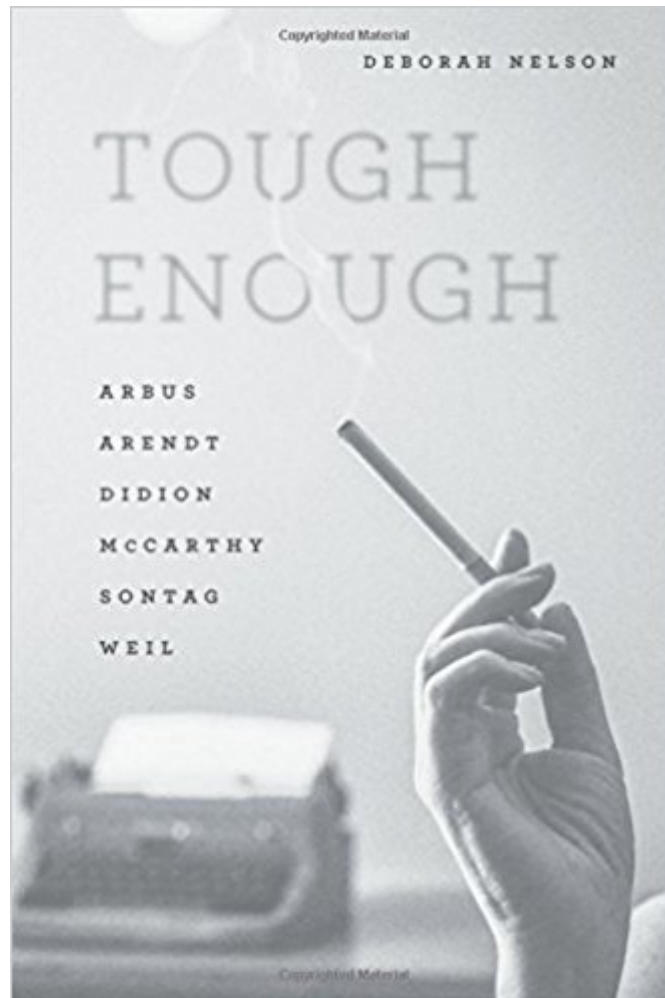




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# **Tough Enough: Arbus, Arendt, Didion, McCarthy, Sontag, Weil**



## Synopsis

This book focuses on six brilliant women who are often seen as particularly tough-minded: Simone Weil, Hannah Arendt, Mary McCarthy, Susan Sontag, Diane Arbus, and Joan Didion. Aligned with no single tradition, they escape straightforward categories. Yet their work evinces an affinity of style and philosophical viewpoint that derives from a shared attitude toward suffering. What Mary McCarthy called a “cold eye” was not merely a personal aversion to displays of emotion: it was an unsentimental mode of attention that dictated both ethical positions and aesthetic approaches. *Tough Enough* traces the careers of these women and their challenges to the pre-eminence of empathy as the ethical posture from which to examine pain. Their writing and art reveal an adamant belief that the hurts of the world must be treated concretely, directly, and realistically, without recourse to either melodrama or callousness. As Deborah Nelson shows, this stance offers an important counter-tradition to the familiar postwar poles of emotional expressivity on the one hand and cool irony on the other. Ultimately, in its insistence on facing reality without consolation or compensation, this austere “school of the unsentimental” offers new ways to approach suffering in both its spectacular forms and all of its ordinariness.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“*Tough Enough* is a brilliant defense of coldness. Nelson gathers together six extraordinarily well-known modern women who, one way or another, and often in deep—and sometimes

conspicuous—concert, championed theological, philosophical, and political principles, as well as aesthetic practices, which together constitute an important school of the unsentimental. For those who are devoted to these six figures, who can't get enough of them, and who always knew that they somehow belonged together, this illuminating book will be welcomed as a revelation and confirmation. (Jeff Nunokawa, author of *Note Book*) "Behind Nelson's cool rhetoric lurks an exciting thinker . . . . Raising the question of toughness as a methodology and style is compelling and timely, especially at a time when women are both assuming more powerful roles in public life and having to fight against hostile stereotypes. Nelson is intellectually tough enough to take on these six case studies." (*Times Literary Supplement*) "Thanks to Nelson, we now know that these 'tough' women share the trait of unsentimentality, which is not a character defect, as their critics often claimed, but a principled commitment, even a style: austere, pitiless, clinical, unwavering. Frankly feminist, *Tough Enough* argues that while sentimentalism has earned enormous critical attention, the unsentimental has largely gone unprocessed by literary critics and theorists. This superb book about women, style, criticism, politics, and misogyny is the beginning of the end of that." (Bonnie Honig, author of *Antigone, Interrupted*) "Agree or disagree with the case for unsentimentality, *Tough Enough* is well worth the time: for Nelson's insights on some landmark works of the 20th (and for Joan Didion, the 21st) century, and for its considerations on how to face suffering. How to see it and wholly appreciate it without trying to inhabit its emotional space. And to wrest something meaningful from that." (*WBUR, The ARTery*) "Tough Enough is an important contribution to literary, gender, affect, and trauma studies, and an all-too-timely read in our current political climate, for academic and non-academic readers alike. At a time when the study of the humanities is under threat, Nelson proves, again and again, that analysis of evidence, critical thinking, and argumentation are vital tools for confronting brutal political realities. May we all be tough enough to approach the world as Weil, Arendt, McCarthy, Sontag, Arbus, and Didion. (Los Angeles Review of Books)" Nelson is primarily interested in the aesthetic, political, and philosophical concerns guiding the work these women produced; thus, *Tough Enough* is light on biographical detail, heavy on fine-grained stylistic analysis. Anyone who already admires Weil, Arendt, McCarthy, Sontag, Didion, or Arbus will no doubt appreciate this approach, and Nelson obviously aware that most readers won't be familiar with all of her subjects—provides some context for each of them." (*Washington Independent Review of Books*) "Unsurprisingly, her subjects' unsentimental attitudes toward human suffering frequently earned them scorn and derision from allies and enemies alike for supposedly being heartless or cruel. Nelson complicates

this predominant view not only by examining the gendered presumptions that constrained women's public self-expression but also by illustrating how and why these women's tough-minded perspective is part of a profoundly ethical and deeply engaged response to the ample brutality of the contemporary world." (Choice) "Her book contributes significantly to our understanding of these remarkable women—Simone Weil, Hannah Arendt, Mary McCarthy, Susan Sontag, Diane Arbus, and Joan Didion—and immeasurably to our thinking about how we as critics understand representations of suffering." (American Literary History Online Review)

Deborah Nelson is associate professor of English at the University of Chicago. She is the author of *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America*.

I enjoyed this book. It gave me a whole new perspective on how to think about social responsibility and critical left politics. And, I found the descriptions of the thinking of these intellectuals fascinating.

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