

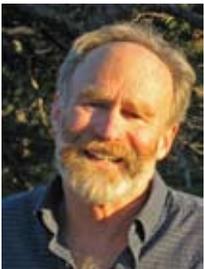
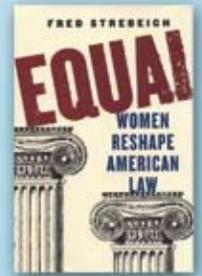
HONORABLE MENTION | BOOKS

Equal: Women Reshape American Law

W. W. Norton & Company
New York, New York
Fred Strebeigh, *Author*

COMMITTEE COMMENTARY

Equal: Women Reshape American Law is an engaging and ambitious work. It tells the dramatic stories of many of the leading cases since 1970 behind the fight for legal equality for women. Through these cases American law was significantly transformed, author Fred Strebeigh persuasively argues. He makes clear that women themselves were integral agents in this legal historical process. What sets the text apart is not only the detail and care devoted to the telling of these stories, but also Strebeigh's subtle focus on the ways in which having women attorneys involved affected how cases were litigated, and, eventually, their outcomes. Strebeigh begins his book with the story of widower Stephen Wiesenfeld, who was unable to secure Social Security benefits when his wife Paula, after years of working and contributing to Social Security, died giving birth to their child. At the time, such benefits were available to widows, but not widowers. Wiesenfeld's case eventually resulted in a favorable Supreme Court decision, but Strebeigh does far more than tell his readers about the case law. He also tells the engaging story of the lawyer who represented Wiesenfeld before the Supreme Court, attorney (and now Justice) Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Strebeigh organizes his book into different sections, each focused on a particular area of law affecting women. Readers learn, for example, about the struggles to address sexual harassment in the workplace, and the efforts to have unfair treatment of pregnant women legally recognized as sex discrimination. The book is intensely researched and rich in detail, and provides readers with an in-depth look at individual cases as well as the larger social, historical, and legal context. The result is an accessible text that can be widely enjoyed by general readers.



INTERVIEW with Fred Strebeigh

Fred Strebeigh, the author of Equal, teaches nonfiction writing at Yale University.

Where did the initial idea for *Equal* come from?

At Yale Law School, about two decades ago, I audited a course in "Sex Equality" taught by Catharine MacKinnon. Her presentation of cases and issues led me to write an article in 1991 for the *New York Times Magazine* called "Defining Law on the Feminist Frontier," which in turn led me to begin *Equal*.

What resources were required to develop your book?

The generosity of Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Catharine MacKinnon, and numerous attorneys and plaintiffs permitted me to work with documents, many in private collections, which other journalists and legal historians had not seen. I am indescribably grateful for that generosity.

How do you think your book treats or offers insights or perspectives on legal issues and legal institutions?

Justices resisted women's rights more than many readers expect. Perhaps only readers of *Equal* know, for example, about

efforts by Chief Justice Warren E. Burger to alter dramatically the outcome of the famous law-partnership case, *Hishon v. King & Spalding*. Little known also may be the story of resistance by Justice William J. Brennan, Jr., to hiring a woman as law clerk, and the pressure that led him to relent, and the impact that his first woman clerk (now a federal judge) had in an early sex discrimination case brought before the Supreme Court by Ruth Bader Ginsburg in her years as a litigator and law professor.

How does *Equal* foster public understanding? What do you see as its public impact?

Readers surprised by *Equal's* narrative of discrimination faced by women may be pleased to see the Supreme Court move closer to having five women justices. With three women serving as justices, the Court's ratio of men to women will reach an imbalance last seen in entering classes of American law schools in the year 1979.

Equal: Women Reshape American Law retails for \$35 hardcover. It is available from W. W. Norton and booksellers nationwide. For more information, go to equalwomen.com/default.aspx