



Great Books bite size

*Memoirs of a
Dutiful Daughter*

**Examine your
Humanity**

**Melbourne
Public
Humanities
Initiative**



**THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE**

An introduction from Professor Jacqueline Dutton

By the time Simone de Beauvoir released the first volume of her autobiography *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* in 1958, she was already a household name in France and a global icon for the emerging feminist movement. *The Second Sex* had been published in French in 1949, translated into English in 1953, and was a world-wide best-seller. Banned by the Vatican, it either scandalised or liberated readers, depending on their perspective, education, gender, and multiple other factors. Whatever their stance, almost everyone formed their own opinion about what kind of woman de Beauvoir must be to have written *The Second Sex*.

Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter is de Beauvoir's first – and arguably most successful – attempt to bring 'Simone' into the official narrative and thereby counterbalance the personal attacks that portrayed her as a bitter, cynical, 'unwomanly' woman. This autobiographical venture rewrites public opinion as de Beauvoir constructs her own identity, tracing those developmental years from her birth in 1908 until 1929, when family, religion, education, and friendships exercised their foundational influences on the young – yet already intellectually oriented – mind of the author.

In this masterclass, we will explore *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* as a source of forensic fascination for those who want to know how de Beauvoir reached the peak of her powers and wrote *The Second Sex* in just over a year at the age of 38. In parallel, we will observe a detailed portrait of society and class, work and play, music, literature, and philosophy in Paris in the early 20th century, as seen through the eyes of one of the greatest writers of her generation. In the end, we will understand more clearly the dynamic interplay between the formative years and the celebrated status of Simone de Beauvoir as a public intellectual.



[Jacqueline Dutton](#) is Professor of French Studies. Her leadership in curriculum design foregrounds Agency, Futures Literacy and Utopian Thinking as key tools to empower future generations and enhance transition to university. She has presented innovative collaborative research on developing this program for delivery to 2500 Arts students per year at Futures Studies conferences in Turku and Paris.

She has established a reputation as a leading researcher and writer on French culture and identity, specialising in literature, food, wine, travel and utopia as intercultural products of regional, national and international geopolitics.

Extra resources

[The meaning of life according to Simone de Beauvoir](#) (5 min), TED-Ed

Iseult Gillespie explores the life of the revolutionary thinker in this short animated video.

[Simone de Beauvoir's Lost Novel of Early Love](#), *The New Yorker*

Beauvoir's passion for her doomed friend was so strong that she wrote about it again and again.

['Becoming Beauvoir': Her philosophy, love life and contradictions on feminism](#) (6:30 min), France 24

Philosopher Kate Kirkpatrick, author of *Becoming Beauvoir*, explains why the French feminist may have played down her skills.

[Simone de Beauvoir: becoming a woman](#) (28 min), Radio National

Host David Rutledge discusses biology, ideology and what it means to be a sexed human body.



Simone de Beauvoir.

Discussion questions

- How do you think Simone de Beauvoir's autobiographical project enhances our understanding of her work and life?

- Are our duties to family, friends, society, religion, education, and employment the bonds that shape our life?
- What role does reading play in forming not just a mind, but also a personality?
- What do you think about releasing private documents after an author's death?

