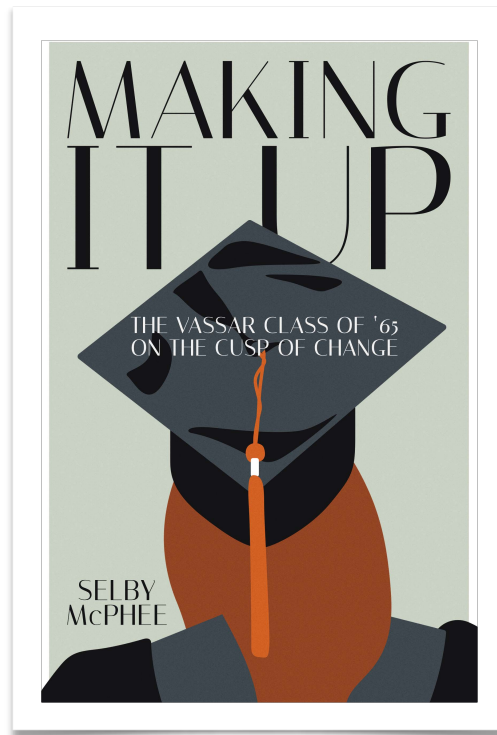




“Book Review: *Making It Up*”

Reviewed by Alexandra Barbush



An inspiring glance at feminist movements through a biographical lens

Selby McPhee presents the life and work of several of her Vassar College classmates from 1965 in *Making It Up*. This first-person narrative starts with a brief rundown of the first and second movements of feminism and then traverses through the womanhood and feminism at Vassar specifically, that which led the graduates to their subsequent lives.



McPhee touches on the Convention of Seneca Falls as a precursor to her time, which she considers to be the foreground for the second movement of feminism, roughly occurring in the fifties and sixties. She also briefly mentions what she thinks of as “*third wave feminism*,” constituting the #MeTooMovement and the Women’s March in 2017.

From there, she speaks on several imperative texts to the feminist movement, like Betty Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique* and the ever-popular *Ladies Home Journal*. She uses several of her classmates as a kind of intimate case study of female life at the time, naming them explicitly and relaying interviews she had with them at a later time, seemingly circa 2017.

She speaks on their childhoods and their own mothers, an obvious starting point to how and why they ended up where they did—at a prestigious northern college of overwhelmingly white women.

Many of them did not know their fathers until toddler age, with them being born into the thick of World War II. McPhee speaks on their fathers’ return home from war and the subsequent cast-off of their mother’s brief careers, along with the catapult back into the home sphere.

Each of the women’s stories is chronicled over time, the most interesting being that of Sylvie Ivie, one of only two Black women accepted into Vassar their graduating year. Daughter of a homemaker and a doctor, Ivie goes on to be an NAACP lawyer, a civil rights advocate, and a published academic, all while marrying and having two children.

McPhee smoothly weaves the personal and political lives of her accomplished classmates with that of the norms and happenings at Vassar circa 1965. She presents them as individuals while hitting simultaneously on their commonalities.

At the time, women often felt unfulfilled and potentially unhappy. They may have used the idea of college less as the beginning of a career and more of a jumping off point to a life that included a husband and children. The women chronicled by McPhee inspiringly



jumped the status quo, with their careers spanning breastfeeding advocacy, academia, and Fortune 500 company leadership.

Making It Up is a smartly personal and political examination of micro-feminism in the modern era.

The feminism displayed here is that of a mostly white, middle-ish class woman who was afforded a chance at Vassar and made something of that chance. Fortunately, she isn't naive about this fact. While she presents some historical facts and introductions, she is aware that she isn't telling every woman's story, just THESE women's stories. These stories are that of accomplished women who, with privilege, made something of themselves and simultaneously struggled with their mothers' stories in second wave feminism—housewives, discontent, stuck at home with the children.

Readers interested in feminist history and studies will get a quick and interesting read out of this one. To better understand ourselves, we must first understand those who have come before us. *Making It Up* makes that possible.