



Women Leaders in Higher Education: Shattering The Myths

Fitzgerald, Tanya
Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014

Book Review

Tags: administration | higher education | leadership | women leadership

Reviewed by: Joanne Maguire Robinson, *University of North Carolina - Charlotte*

Date Reviewed: March 5, 2015

Women involved or interested in leadership in higher education will find this book to be at turns inspiring and somewhat painful to read. Any woman who has held a position of leadership likely shares similar stories of personal sacrifice and institutional prejudice; indeed, many of the stories in this book paint a picture of academia as hostile, male territory. Tanya Fitzgerald manages to add a twist to this tale in the way she weaves together stories from her ethnographic research with senior women leaders in universities in Australia and New Zealand. Her work focuses primarily on the trials and triumphs of women as they extend themselves mentally, emotionally, and physically in their jobs, but the book manages to offer a sense of hope in part because the author chooses to frame her analysis around the experiences of Indigenous women. This inclusion and focus gives the book leverage in a field flooded with similar studies. Fitzgerald uses the experiences of these women to show that women's encounters with academic institutions are best described as "continuous struggle and compromise" (25) that nevertheless opens the way for new ways of conceiving of leadership in higher education.

Fitzgerald teases out the complexities of the tasks facing women who oversee diverse staff, who are expected to "think big" while handling minutia, and who serve as mentors for women wanting to break into the leadership roles. Women's lives as academic leaders is, in one word, "messy." Fitzgerald is also appropriately attentive to disciplinary context and institutional climate, and her subjects come across as real individuals in real circumstances. Her overall goal is to push up against the myths that keep women as institutional housekeepers or otherwise limit their potential as leaders (22) and she manages to do that, albeit in a limited and incomplete way that fits with the stories she includes. She is careful not to advance any

“grand narrative,” preferring instead to celebrate the individuality of her subjects as they improvise their lives.

The myths being shattered here include the myth of opportunity (which assumes that gender equality is established) and the myth of what leadership ought to look like and how women ought to behave (17). Overall, Fitzgerald paints a picture of academia as a land alien to women and women’s ways of being, so that women who find themselves in position to lead often have to adjust to the rules or courageously make up new rules. Fitzgerald highlights the precarious positions held by women in leadership roles, and she ends on a point of hope that seems a bit of a stretch based on her evidence. Nevertheless, I would recommend this study to any woman (or man) in leadership, either in higher education or the clergy. Although *Women Leaders in Higher Education* does not focus much on teaching, many women in higher education will find themselves faced with the question of whether to move into administration. This book will shed light on that personal and professional choice.

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