Life of a Black, Feminist Radical was a mixed bag for me. I remember

seeing Ms Kennedy at several conferences. I was very young, about 16-20 but never forgot her smarts, her energy, her humor and style. I devoured her words and wanted to be like her so I was surprised that this book was tedious and frankly boring, at times, to read. On one hand, I learned so much about Ms Kennedy and her radical vision for change and appreciated getting to understand more about her politics on a deeper level. Coming from a family that respected her intelligence, who was keenly aware of how oppression impacted, her father especially made it clear that his family should not "take s***" from anybody. Ms. Kennedy lived up to her father's dictum and in her own iconoclastic fashion went about organizing, educating, forming cross-cultural/race coalitions to turn oppressive institutions upside down and inside out. Ms Kennedy was one of the first leaders to name and understand what we now call "intersectionality" and she was the beating heart of organizing so many actions, cross-race coalitions, organizations and critical events. She was there when it counted and I especially respected how she mentored young women and trusted that they were key players in ensuring that new ideas and new ways of organizing took hold. However, this book is so poorly edited that I wanted to put it down half-way through it. There are literally passages, verbatim, that are used two or three times in different chapters. The repetitiveness of the concepts, the constant reminders about what she believed or how she organized was annoying and redundant. Given how engaging Ms Kennedy was and how she trusted people to be smart and sharp I wish that the author/editor could have done the same. I want to give book 1 or 2 stars for the writing/editing but do not want readers to miss the opportunity to read about one of the foremothers of Black feminism so I am giving it three stars. Thank you Netgalley for giving me the opportunity to review this book for an honest opinion.

I've got a new hero (not only feminist, but a fierce warrior against all forms of discrimination), and she doesn't look anything like me. I had never heard of her before reading this book, in fact (a symptom of a significant problem in itself.) She reminds me of a black Molly Ivins, although she predated her by several years. (Perhaps I should say Molly Ivins resembled a white Flo Kennedy). In any event, this is a must-read. The author, Sherie Randolph, worked with Kennedy's remaining papers - much had been destroyed for various reasons - but there was enough to craft an in-depth biography of a remarkable woman (a lawyer by training) who fought for justice during the 1960s and '70s against insane odds. I haven't heard "Black Lives Matter" activists mention her, although they're on the same page. Highly recommended. (I received a time-limited PDF of this book in exchange for a review. I will probably purchase a copy.)

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