

## Complicated Womanhood

Julie Debra Neuffer. *Helen Andelin and the Fascinating Womanhood Movement*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2014. 240 pp. Paperback: \$19.95. ISBN: 978-1-60781-327-9.

*Reviewed by Jessica Jensen*

I somehow lived my first twenty-nine years never having heard of *Fascinating Womanhood*, a how-to-save-your-marriage manual-cum-lifestyle popularized by a Mormon housewife in the early 1960s. Thanks to historian and author Julie Debra Neuffer, that situation has now been rectified. Neuffer's new book, *Helen Andelin and the Fascinating Womanhood Movement*, gives an unprecedented look into the personal experiences and sociopolitical climate that spurred Andelin's pursuit of an antidote for divorce, the growth of her idea into an international enterprise, and the supposed enemies she made along the way: "the feminists, the abortionists, the liberals, the BYU Family Relations Department, and the General Presidency of the Relief Society" (120–21).

Concerned by rising malaise among housewives, Andelin considered it a calling from God to find the cure. Concurrently, Betty Friedan made the same observation and famously published her perceived solution in *The Feminine Mystique*, the book widely credited as the catalyst for second-wave feminism in America. After years of obsessing over the issue, Andelin, however, had come to a much different conclusion than Friedan: To experience happiness in marriage, women should be utterly submissive, defer to their husbands in all things, change their personalities, maintain trim figures, deny themselves of all optional activities, ball their fists and stamp their feet like petulant children when angry, wear ribbons in their hair, and act helpless and dumb. This, according to Andelin, was the only way to a happy, adultery-proof marriage. She even took it a step further—if you fail to take these measures, not only will your marriage fail, but your children will become delinquents, too!

These were not original ideas. Much of *Fascinating Womanhood* was lifted word-for-word from self-improvement pamphlets

commercially produced in the 1920s under a nearly identical title. Andelin's close friend Verna Johnson introduced her to the booklets after Andelin confided some marriage woes. Though Johnson was already teaching classes based on the booklets, Andelin took them home with her, and that was that. This was the beginning of a pattern of broken friendships in Andelin's life.

Neuffer dances around the P word throughout the book, never personally calling Andelin a plagiarist but rather proving that point by quoting others and making observations like "she felt justified in taking possession of [the pamphlets], adding some of her own ideas, and then copyrighting the finished product in her name" (x). Throughout her life, Andelin explained away these accusations by repeating her belief that she was the rightful owner of the pamphlets: God had given them to her for the benefit of the world.

A devout Mormon, Andelin spent years trying to secure the endorsement of the LDS Church. Despite obtaining audience with several apostles and appealing to at least four different prophets by mail (and one—Joseph Fielding Smith—in person!), she never succeeded. The Church, though embroiled in ERA opposition, distanced itself from her particular philosophy. Julie's description of Andelin's intense, physical anguish as a result of these failed opportunities—feeling that leadership was uninspired, lamenting the red tape that separated her from her spiritual leaders, struggling to remain in the Church—was one of the few moments when I ached for her.

But then I reminded myself of the downright harmful ideas she promoted to millions of women all across the globe (three million copies sold to date, people) and my sympathy waned. To name just a few of the quotes that made my eyeballs bug out of my head:

Happy wives are helpless wives. (58)

Women's needs are the same the whole world over—to make men happy, to understand the masculine nature, and to be loved. (31)

Love, she said, "will never blossom forth until we surrender to a man." (33)

A husband didn't want to see a depressed wife, taught Andelin, so a wife who was depressed should not be surprised if her husband left her. (35)

God, believed Andelin, measured a woman's worth not by her relationship with him but by her relationship with her husband. (54) (Though unexplored by Neuffer, I can't help but wonder if this is a conclusion Andelin drew from the temple experience.)

[Bottle-feeding] makes it all too easy for a mother to leave her baby for long periods of time to pursue her own self-interests. (64)

When a man was cross, said Andelin, whose own husband was often cross with her, he was usually justified. (36)

One fan said, "Looking back I can see that my husband's problem with alcohol was a very convenient scapegoat for my own shortcomings." (47)

With the amount of nonsense emanating from some of Andelin's quotes, it shouldn't have hurt my feelings when she said that women who aren't good homemakers are failures in life, but it sort of did.

Unsurprisingly, Andelin clashed with feminists. At first she attempted a benevolent approach, calling them her sisters (albeit misguided ones in need of her help). As tensions between the two groups mounted, however, Andelin began taunting them: She attacked Betty Friedan's looks, accused feminists of being man-hating lesbians, and even had some nasty things to say about Susan B. Anthony before ultimately going full zealot and calling all feminists to repentance. With hostility increasing on both sides, Andelin grew paranoid, even once implying that her detractors were under a satanic influence.

It didn't go unnoticed by Andelin's critics that she was becoming a very savvy (and very rich) businesswoman from preaching her "domestic goddess" ideal. She was often accused of hypocrisy—after all, she was out-earning her husband and had hired full-time help at home while growing an international empire built on the premise that women ought to stay at home, act helpless, and

stroke their husbands' egos. Neuffer, as measured as ever, doesn't outrightly agree with the hypocrisy claims, but she does take an unflinching look at them.

This book is a quick yet illuminating read. Some might be left wishing for a bit more in-depth analysis, but that's a testament to this gem of Mormon history in Julie Neuffer's talented hands. I only have a smattering of minor complaints: I found the organization of the content into six non-chronological chapters a bit of a misfire. It resulted in bouncing all over the timeline with several bits of information playing on repeat throughout the book (at one point I said aloud, "We get it! Women were teaching the courses without official certification!"), and certain pages felt crammed into an unrelated chapter just because there was no better place for them. Also, Harold B. Lee is described as the president of the Church in the spring of 1971 (he became prophet in summer of 1972). Lastly, I was confused by Neuffer's statement in the book's conclusion that women today "are marrying younger and having more children." Record scratch?

That's me being hyper-critical, though. I definitely recommend the book. Above all else, it made me want to troll Andelin's *Fascinating Womanhood* book on Amazon, recruit Gloria Steinem to do dramatic readings of the more ridiculous passages, and go express several opinions to my husband just because I can.