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Women Who Fight Back

The author’s quest to find women who fought back began when she was raped by a tour guide in Rome after he slipped her a sedative. She did not report the incident because she did not think anyone would believe her. But it consumed her thoughts for decades, drawing her to tales of women who retaliated. As an investigative journalist she was able to research and write about the women in this book over a period of many years, producing articles and documentaries about them as well as getting to know her subjects very well.

This is the story of three women who became vigilantes. Violated, they “took their stories of pain and transmuted them into power” (p. 3). It is also a story of three different experiences, in three different cultures, in three different parts of the world. As a result, it is divided into three different books, each with its own chapters. These books are so distinct that they could have easily been published separately as individual books. The title comes from Greek mythology. The Furies were ancient Greek goddesses who took revenge on men for wrongs done to women. Paintings show three Furies, hence the three separate books published in this volume.

Book 1 is about Brittany in northeast Alabama who shot her assailant while he was wrestling with her brother, after the assailant had raped and choked her. Complicating this story is the role of drugs, especially meth, and the widespread prevalence of guns. Brittany knew the man; she let him into her home, but it was her brother who brought the gun.

Brittany’s home is a rural, heavily white area in the Appalachian Mountains just below the Tennessee line. She had screwed up her life with drugs to the point that she lost custody of her three children. As her book begins, it looks like she
is just about to get her life back together. Instead, her talent for making bad decisions intervenes, as does her attraction to violent men.

She lived in a world in which courts and cops believed men were honorable and women were not, at least women like Brittany who were at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Charged with murder, she was assigned a lawyer who invoked Alabama's stand your ground defense, which states that if you are threatened in your own home, you can use deadly force to defend yourself. From the author's description, the incident sounds like a clear case of self-defense, not just stand your ground. After a hearing, the (female) judge denied the defense, so a jury never heard it. Brittany had a habit of changing her story, depending on whom she was talking to. Her brother was also inconsistent. The judge did not believe her. This case dragged on, but it never went to a jury because Brittany agreed to plead guilty in exchange for a very short sentence. Only after she got out of prison did she learn that being a convicted felon added to the burdens in her life.

This short summary does not do justice to the author's extensive review of what happens to women who kill abusive men. Elizabeth Flock describes other cases in other states as well as studies that have been done since the women's movement raised national consciousness. She also examines the support that Brittany received from women all over the country. Social media played a major role or, rather, was a major tool for both Brittany and others.

Book 2 is about Angoori, a Dalit in Uttar Pradesh, a large state in northern India. Dalits used to be called Untouchables, reflecting their place in the world below the four Hindu castes. Angoori became a bandit after her high-caste landlord evicted her family from their small plot of land, even though she had paid all their bills. She was following in the steps of Phoolan Devi, famous as India's Bandit Queen. Angoori formed the Green Gang, which became known for beating men with bamboo canes who had wronged women. (Occasionally they beat women.)

Her growing reputation and systematic organizing of other Dalit women made her Green Gang very large. They were taken seriously, and eventually she brought the gang into one of the state's political parties. Her women could vote, turn out the vote, and populate rallies at her direction. This gave them some protection from the fact that they were also violating a lot of laws. Flock says that state institutions failed to protect women, or anyone else who did not have influence. Blending criminal actions with political ones gave them the power to get a semblance of justice for the women they helped. Angoori also did some time in jail, as did others in her gang.

Book 3 is about Cecel, a Kurd in northern Syria. Kurds share a culture, language, and identity but were placed into four separate nations when the Ottoman Empire was carved up after World War I. Since then, Kurds have alternated between wanting their own state and wanting autonomy within the four existing states. Turkey is particularly hostile to their existence, viewing the Kurdistan Workers Party (the PKK) as a terrorist organization. Turkey has sought to ban all manifestations of Kurdish identity, including language.

Cicel was a school dropout when the Syrian civil war erupted in 2011. A born rebel, she “saw marriage as equivalent to becoming a servant” (p. 195). She liked to fight and wanted to go into the military. Her chance came when Kurds joined with others to form the Syrian Democratic Forces in 2015. Kurds saw this as a chance to create an autonomous homeland. They had a cult leader who promoted not only Kurdish nationalism but also equality for women. He was in jail as Turkey's political prisoner, but his ideas were taught as the reigning ideology of the longed-for Kurdish state. Syrian Kurds created two militias: the YPG (People's Defense Units or People's Protection Units) for men and the YPJ (Women's Protection...
Units) for women. Both were trained to fight. Cicek joined the YPJ.

The author writes not only of Cicek’s many battles and injuries but also those of other women. She notes that the men’s and women’s units were not allowed to date each other but did so surreptitiously. They also needed their parents’ permission to marry, which was not always granted. Although Cicek had no interest in dating men, she eventually fell in love with her YPJ commander, whose death left her distraught.

In the end, Flock concludes that these women’s violent actions “both helped and hurt them.... They all found agency, a voice, and an identity beyond how the men in their towns saw them” (p. 285). They also found tragedy, as their traditional cultures sought to smother them through rules and expectations. But, like in the glass ceiling women pound on, cracks appeared. It is up to the next generation to make them larger.

Flock reports much more than she analyzes. Although I would have liked to learn more about the costs and benefits of the actions these women took, knowing what they did is both informative and entertaining. The book has a five-page list of references but no index. Read it for pleasure, not for research.

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