



## Praxis

*Fay Weldon*

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## Praxis Fay Weldon

Tells the story of a woman from childhood to adulthood. The book begins in wartime Brighton and follows Praxis in her various personalities - whore, adulteress and finally murderer. It was shortlisted for the Booker Prize.

## Praxis Details

Date : Published December 1st 1993 (first published 1978)

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Author : Fay Weldon

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## **From Reader Review Praxis for online ebook**

### **Sarah B. says**

I have set this one aside to read again once I have thought about it for a while. Praxis' life highlights the problem of being a woman who is not content to be a housewife but lacks the drive to achieve another goal. I didn't find it enjoyable, exactly, but confronting the ways one has disappointed oneself can hardly be expected to be enjoyable. I think Weldon has done a magnificent job, making the story dramatic enough to keep the reader engaged through some difficult material, and keeping Praxis completely without bitterness, even when she comes to self-awareness.

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### **Ree Villaruel says**

This will always be one of my favorite novels. Personally, I think Weldon's playful words are so magnetic it draws me to Praxis' world whenever she speaks about things that express feminism. I am not really a bookworm (I've read less than 15 novels thus far)but this novel kept my interest all throughout. Not a single bored bone in my body while I was reading it.

Objectively speaking on the other hand, the story has very realistic characters. The flow wasn't dragging and the characters were well developed.

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### **Joy says**

Depressing Weldon. In this one, very few come out ahead.

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### **Louise says**

I thoroughly enjoyed this book!

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### **Gemma Williams says**

Praxis shares many themes with Marilyn French's *The Women's Room*, which I also read recently, dealing with the trials of women forced to deny themselves in favour of maternity and men. It also features female insanity as a central theme. Praxis isn't as impressive, lacking the scope and characterisation, as well as the depth of anger in French's book. It is, however, really very good - written in a lively and readable way, frequently darkly funny, cynical and engaging.

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### **Madeleine says**

"Praxis"

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**Shirl says**

loved it.

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**Sara says**

79 shortlisted for booker prize

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**Dawn Echlin says**

Well where to start. The book is basically about the confusion each generation of females goes through as we are defined into roles by the generation before us and the one that emerges after us. But to tell the story you must really go through some ugliness that doesn't feel real to me. If Brighton Beach England was truly like this post WWII and into the sexual revolution than I'm really disturbed. This book is full of a girl feeling unloved, trying to find a sense of belonging through sexuality, using ones body to regain power, and then succumbing to roles again forced on us by society. And the whole time she appears miserable...no joy from her family, her lovers or husbands, or her children. The only thing she feels remotely good about is her work. Women are fuller beings than that. I'm not saying superwoman syndrome, I'm just saying this very narrow perspective of women did not resonate with me.

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**Christine says**

My all time favourite Weldon. One to read and re-read every few years.

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**Rachel says**

The only problem with Fay Weldon is her books often have horrible covers. You have to look for the good editions. They're out there somewhere. I was in the middle of reading this book and then school started.... Of course, I could easily have finished it in the time I have spent on bookster in the last two days.

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**Merilee says**

4.5 stars! Wow, I certainly did not have this cover!

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## **Stacey says**

I think that Praxis might be a more interesting book for women of a different generation than I. I recognize the expertise of the writing, and was compelled to finish the book. That all being said, Praxis lived a life propelled by madness, sex, and narcissism, and the hollowness of all the characters was unmistakable and left me not caring about any of them.

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## **Kate says**

Brilliant book for women I think.

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## **Scott Koestler says**

Story of two sisters, Praxis and Hypatia, in 1960s chauvinistic England with no escape from their dreary suburban subjugated lives. How satisfactorily dreary. Ho hum.

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## **Kis says**

I've read a lot of Fay Weldon, but I'm adding this first because of the bit about how Praxis got her name. Her mother didn't know what it meant! Life. In a nutshell.

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## **Deborah Sheldon says**

Blistering. No one examines relationships and the human psyche quite like Fay Weldon.

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## **Greg says**

This novel is a difficult one to review. It is the story of Praxis Duveen, who is abandoned by an abusive father only to have her mother committed for insanity, and is left in her house with only her sister who is also clearly touched by the insanity of their childhood. It is a feminist novel, arguing forcefully against the restrictions placed on women in mid-twentieth century British culture. You would think you would feel a kinship with Praxis, or at least pity her and her lot. Unfortunately, she also becomes disaffected, works as a prostitute, commits incest, commits murder, and is left with damaged friendships and relationships.

The novel starts very promisingly. Weldon in an early passage establishes the pitiable start to Praxis's life: "If that young one were mine, thought Henry Whitechapel, I'd belt her one. Later he was to have the opportunity of doing so. He had never married and had no children of his own; his lungs and his concentration were not what they had been before the war; nor certainly at that time was his sexual capacity. But a romantic interest in the opposite sex remained, and Lucy Duveen, sitting on the pebbly beach with her

hamper, her parasol and her two little girls, made for him a romantic image.

He took the opportunity of passing 109 Holden Road one evening in September, when only a trickle of holiday makers remained to pose before his by-now filmless camera, and he knew he would soon have to go back to London and take his chances there. He found, much as he had expected, a stout Edwardian house, sheltered by laurel bushes, with a circular drive, well-kept flower gardens and a motorcar outside the front door. All the lights in the house blazed, in apparent defiance of the electricity bill: and he heard what he took to be the noise of revelry within, but what was in fact the sound of Ben Duveen drunk, laughing and beating his wife, while the two children wailed. Benjamin Duveen had other children in other places, who wailed for the absence of their father, as these two wailed for his presence.” (10) Henry and Ben – not the greatest of potential father figures. And both damaged her mother beyond repair.

Praxis comes to be raised by Miss Leonard, who is pleased with her independence, and is proud at her statements supporting abortion and against war and violence. Ultimately she gave birth to a child, who Praxis raises after Miss Leonard is killed, and is the product of an unknown man and his son who mistook her for a prostitute. It is Miss Leonard that seems to guide Praxis in her thought process. Praxis later attaches herself to a student named Willie, who is inferior to her intellect. She is expected to do worse than he does, and in the interest of keeping him as a steady boyfriend, she gets C’s intentionally. When ultimately she leaves him years later because he invites another woman into her house (as retribution among other things for her becoming a prostitute), she thinks to herself, “I was too nearly Willie’s equal. He did his best: stopping my education, forbidding me to earn, reducing me to whoredom: yes, he certainly did his best. Except, alas, that to blame Willie for these things is ridiculous. He didn’t do them. He pointed a finger, and I ran, willingly, in the direction he pointed.” (144) It is this self-reflection that begins to be compelling. Rather than blaming her mother, she comes to term with her:

“Poor mother. Of course she should have struggled. My father’s people in Germany should have struggled too. But she did not, as they did not. We see the world as we are taught to see it, not as it is. Our vision since has widened. And of course she should have kept her misery to herself, not handed it on to her children. For a time I hated her for her weakness, until I saw what I did to my children through strength. Then I forgave her.” (36)

Ultimately, this reflection serves as the critique of the society that has developed:

“I am accustomed to pain. And pain in the elbow, the fingers and, since my abortive journey to the hospital, pain in my stamped-upon toe, is nothing compared to that pain in the heart, the soul and the mind—those three majestic seats of female sorrow—which seems to be our daily lot.

I do not understand the threefold pain: but I will try. Perhaps it serves a useful purpose, if only as an indication that some natural process is being abused. I cannot believe it is a punishment: to have a certain nature is not a sin, and in any case who is there to punish us? Unless—as many do—we predicate some natural law of male dominance and female subservience, and call that God. Then what we feel is the pain of the female Lucifer, tumbling down from heaven, having dared to defy the male deity, cast out forever, but likewise never able to forget, tormented always by the memory of what she threw away. Or else, and on this supposition my mind rests most contentedly, we are in the grip of some evolutionary force which hurts as it works and which I fear has already found its fruition in that new race of young women which I encountered in the bus on the way to the hospital this morning, dewy fresh from their lovers’ arms and determined to please no one but themselves. One of the New Women trod me underfoot and with her three-inch soles pulped my big toe in its plastic throw-away shoe (only I, unlike her, cannot afford to throw anything away, and am doomed to wear it forever), causing me such fresh pain that when the bus broke down and we were all to be decanted into another, I lost heart altogether, abandoned the journey and limped home.

The New Women! I could barely recognize them as being of the same sex as myself, their buttocks arrogant in tight jeans, openly inviting, breasts falling free and shameless, feeling no apparent obligation to smile, look pleasant or keep their voices low. And how they live! Just look at them to know how! If a man doesn’t

bring them to orgasm, they look for another who does. If by mistake they fall pregnant, they abort by vacuum aspiration. If they don't like the food, they push the plate away. If the job doesn't suit them, they hand in their notice. They are satiated by everything, hungry for nothing. They are what I wanted to be; they are what I worked for them to be: and now I see them, I hate them. They have found their own solution to the threefold pain—one I never thought of. They do not try, as we did, to understand it and get the better of it. They simply wipe out the pain by doing away with its three centres—the heart, the soul and the mind. Brilliant! Heartless, soulless, mindless--free!" (16)

Weldon writes with a wicked sense of humor, and the actions of Praxis and the other characters is sure to shock the reader. Ultimately, however, I struggled to personally relate to the events because the societal norms being challenged are not my own, and outside of my own experience.

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## Guy says

Praxis is an interesting book to come back to for many reasons, but as I read it in tandem with Kate Atkinson's *Life After Life*, the two books worked, rather curiously with no small amount of synchronicity—odd really as the books are about entirely different things, for while *Life after Life* explores alternate lives and brings up the possibility of changing fate, *Praxis* focuses on a character who rarely exercises her Free Will. It was pure accident that I read these two books simultaneously, and while both books focus on the lives and the choices of two women, time wise, *Praxis* extends into the late 20th century, whereas *Life After Life* is rooted in the first half of the 20th century.

Weldon, a feminist writer who's been the centre of some controversy, concentrates on the lives of women with themes that include: female identity & self-image, transformation & reinvention, gender inequality, female madness and the vicious relationships between women. While Weldon's work, full of biting wicked humour, obviously fits in any feminist canon, her work can also be considered Transgressive fiction for the way her marvelous characters subvert societal norms. *Praxis* is the story of a 20th century woman who's transformed (not for the better) by her relationships with men. A female chameleon with little sense of just who she really is, Praxis subsumes herself in her relationships, becoming what her lovers expect/want her to be. Becoming what is expected or desired brings only unhappiness and confusion, and through this character's transformations, we see Praxis struggling with her identity, her own worst enemy as the years fall away spent on some meaningless daily life that fulfills someone else's demands and expectations. And then the day comes when Praxis acts spontaneously and as a result goes to prison. Is she a feminist hero or a monster?

The Praxis of the title is the youngest daughter of Lucy Duveen and her common-law husband, Benjamin. The story is told by a now elderly Praxis, a woman who has apparently spent a few years in prison for an unspecified crime. Praxis writes down her story, going back in time to at age 5, "sitting on the beach at Brighton," with her mother and her older sister Hypatia. Lucy and her two daughters give an idyllic impression to passer-bys including WWI veteran and former bombardier, Henry Whitechapel, who now lurks on the beaches pretending to take photographs for tourists with film (if he actually has any) that he never develops.

Told in both first and third person narration, we follow Praxis through her life, through her university days, her lovers, marriages, divorces, children, step-children, endless cooking and cleaning, and there are several points at which Praxis finds herself in a life she didn't plan and doesn't want. With a 'how-did-I-get-here'

feeling, a stupefied Praxis marvels that lacking a sense of self, she's been molded into a person she no longer recognizes in order to please whichever man is in her life.

"Staring at herself in the mirror, at her doll's face, stiff doll's body, curly blonde doll's hair, she wondered what experience or wisdom could possibly shine through the casing that Ivor had selected for her. She did not blame Ivor: she knew that she had done it to herself : had preferred to live as a figment of Ivor's imagination, rather than put up with the confusion of being herself."

But while Praxis tries to hard to please the various men in her life, she fails to befriend women, and since Weldon is big on the betrayals of women towards their own sex, there are several times when Praxis's peculiar, and very possibly mad, sister, Hypatia ("People fail you, children disappoint you, thieves break in, moths corrupt, but an OBE goes on for ever,") takes measures to ensure her sister's unhappiness. It's no coincidence that the very best things that happen in Praxis's life occur on those rare occasions when women stick together.

While the style, tone and theme of Praxis were all vastly dissimilar to Kate Atkinson's *Life after Life*, there were connections. *Life after Life* gives us a protagonist who lives many versions of the same life. Choices made in a split second lead Ursula down different paths in an alternative universe sort-of-way. While Weldon's Praxis is grounded in bitter reality, her life is segmented by divisions and a metaphysical connection with the star Betelgeuse—which signals death of one self and the rebirth of another 'new' Praxis. While Ursula has moments of disturbing *deja-vu*, Praxis feels a strong disconnect with her life—almost as though one day she wakes up and wonders just how she got to this place.

Praxis, who becomes entangled with the swinging sixties, also runs head-long into feminism, and Praxis has mixed feelings about feminists—initially repelled, they begin to make sense to her—although as the years pass, once again, Praxis feels out of touch with "the New Women."

I can't conclude without mentioning one of my favourite characters in the book, Irma, a friend from Praxis's university days. Irma is the sort of hard, driven woman who always seems to know what she wants and how to get it. She marries a man she thinks will be successful and she leads a rather terrifying life of social success and mental emptiness. At one point, for example she offers Praxis some practical advice:

"There's only way to get out of the fix you're in," said Irma. "And that's to sleep your way out of it. Sorry and all that."

Since this is a Weldon novel, Irma undergoes her own radical transformation, becoming a militant feminist and appearing on television while her ex-husband nastily argues that all "poor Irma" needs is:

"a good lay. But where is she going to find that? Look at the way she dresses."

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## Val says

Fay Weldon at her best can be both funny and thought provoking. She is at her best in this one and I enjoyed it.

Praxis is either an opportunist who makes some dubious choices or a powerless, misunderstood woman pushed around by fate, society, men and circumstances, or both.



