

guardian.co.uk

What happened next? Feminism

A great year for women? Twelve months ago we predicted that it would be. Were we right?



Viv Groskop
The Guardian, Monday 27 December 2010

[A larger](#) | [smaller](#)



Precious, the story of an overweight, illiterate teenager in 80s Harlem, won two Oscars. [This time 12 months ago we promised it was going to be the biggest year in feminism ever.](#) So was it? Er, sort of. We weren't wrong about it being a celebratory year. But our predictions of the feminist events to watch in 2010 were a bit hit and miss. Where did we strike gold? **The significance of the movie Precious**, the story of an overweight, illiterate teenager in 80s Harlem, pregnant by her abusive father ("primarily female cast", "a must-see", we said). Come the Oscars, the film won six nominations and two awards. What did we overestimate? **The impact of Drew Barrymore's directorial debut Whip It!** ("a great film"). That turned out to be a bit of a howler. The film went right under the radar, more's the pity.

So what else did we get right? Well, it was always going to be a bumper year and maybe we could have even got a bit more excited about it. 2010 marked the [40th anniversary both of the publication of Germaine Greer's still controversial The Female Eunuch and of Kate Millett's landmark Sexual Politics.](#) It was also four decades since the agenda-changing first ever National Women's Liberation conference. This killer combination of events galvanised campaigning groups everywhere and if anything our predictions of a feminist bonanza in 2010 underestimated **the resurgence of grassroots activism.**

The first ever Feminism Summer School, hosted by UK Feminista in July, was a major success, picking up international coverage. And the Reclaim the Night movement was invigorated in force, with more than 2,000 women attending candlelit vigils in central London in November, where DJs kept the crowds going until 2am. Meanwhile more than 1,000 people attended London Feminism Network's October conference. Student activism came into its own even before the recent protests, with Leeds University unleashing a feminist flash mob during Freshers' Week, complete with a giant papier mache vagina dancing to Lady Gaga's Bad Romance. Last month Women Against the Cuts joined in with demonstrations at the Treasury.

Our film predictions were admittedly a bit lousy – with the no-brainer exception of Precious. The animated anti-Disney film, **Ponyo**, about a fish-girl who swims away from her father's underwater castle (what's not to love? You go, girl!) pretty much tanked. Tina Fey's screwball comedy **Date Night** turned out to be more about her tummy control corset than about female liberation. And Angelina Jolie's potentially inspiring "Tom Cruise replacement" role as a CIA agent in **Salt** was eclipsed by her burgeoning status as Earth Mother Extraordinaire.

We did tell you to look out for **Mad Men series three** – "the best show on TV when it comes to exploring gender relations". But even we couldn't have predicted the rise of the Cult of Joan. Or that the Washington Post would crown Mad Men "the most feminist TV show in history" – simply for demonstrating the consequences of a world where sexism goes unchallenged: "Mad Men's writers aren't sexist. The time period was."

Our book predictions were spot on, just about. **We said Andrea Levy's The Long Song would win the Booker.** It made the shortlist – and won the Orange prize. **We failed to spot Emma Donoghue,** though, whose bleak but highly acclaimed kidnap novel Room was the Booker favourite until Howard Jacobson pipped her at the post. **Natasha Walter's Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism (Virago) was indeed the hugely controversial event we predicted.** It was praised by some ("an important book" said Sarah Vine in The Times; "kicks Nuts magazine right in the nuts," said Bidisha in the New Statesman) but awarded the "meh" badge by others (Joan Smith: "still the same old inoffensive feminist at heart").

Kat Banyard's The Equality Illusion (Faber) – which, months before its release, we credited with "exposing some uncomfortable facts" – also made a splash. "A terrific read," said Louise Doughty. "Give it to David Cameron – and the chairman of Marks & Spencer," said Anthea McTeirnan in the Irish Times. **We perhaps gave a little too much prominence to Martin Amis's The Pregnant Widow** (Jonathan Cape) – "Brace yourself for a furore as Amis takes on sexual politics." Bracing was not necessary. The Great One's latest novel largely failed to re-ignite the gender debate, despite being described as "strange and sparkling" by the New York Review of Books.

There were two gigantic omissions in our books category, however, which I am still personally kicking myself about. Two books came out this year which, in the long-term, could change how we view gender for ever. We didn't list them in our events of the year. Mea culpa. **Cordelia Fine's Delusions of Gender: The Real Science Behind Sex Differences** (Icon Books) finally debunked the myth that men and women's minds are significantly different. And in **Pink Brain, Blue Brain** (OneWorld), Lise Eliot argued that we create gender stereotypes in our children by unwittingly reinforcing barely perceptible differences in female and male brains from birth. Both books were favourably reviewed and hotly discussed. Over time their conclusions could have far-reaching consequences as significant as The Female Eunuch.

Where else did we misfire? BBC Three's Lip Service – "a sexy, funny and irreverent drama" that "could prove to be even more daring than cult US series The L Word"? No. It was something of a damp squib. **We would have been better focusing our attentions on ITV's Downton Abbey,** a surprise "feminism lite" ratings winner, with superb roles for the oft-neglected older woman and even a Suffragette storyline. (OK, so the "votes for women" theme was a bit weak, but we appreciated the nod nonetheless, and especially the scene where the politically aware Lady Sybil shocked everyone by wearing – gasp – a pair of trousers and a sequinned headband. Not the sort of stuff you usually get on ITV on a Sunday night.)

At least **we bigged up Elles@centrepompidou,** one of the biggest exhibitions of women's art in the world this year, as well as the **2010 Whitney Biennial in New York** ("an unprecedented 52% of the artists featured are women"). But we couldn't possibly have foreseen the exciting news that sound artist Susan Philipsz would win this year's Turner prize. Although it's painful to note that she's only the fourth woman to win the award in its 26-year history. Roll on more accolades like this in 2011.

guardian.co.uk © Guardian News and Media Limited 2010