

Finding Fran: History and Memory in the Lives of Two Women

Lois W. Banner. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. 243 pages.

Finding Fran is a memoir of two women, once best friends, who take very different paths. The author is now a feminist history professor and her high school friend, Fran, is Noura—a Muslim living in Egypt. Banner looks back on their lives to find out what led one to feminism and the other to Islam. Unfortunately, while Banner offers many interesting insights into the lives of both women, she never fully answers this fundamental question.

The book is divided into four parts. Part I, "My Story (1944-1952)," explores Banner's family history as well as her life up until high school. She traces the lives of various family members in order to discover how they affected her childhood and her outlook on life. In the second part, "Fran & Me (1952-1956)," Banner tells the story of their high school friendship. It is a friendship of two smart and artistically talented girls, who are often bold and passionate in a time and place that glorified passive, feminine women. Together they navigate the seemingly esoteric system of football players and prom queens without ever really belonging to that system.

In college they separate, Banner to UCLA and Fran to Stanford. This is the beginning of their two different paths. Banner takes to academia and feminism, while Fran is drawn to the various spiritual movements of the 1960s. These years are covered in the third section, "Passages (1956-1982)." Banner includes chapters on their college life and the years immediately following, and then delves into her life as an academic and a feminist.

The last section covers Fran/Noura's life between 1967 and 1990. She studies Zen and other spiritual movements, such as the Gurdjieff system. In late 1960s, she moves to a commune in New Mexico. There she discovers westernized Sufi practices that have been cut from their Islamic base. Her continuing quest leads her to study Islam. She eventually becomes a Muslim and a member of a traditional Sufi order. Later, she studies in Saudi Arabia, and currently, she resides in Egypt.

In keeping with the personal nature of the book, Banner includes a collection of photographs ranging from old family snapshots to the two women together in high school in 1956 and again in Egypt in 1992. Much of Banner's analysis comes in the prologue and the epilogue. She also includes detailed notes for each chapter.

On the surface, Banner has written a memoir. It is a fascinating and quick read, drawing the reader into the women's lives. However, the book is more than a narrative of friendship. As a historian, Banner understands that personal histories can be reflective of larger societal histories. She writes: "this book explores two women's experiences during the post-World War II eras of gender traditionalism in the 1950s and of social ferment in the 1960s. Our differing lives illustrate the power and complexities of those decades, how each could impact on two lives so uniquely." As an historian Banner can see the difficulties she and Fran/Noura faced in high school not as the unique challenges they seemed to be at the time, but instead as an experience that was common to women who did not fit the 1950s mold. She examines their high school years within the larger framework of post-World War II middle-class America.

Banner analyzes her adult life and career choices in the context of second wave feminism. Prior to becoming involved in the feminist movement, Banner was unaware of the discrimination she regularly faced as a graduate student. Feminism allowed her to see the sexism in academia that hindered her career and limited her options. She understands that failures, such as her inability to get tenure as a history professor at Douglass, reflect larger societal truths while she still expresses to the reader the impact they had on her personally.

Fran/Noura's life and choices are examined in context of the many spiritual and communal movements of the 1960s. These spiritual groups are often seen as part of America's past, like peace symbols or love-ins, yet many still exist today. Fran/Noura's search "for a life in which work and family, art and spirituality could be integrated into a creative whole" was a search many people shared. Like many of the spiritually minded of her generation, Fran/Noura would try many systems before finding one she could completely adopt.

Banner gives the reader two personal stories within the larger societal environment. This is where the book is strongest and most useful. It is an autobiography/biography of two women and of two cultural forces of the recent past.

Having presented a personal account, Banner tries to go further and attempts to analyze each of their life-altering decisions. She wonders why their lives took such different turns, one to feminism and the other to Islam. Ostensibly, this query is the heart of Banner's book. It is, however, a question she never adequately answers. Banner never fully

explores Fran/Noura's life and choices. Her decision to embrace Islam is not treated with the same analysis Banner applies to her own life choices. While Banner shares with the reader Fran/Noura's dissatisfaction with other spiritual movements, such as Gurdjieff's, much is left unsaid. The reader wonders what it is about Islam that made it the end of Fran/Noura's journey.

Moreover, though Banner hints at a dialogue between Islam and feminism, she fails to elaborate on this theme. She tells the reader that she and Fran/Noura have spent many hours discussing Islam and feminism, but the reader is not allowed to listen in on this discussion. Nor does she fully explore the differences between her feminism and Fran/Noura's Islam and the ultimate consequences of these differences.

Though in chronicling her own life, Banner sheds new light on the struggles of women in post-industrial America, she offers no similar insights into the role of women in Islam. Fran/Noura explains women's rights in Islam while admitting that men sometimes deny these God-given rights to women. Banner calls many of Fran/Noura's Islamic beliefs "feminist," such as the belief in equal pay for equal work and a woman's right to education. In spite of this surface level agreement, the reader never learns how each woman perceives the other's total worldview. Still, as lifelong friends, Fran/Noura and Banner can accept each other.

Some feminists may see Banner's acceptance of Fran/Noura's Islam as a betrayal of her own ideology. Where, for example, are the "tough questions" about the status of women in Saudi Arabia, where Fran/Noura once lived? At the same time, however, her exploration of the feminism of her generation may be seen a major contribution.

On the other hand, Muslims may see Banner's loving acceptance of her friend as a sort of triumph in a world where the followers of Islam are often painted with a single brush—a brush that colors 1.2 billion people as backward, narrow-minded terrorists. They may, however, feel that Banner's failure adequately to explain how and why Fran/Noura became a Muslim is a major shortcoming of the work.

In reality, Banner has failed both Muslims and feminists. While she and Fran/Noura may have come to a personal understanding, that understanding has not been translated onto the pages of her book. Banner has a unique opportunity to open a dialogue on women, their lives and choices—a dialogue between feminisms and Muslims. Sadly, it is an opportunity lost. The two friends may be reconciled, but the reader still wonders about the larger issues inherent in their friendship. Is there room in the western academic feminist worldview to accommodate "feminist"

Islamic beliefs? And, if they cannot be accommodated, is there room at least for meaningful dialogue?

As a personal narrative, this book is interesting and insightful. Personal stories can reveal much about society as a whole. Unfortunately, Banner's does not. There are growing numbers of converts to Islam from both America and Europe, most of them women. Is Fran/Noura representative of these women, or is her story unique? "Finding Fran" does not answer these questions. It only begs them. It also does not answer or even approach the larger question of whether the women's movement and Muslims, especially western converts, can find enough common ground in order to discuss their differences. In the end, "Finding Fran" is limited by its greatest strength: its very personal focus.

Finally, it is interesting to note that Banner experienced her own spiritual awakening and transformation while working on this book. After rejecting the Protestantism of her youth, she was an atheist most of her adult life. As she traces Fran's life through various spiritual groups, she awakens her own need for spirituality. In the end, she joins the Sufi Order in the West, a group which borrows Sufi practices without embracing Islamic structure and law. Fran was a member of this same group in the early 1970s. For her, it proved to be a rest stop on the journey to Islam.

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