

"To understand my father, I had to understand much more than the gender question, because my father's experience of her gender was in a complicated conversation with her religious identity, with her national identity, with her political identity." — SUSAN FALUDI

FALUDI, from page 4

her journey that pushed you to re-examine some of the conclusions you've come to in some of your previous works?

S.F.: Feminism gave me tools to really grapple with what was going on. I would say, in particular, the feminism idea of intersectionality, which I'm kind of laughing at myself as I say this because it's become such a buzzword, particularly in academia, but in fact you can, in a way, look at this

whole experience as an opportunity to actually apply intersectionality. To understand my father, I had to understand much more than the gender question, because my father's experience of her gender was in a complicated conversation with her religious identity, with her national identity, with her political identity. So that was a really helpful tool for me in thinking about my father's experience.

At the beginning, I have to say it was a real life test of my feminism. The

ironies weren't lost on me: Here I am, this woman whose feminism was sparked initially by dealing with her father's violent, macho behavior, who finds herself visiting her father for the first time, and being treated to a kind of giddy tour of Doris Day wardrobe and makeup and all the kind of girly-girl femininity that I generally recoil from. My father and I disagreed a fair amount, I think it's safe to say, over what constitutes womanhood, and I am not someone who believes there is any set of traits that define what it means to be a woman, but ultimately, my father moved away from that 1950s caricature of femininity and, as she became more comfortable with herself, sort of settled into something that was more in-between and more idiosyncratic to her. And I think in the end it really affirmed and deepened my strongest feminine belief, which is that gender is fluid and is on a continuum. In that way, I'm in accord with the newer generation of trans folks.

E.G.: *Do you think you would have reached out to your father if you weren't planning to write a book – or did wearing the hat of a journalist give you the courage to ask the questions that you needed to ask to be able to mend your relationship with her?*

S.F.: It's the latter. I wanted to be back in touch with my father. There had been so many years of alienation, and in retrospect,

I think we both wanted to reach across the divide and didn't know how to do it. When we started out, the so-called writing of the book – my father said that she wanted me to write her story – I wasn't even thinking in book terms at that point. I just knew that was a way that we could reconnect, and gave me a certain safety, maybe, a kind of security blanket in holding my reporter's notebook, to be able to dive back into a relationship with her. It gave me a little bit of a buffer and a distance to be able to imagine myself as the dispassionate reporter with my list of questions and tape recorder, and pen and pad, but ultimately I had to drop that because I was clearly as much a participant as an observer. And I think for my father – my father loved to be interviewed, so it was a comfortable way for us to approach each other.

E.G.: *You went into how your father, at first, was enthusiastically embracing some pretty antiquated gender stereotypes. That sentiment was later echoed when you talked about the trans literature you went through at Portland's public library. It seemed that for many male-to-female transgender individuals, their inner female identity resembled a kind of chauvinistic idea of what it means to be a woman. What do you make of that? And do you think the transgender community is in need of its own feminist revolution?*

S.F.: I read these books and thought, wait – this does not seem like it's disrupting the category of woman; it seems like it's replicating the very attributes that kept women down in the first place.

Part of that is *when* some of those books were written, and (that they were) written by people who grew up in an era when this is how womanhood was defined, and (who) grew up with a male point of view on that – it would be interesting to go back and talk to those authors who are still alive and ask if they moved away from that.

One trans friend of mine said, "You have to keep in mind when reading these books that they are generally written very soon after the transition." She was saying to me, "It's sort of the experience of an adolescent that is trying to figure out what all this means, and remember when you were an adolescent? You probably were doing cringe-worthy bad impersonations of womanhood based on some Disney movie." And that's true, I hate to revisit that period, and I'm sure I spent way too much money on mascara and lipstick – so I think that's another aspect of that.

I think the new generation of transgender activists is pursuing a feminist revolution. There is a major portion of the trans movement that is about not just transitioning from one gender to another, but exploding the whole category and thinking about how trans is not transporting from one sex to the other, but transcending those categories entirely.

E.G.: *I can't help but point out – I don't know to call it a coincidence or ironic, but you've been regarded as an expert in gender identity issues, and then here, your own father, at age 76, has the ultimate gender identity transformation. Have you pondered if there is some kind of connection between the two – if*

maybe growing up in a house with someone who had so many layers of identity crises kind of planted the seed of your fascination with the exploration of identity that you've gone into throughout your career?

S.F.: We don't know half the reasons we write what we write.

(laughs), and I thought I was fascinated by gender for the more – on the personal level – because my father behaved in such a scary, typical, macho way, and that feminism made sense to me because I saw the ways in which my father ruled the roost unfairly and denied my mother the opportunity to be her full self, but now, looking back, I think, well, my father wasn't just denying my mother; my father was denying herself. And it's funny because I was looking back at, I think this was in "Stiffed," my book on masculinity, and noticing that I had all these references to identity, and so the brain works in all these subconscious ways and while I felt my preoccupation was with gender and sexism and misogyny, I now think it was equally about identity, the sort of confounding nature of identity because I have this father who just was wearing one mask after another my whole childhood.

E.G.: *There was something your father said to you that you repeated a couple of times in*



PHOTO COURTESY OF SUSAN FALUDI

Susan Faludi remembers her father, Stefanie – then Steven – as domineering. She said her "feminism was sparked initially by dealing with her father's violent, macho behavior."

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PHOTO COURTESY OF SUSAN FALUDI

Susan Faludi with her father in the 1960s.



PHOTO BY SIGRID ESTRADA

Susan Faludi is the author of "In the Darkroom," about her investigation of her transgender father's identity.

IF YOU GO

Susan Faludi will be at Powell's City of Books at 7:30 p.m. Sept. 28 for a signing, reading and Q&A about her new book, "In the Darkroom."