

Reading for change



The politically involved make connections through the selections they read and discuss in the Women and Politics Reading Group. By Sally Kenney.

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My job requires me to read political science texts at breakneck speed, preparing the hour or night before a class, meeting a deadline for a promotion review, considering a manuscript for publication, writing a review, or preparing to serve as a discussant on a conference panel.

I am never in the waiting room of a hair salon, a doctor's office or an airport lounge without student papers, books or drafts of journal articles. Now that I'm 46, and my little baby face has its frown lines and sags, I am less likely to be asked if I'm studying for a test. (Of course, what I want to say is, "I give the tests now.")

I read fiction for pleasure, bingeing during breaks in the teaching calendar. That's when I have the experience of living partially in the world of the characters as I wander through my own life—as I am now, with my mind continually wandering back to my current book, Ann Patchett's **The Patron Saint of Liars**. I love the start of realization as I'm driving home that a good book awaits me, and I press down the accelerator. Increasingly I associate plane rides and hotel rooms with the pleasures of uninterrupted reading.

Somehow, however, between my professional reading and my pleasure reading, the books that get shortchanged in my life are worthy popular nonfiction texts. My partner lies in bed reading a book on the Rwandan genocide, the influenza epidemic, or a biography of Atatürk, while I delve into Sue Grafton's **R is for Ricochet**. (Remind me, again, who's the academic here?)

When I first met Mary Rosenthal, from the Minnesota Democratic Party's Education Foundation, we immediately bonded over

our common love of books, and we decided to create a reading group on women and politics. We called it, appropriately, The Women and Politics Reading Group.

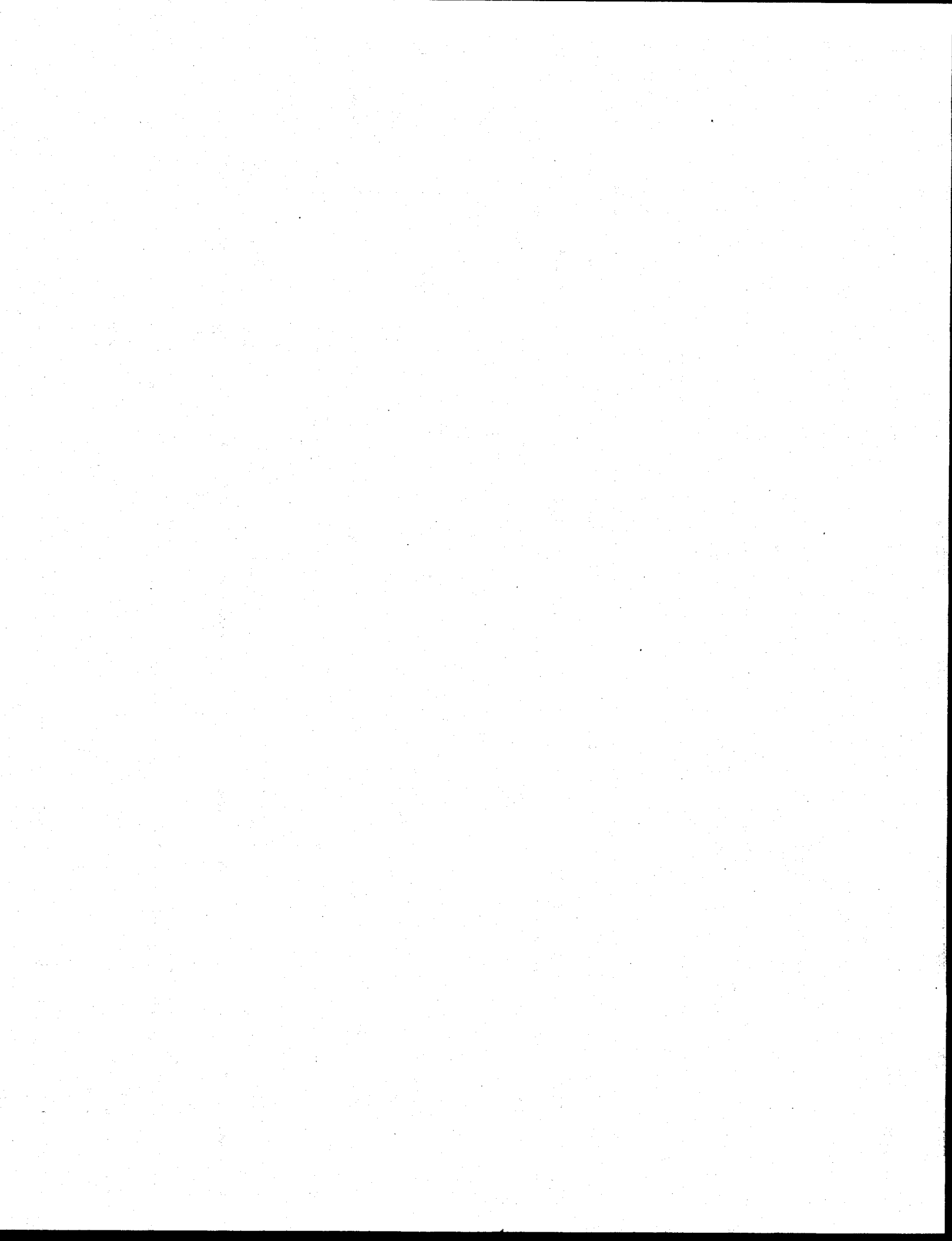
The initial impetus was the visit of Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton to the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute with the release of Joan Steinau Lester's biography, **Fire in My Soul: The Life of Eleanor Holmes Norton**.

I had become increasingly disquieted by the fact that feminist political scientists were doing great scholarly research, published in journals such as *Women and Politics*, but female elected officials, activists and even consultants never engaged that work. While women in academia and women political activists share common interests, we seem to exist on two, non-intersecting tracks.

While I might entice my graduate students to read an article from the *American Political Science Review*, especially if I test them on it, my pals in the political "chattering classes"—the women on the boards of such organizations as Minnesota Women's Campaign Fund, the DFL Feminist Caucus, or the Minnesota Women's Political Caucus, for example—would never imbibe.

The Women and Politics Reading Group is a way to fulfill in part the Humphrey Institute's mission of connecting town and gown around the most important policy issues of our times, such as women in politics.

We meet every six weeks or so, at 5 p.m., for an hour or hour and a half. Everyone is welcome, women and men, students and community members, University staff and someone's next-to-neighbor. Although we're



in an academic setting, there's no test over the book. Some have read it carefully, others not at all. Some people come for just one particular book discussion, others are more regular. Discussions of both Hillary Clinton's and Madeleine Albright's memoirs, **Living History** and **Madam Secretary**, attracted more than 50 discussants, but most times the group hovers around 10 or so.



Eleanor Holmes Norton

Because I never know who will show up besides me, I please myself first in selecting titles. I have to want to read the book. Happily, that's a pretty low threshold, because I want to read just about everything. The women and politics criterion narrows the choice only slightly more. I run another reading group on women, law and public policy, so law books get shunted there. I have an informal quota of about one-third women of color and about one-third historical topics.

If someone is coming to town to promote a new biography or autobiography of a woman in politics, we read that. We thus recently read Donna Brazile's autobiography, **Cooking with Grease**. More recently, we've been reading books on engaging younger women in politics: **The F Word**, by Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner, **Closing the Leadership Gap** by Marie C. Wilson, and **Grassroots**, by Jennifer Baumgardner. Younger women in the group have been unimpressed.

Twice a year, I bring a big stack of books, as well as a list we've collected, and we choose the next three or four books.

I have to say, while the discussions are uniformly good, the books we've read are most decidedly mixed. It's surprised me how people who are writing an autobiography can utterly lack the quality of introspection. Similarly, being at the center of history does not mean you have something coherent, let alone interesting or even profound, to say about it. Participating in an episode does not necessarily mean you can narrate what happened well.

After orchestrating this opportunity for myself to read more of the popular than the academic,

I've been disappointed with the breezy histories of Cokie Roberts' **Founding Mothers**, and Eleanor Clift's **Founding Sisters**. Clift's superficial rendition of suffrage was especially disappointing, in contrast to Nell Irvin Painter's biography, **Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol**. I did, however, love Catherine Thimmesh's more journalistic **Madam President**. Laura Flanders' hard-hitting

meanness in **Bushwomen** turned off some of our members, but I found the book eye-opening.

As is the case with other book groups I have participated in, the looming deadline of the next group meeting pushes me to finish the book, enhanced in this case by the added pressure of leading the discussion.

Sometimes, the discussion turns very personal. Other times we benefit from an impromptu lecture from a group member about an issue the current book raises, whether the nature of the campaign autobiography or current thinking about the "waves" of feminism. Because the group is made up of smart, engaged readers, discussants are always embellishing comments with insights from other recent books that influenced them.

At the same time that I'm inspired by the depth of intellectual engagement of the non-academic participants, many of whom read more broadly than most of my colleagues, I can't help but be disappointed by the number of people who intend to come but never get the book off the coffee table. I guess the teacher in me feels I've failed to motivate. But I always look forward to what the regulars will have to say about any given selection.

I would love to hear from other readers about the books we have read or books we should read. I'd welcome comments and recommendations. Feel free to "tune in" any time to our webpage and see what we're up to.

For more info on the Politics and Women Reading Group, including dates and upcoming titles: www.hhh.umn.edu/centers/wpp/women_politics_reading_group. All readers welcome.

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