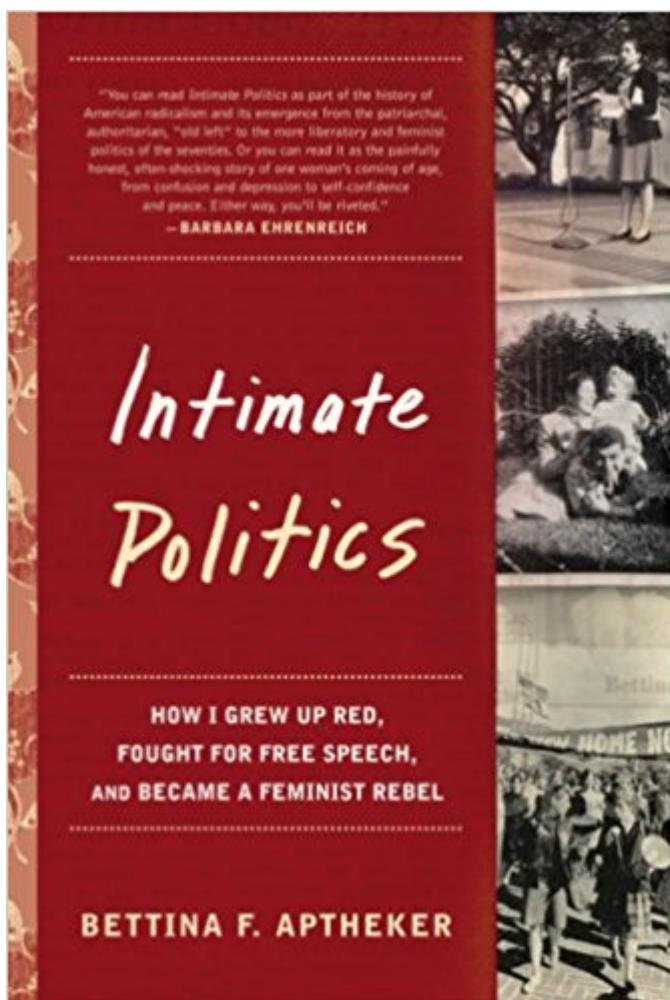


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# Intimate Politics: How I Grew Up Red, Fought For Free Speech, And Became A Feminist Rebel



## Synopsis

At eight years old, Bettina Aptheker watched her family's politics play out in countless living rooms across the country when her father, historian and U.S. Communist Party leader Herbert Aptheker, testified on television in front of the House on Un-American Activities Committee in 1953. Born into one of the most influential U.S. Communist families whose friends included W. E. B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Bettina lived her parents' politics witnessing first-hand one of the most dramatic upheavals in American history. She also lived with a terrible secret: incest at the hands of her famous father and a frightening and lonely life lived inside a home wrought with family tensions. A gripping and beautifully rendered memoir, *Intimate Politics* is at its core the story of one woman's struggle to still the demons of her personal world while becoming a controversial public figure herself. This is the story of childhood sexual abuse, abortion, sexual violence, activism, and the triumph over one's past. It's about FBI harassment and persecution, Jewish heritage, and lesbian identity. It is, finally, about the courage to speak one's truth despite the consequences and to break the sacred silence of family secrets.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Now professor of feminist studies at UC Santa Cruz, Aptheker was an activist participant in some of the major events of the '60s and '70s—the Free Speech Movement in Berkeley, the antiwar movement and the Angela Davis trial. As the daughter of U.S. Communist Party leader Herbert Aptheker, she was virtually a red-diaper princess, only to "fall from grace" with the party in

her late 20s. Her highly politicized New York City upbringing was one of middle class comfort, although sorely affected by McCarthyist persecution—as well as sexual abuse by her father, deeply repressed memories of which she uncovered in adulthood. The author, who taught her first women's studies course in 1977, describes herself as a latecomer to the women's movement (the Communist Party considered it "petit bourgeois"). A personal transformation paralleled the political, as her repressed lesbianism also surfaced and gradually culminated in a fulfilling long-term relationship. Though pedestrian prose and prolix detail obscure what ought to be a compelling account of events with powerful social as well as personal meaning, Aptheker's memoir (after *Tapestries of Life*) is a significant document for students and historians of feminism, communism and the '60s. (Nov.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

"An awful and amazing story, reading like something in Doctorow's *Ragtime*. . . iron[ic] . . . it comes out [with the Representative] Foley revelations." -- Jesse Lemisch, History News Network "I could not put this book down. What a story! It is enlightening and enriching. " -- Tom Hayden, author of *The Lost Gospel of the Earth*, *The Port Huron Statement*, and *Street Wars* "Part of the history of American radicalism . . . painfully honest, often shocking . . . you'll be riveted." -- Barbara Ehrenreich, author of *Nickel and Dimed* "Stunning . . . remarkable . . . shattering. . . . Bettina Aptheker is a powerful witness." -- The Chronicle of Higher Education, October 6, 2006 "This memoir is a revelation and an inspiration. . . a deeply forgiving work." -- Margot Adler, NPR correspondent and author of *Heretic's Heart* and *Drawing Down the Moon*

From the outset, I read everything I can by Bettina Aptheker. Aptheker's (1989) book *Tapestries of Life* discussion of dailiness had a powerful influence on my dissertation research and gave me a language from which to see. So I was eager to read her autobiography. This is not a Pollyanna life is wonderful memoir. What is to come is foreshadowed in the prologue when Aptheker noted, "With disclosure, cycles of violence may be stopped. . . . I was a "reliable witness" to my own life. . . . bearing witness is a political and spiritual practice in which the participants go to a place of great suffering and publicly acknowledge its existence" (pp. 5,6). Family dynamics, incest from 3 to 13, political activism, to the inner workings of a child trying to understand and make sense of her world and the adjustments are made in relation to her context. This is a rich reliving and telling of Aptheker's growth into a woman. As I read about the early years, I was transported to that time, forgetting that she was writing in retrospect, I easily thought I was listening to a child describe how

she coped(?) and adjusted to survive the abuse, family dynamics and circumstances. The other part of the story is her family's and her activism and how their beliefs and values shaped the woman she is. McCarthyism, the Communist Life in America. We get a rich glimpse into a part of US history and the years that followed and how Aptheker's views and ideas were influenced by her context. This is a tremendous, tremendous autobiography. Aptheker, B. (1989). *Tapestries of life: Women's work, women's consciousness, and the meaning of daily experience*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.

an honest women. moves away from doctrine to reality.

There are two distinct and fascinating stories interwoven here. Ms. Aptheker was part of the inner circle wherever boomers spontaneously manned the barricades for social change. She gives us a meticulous (perhaps too meticulous) first-hand account of the people she knew and the events she lived during the free-speech, civil rights, anti-war, and feminist revolutions. Hence, the word 'politics' in the title. Then she tells another, much more interesting story. The 'intimate' passages introduce us to a very, very bright, traumatized young girl, one who is eager to please and desperate to fit in. So she steps out bravely -- her courage is astounding (especially her courage to change course in pursuit of integrity)-- but every bold action she takes also exposes her to very real dangers from the powers-that-be. A more sensible person might have withdrawn and conformed, but Ms. Aptheker staggers defiantly on. This is a story about secrets, injuries, shame, stubbornness, self-destruction, self-discovery, healing, and the courage to keep following your star, despite it all.

Well written, honest, and insightful

Bettina reviews a very important period; her growth, both personal and political, make for fascinating reading. I know her, and many of the persons and events in the book, and her "take" on them is very insightful. Events in her family, which took/take up so much of the reviewers time, are treated, I think, with respect and love, and don't detract from what is a wonderful story. Bravo to her.

I enjoyed this book very much. It is a great personal and political memoir, and captures the feeling of the transitions women were going through. I recommend it to all who are interested in understanding women and their struggles for independence.

This memoir by Bettina Aptheker is an amazing story of how she was able to heal herself from the terrible trauma of childhood sexual abuse and assert her power to create the kind of life that she wanted for herself. Although she talks about her individual process of healing she always links that to the larger political struggles she was engaged in and makes the connection between the struggle to heal ourselves and the struggle to heal and transform society. A wonderful offering, *Intimate Politics* is a must read for social justice activists who have experienced violence in radical spaces and are looking for tools to heal.

Once in a while I'll take a gamble on a book and what I'll end up reading won't be nearly as profound as what I had first expected, therefore by spacing out my reading sessions (understatement) I was able to read this book from beginning to end. First of all, I would like to mention the Author's soothing writing style, which for me made this book a sincere pleasure to read and made the book's seven long chapters less tedious as they could have felt. Second, while this memoir has plenty of personal elements to it, I feel that there are too many parts that I as the reader had trouble connecting to the Author's life directly, diluting what I feel should've been the main thrust of this book the Author's life. Furthermore, the book left me feeling both too angry and too vulnerable, can't really explain why, perhaps it was something I'll call a negative slow burn. Lastly, luckily this book had a solid ending pulling together most of what was written in the heart of the book and there you go... to Brooklyn to Berkeley and too Beyond the beaten path.

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