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Book Review: Champions for peace: Women winners of the Nobel Peace Prize

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Champions for peace: Women winners of the Nobel Peace Prize. Judith Hicks Stiehm. Third edition. Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Rowman and Littlefield. 2014 and 2018. 289 pp. Hardcover, ISBN: 978-1-5381-1899-3. Paperback, ISBN: 978-1-5381-1900-6. Electronic, ISBN: 978-5381-1901-3.

*Judith Hicks Stiehm is a political science professor who has served on the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Military and as a consultant to the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women and to the Lessons Learned Unit of the Department of Peacekeeping Operations. In earlier publications she explored nonviolent resistance in America (1973); analyzed and challenged the traditional protector/protected male and female roles in war, arguing that the path to gender equality entailed equal responsibility for military protection (1982); then turned to an examination of women in the military (1996), and military education. In *Champions for Peace*, Stiehm's focus shifts to an examination of 16 women who were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. She declares her purpose on the dedication page:*

Historians too often praise reckless and arrogant leaders who send troops to wage war. This book is intended to encourage and to honor those who seek to avoid war without relinquishing the pursuit of justice.

The Nobel Peace Prize (NPP) first began to be awarded in 1903. In only thirteen of the more than 100 years since then has the award been presented to one or more women:

1905 – Baroness Bertha von Suttner (Austria)
1931 - Jane Addams (USA)
1946 - Emily Green Balch (USA)
1976 – Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan (Northern Ireland)
1979 – Mother Teresa of Calcutta (Macedonia/India)
1982 – Alva Myrdal (Sweden)
1991 – Aung San Suu Kya (Myanmar(Burma))
1992 - Rigoberta Menchu Tum (Guatemala)
1997 – Jody Williams (USA)
2003 – Shirin Ebadi (Iran)
2004 – Wangari Muta Maathai (Kenya)
2011 – Tawakkol Karman (Yemen); Leymah Gbowee (Liberia); and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (Liberia)
2014 – Malala Yousafzai (Pakistan)

The Preface offers a brief history of the NPP and the evolving criteria for selecting awardees. The thirteen chapters that follow, each about 20 pages long and in the above historical order, are devoted to the women awardees. Each chapter begins with a brief overview of the historical, cultural, and socio-economic context and the conflicts and issues addressed by the respective awardee(s), then relates her story, including family and professional background and the initiatives she undertook. A short concluding chapter compares and contrasts the different women and their contributions to peace. Discussion questions are suggested in an Epilogue, followed by a Selected Bibliography and Index.

The women awarded the NPP are from diverse world regions, religions, races, and socio-economic backgrounds. There are honorees from the nobility, middle class, and peasantry. Some hold doctoral degrees, others had little formal education. There are professors, lawyers, social workers, diplomats, heads of state, authors, housewives, a nun, computer networker, and movement organizers. The issues they addressed read like a history of peace and peace movements and range from a focus on negative peace (peace as the absence of war), and leadership in anti-war and disarmament movements, to a focus on positive peace (peace as the presence of social justice), and mobilizing movements for democracy, human rights, economic equity, humanitarian assistance, girls' education, and ecology.

Some of these women worked their whole lives addressing a broad spectrum of peace-related issues affecting the whole global community. Others gave a brief period to address one particular issue in one country. After winning the peace prize, some continued their work with enhanced reputations and increased support. Others faced retaliation or "punishment" by jealous or opposing forces; some fled into exile.

Some awardees were absolute pacifists, totally committed to nonviolence as a matter of conscience or article of faith. Others pursued nonviolence not from any spiritual conviction but as an effective tactic. And still others allowed that violence might be necessary to escape tyranny or oppression. Stiehm briefly discusses these differing stances on nonviolence vs. violence in her conclusion.

Some of the awardees are still alive and their stories continue to evolve. Stiehm did some updating in this third edition, and may well do more in future editions. The unfinished story of Aung San Suu Kyi comes to mind. For years, even while under house arrest in Myanmar, Suu Kyi was a voice for nonviolent struggle against oppressive rule. She was awarded the NPP in 1991 for her nonviolent leadership. But after her National League for Democracy party gained political power and she became Myanmar's State Counsellor (a position akin to prime minister), Suu Kyi came under severe international criticism for allegedly failing to stop the persecution and genocide of the Rohingya, a largely Muslim ethnic minority in Myanmar. Three women peace awardees were among the critics: (Tawakkol Karman from Yemen, Mairead (Corrigan) Maguire from Ireland, and Shirin Ebadi from Iran). In her 2019 testimony before the International Court of Justice, Suu Kyi denied the genocide, but the issue remains contentious and her image tarnished.

Overall, Stiehm respects the NPP choices, but occasionally flags questions and criticisms about the NPP committee, including its secrecy; the politicized campaigns waged by special interest groups; inconsistency in the criteria for selection; and the uneven qualifications of different awardees. These criticisms do not bother Stiehm that much. But what does bother her, and which she hopes will change, is awarding the peace prize to men for ceasing to support a war they helped to start and/or sustain. This grievance does not apply to any of the women awardees; Stiehm deems them all to be true champions of peace.

However, in her concluding chapter she points to another question about the NPP committee that is related to women-i.e. passing over women who she believes should have won, including:

Eleanor Roosevelt, whose leadership gave us the UN Declaration of Human Rights; Australian physician Helen Caldicott, a powerful voice for nuclear disarmament; the Madres of Plaza de Mayo in Argentina who protested the “disappeared”; the Black Sash Women of South Africa who protested apartheid; and the Palestinian and Israeli Women in Black working across religious divides to build peace in the Middle East.

The first word in this book is “Lysistrata.” In Greek it means “army disbander” and is the title of an anti-war comedy by Aristophanes, first staged in 411 BCE. The lead female character, Lysistrata, mobilizes women to end the Peloponnesian War by withholding sex from men until they negotiate peace. At the beginning of the play Lysistrata tells her friend, Calonice: “There are a lot of things about us women that sadden me, considering how men see us as rascals.” Calonice responds: “As indeed we are!”

Stiehm’s stated purpose in referring to this ancient play is to indicate that women’s work for peace has a long history. Her purpose is sound, but the example isn’t apt, for “Lysistrata” is a male playwright’s fictitious account of women getting their way by manipulating men. Perhaps beginning with “Lysistrata” was a humorous way to set the stage for this book’s contents, but the women NPP winners were not rascals and their work for peace was not underhanded or manipulative. Most worked, not in opposition to, but in partnership, with men. It would be more persuasive to identify some real women peace builders in history – women on whose shoulders the NPP awardees and all peace workers now stand.

While reading this book I kept thinking about the thousands of women around the world, women of every color and culture – some who lived long ago, some still living, some in schools, courtrooms, and offices, others demonstrating on streets, some visible in the front lines, others busy in the back rooms of peace work—all equally peace champions. The history of women’s work for peace has gone hand in hand with their struggle for suffrage, for social and economic equality, and for ecological integrity. Seldom, if ever, did they work alone. They worked with others – male and female -- whose solidarity and support helped sustain them. Although it was not in the scope of this book for Stiehm to detail this long, worldwide history of women peace builders, perhaps she could add a paragraph or two in future editions signaling that it goes far beyond anything imagined in fiction.

That having been said, this is an excellent introduction to the women Nobel Peace Prize awardees. Stiehm packs a lot of information into limited space. The book is objectively written and academically sound while also being accessible to lay readers. It is a significant contribution to the growing body of literature about women and peace.

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