Leisure and Feminist Theory is a must-read introductory book for novice researchers and postgraduate students, and a recommended reference for experienced researchers who are interested in gender studies in leisure, tourism and sports. This landmark book provides a comprehensive overview of the development of leisure and feminist theories in the last three decades of the twentieth century, a period of time marked by rapid social changes and the pinnacle of feminist movements. The shift from industrial society to consumer society and women’s increased participation in the workplace, most notably in the developed western countries, had a significant impact on the meanings of and the importance ascribed to leisure, which warranted a renewed understanding of leisure experiences as a social phenomenon. As such, this book was a timely effort to chart and critique social theories and feminist perspectives that have informed leisure studies. Researchers who are new in this study area will find this book helpful as it provides an extensive compilation and comprehensible introduction to the works of major social theorists (for example, Foucault, Giddens and Mead) and feminist thinkers (for example, Butler, bell hooks and Spivak). Researchers who are interested in the leisure experiences of women and men in the past century will also find the book valuable as it provides a collection of empirical materials, records of social events, and even poems.

The book comprises nine chapters with each examining a social theory (mainly put forth by male theorists) that inform the understanding of leisure experiences and its responding feminist perspectives. While the chapters are independent of each other, they are organised in a coherent logical flow that reflects the evolution of leisure theories from functionalism, where leisure is conceptualised in relation to paid work, to structuralism, where the class and gender-based inequalities in access to leisure are questioned, and from there to poststructuralism, where leisure is conceptualised as a space to negotiate power and identities. In addition to the aforementioned macrosocial perspectives, the book covers microsocial perspectives that focus on the individuals, including the construction of multiple subjectivities through leisure as well as the embodiment and emotion of leisure. A chapter is dedicated to urban sociology to examine the design and use of leisure space and to demonstrate how feminist perspectives can contribute an alternative understanding of space that is flexible, interactive and empowering. While the focus of the book is to theorise women’s experiences into the male-dominated leisure theories, Wearing does not lose sight of the struggles of men at an individual level caused by the hegemonic masculinity. Likewise, the experiences of women at the social margin, such as refugees and aborigines, are addressed, though the analytical lens is mainly informed by white feminist perspectives.

One of the main highlights of the book is Wearing’s critiques of the merits and shortcomings of each social theory and feminist perspective in their effectiveness in conceptualising the concept of leisure and the embedded power relations that construct women’s leisure experiences. The emphasis on power forms the main argument that runs through the book, in which Wearing declares her predisposition to a poststructural feminist standpoint at the outset. In the conclusion of the book, Wearing reflects on how each perspective contributed to her own conceptualisation of leisure. Instead of distancing herself from the text to achieve an objective, expert voice as seen in the works of many male thinkers, Wearing openly acknowledges her impure, eclectic and neo-pragmatic approach where she combined the strongest features of each feminist perspective in order to maximise the ability to contest the persistent
gender hegemony. Such reflection is especially valuable for novice researchers to learn how to conceptualise their research along the feminist spectrum.

The outcome of her eclectic approach leads to the most important contribution of the book, which is a feminist construction of leisure as a personal space in contrast to the masculinist construction of leisure as non-work free time. The latter fails to address leisure in relation to unpaid care and domestic work, which is estimated as equivalent to 48% of Australia’s GDP in 1997 – this is the most recent estimate as standard social and economic statistics usually do not include this data (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). For women who are responsible for most of the domestic work, it is hard to imagine cooking for the whole family as a leisure activity. To address the limitation of the conventional, gender-blind understanding of leisure, Wearing puts forth the notion of leisure as personal space, which is shaped by three interrelated perspectives: (1) because of the relative freedom that constitutes leisure, individuals have some degree of autonomy to do something or nothing, and this autonomy allows them to resist social constraints and gender expectations (poststructuralist feminism); (2) leisure space provides a *chora*, which is a space of becoming (urban sociology); and (3) through the embodied leisure experience and repeated performative acts, individuals can expand their subjectivities beyond gender stereotypes (embodiment). Wearing is particularly optimistic or hopeful in her poststructuralist theorisation of power and agency in leisure where she argues, with evidence, how individual leisure undertakings such as writing and poetry have turned into political action.

A lot of the insights offered in the book remain valid in 2018, twenty years after its publication. On the positive end, the book exemplifies how individual leisure usage of social media turned into a global movement that brought the conversation of sexual harassment to the forefront in 2017 – though social media as a leisure space was not considered in Wearing’s book that predates the existence of Tweeter. On the negative side, the objectification of women’s bodies in sports and tourism, which are two specialised forms of leisure, continues to be evident. In 2017, a well-known surf brand received strong criticism for using a controversial image on the landing page of its website (Heller, 2017). In the questionable image, the female model is projected as passive in a sexualised pose while the male model is presented as powerful and active. Another notorious example is the media representation of athletes where female athletes continue to be inferiorised and sexualised (Dunn, 2018). At an individual level, there has been an increasing concern regarding the issue of self-surveillance on Instagram and other social media platforms, and its impact on self-image and identities for the majority of people who do not fit into the ideal feminine or masculine bodies. The gendered body in leisure was deliberated on and critiqued in Wearing’s book and in other scholarly works that followed (Pritchard & Morgan, 2000; Small, 2016). It appears that work remains to be done to help scholarly critiques inform social changes and provide individuals access to alternative discourses and subjectivities.

As comprehensive as this book has endeavoured to be, one important feminist perspective has been under-theorised and that is intersectionality. Intersectionality is a concept germinated during the second wave feminist movement where feminist scholars of colour began to question the legitimacy of white feminism in representing voices of other women. The concept of intersectionality was coined by Crenshaw (1991) to account for interactions of multiple social identities (e.g. gender, race, age, class and sexuality) and embedded power relations in producing new forms of oppressions and inequalities. Intersectionality has since then developed into an important feminist perspective (Dhamoon, 2010) and has been recommended as the future direction for gender studies in leisure (Henderson & Gibson, 2013). While Wearing’s arguments are informed by the notion of power differentials and she critiques structural approaches and theoretical perspectives that disregard power, the idea of intersectionality is
embedded in Wearing’ arguments but is not spelled out and critiqued in the same fashion as other feminist perspectives.

A major social change that has become increasingly noticeable since the turn of the century is the rise of Asian economies, which can be translated into an increased access to commodified forms of leisure, including tourism. While the book has dedicated chapters on cultural studies and postcolonialism respectively, the discussion mainly focused on western leisure cultures and indigenous women experience in a western context (i.e. Australia). A study that extends Wearing’s work to examine the appropriateness of existing leisure and feminist theories in accounting for women in Asian, South American, African and other non-western cultures will be of particular value to continue the postcolonial theorisation and even decolonise the theorisation of women’s leisure experiences. In fact, in the closing of the book, Wearing wrote, “listening to the voices of women whose cultural position is different from one’s own can introduce alternative discourses and enable one to imagine other ways of being women” (p. 186). Following this sentiment and her feminist theorisation of leisure as “becoming”, Wearing’s work is an ongoing project rather than a conclusion.

While an updated review of the development of feminist and leisure theories in the past twenty years is warranted, the book remains highly relevant to current academic and policy discourses, especially its arguments of how leisure can be a space for women and men to resist social constraints, and how policy and urban planning should facilitate this empowering experience without pigeonholing women and men into gendered stereotypes, yet with sensitivity to cultural differences. While leisure researchers who are committed to meaningfully engage gender as a subject of investigation in particular will find this book insightful, I would recommend it to researchers working on any topics because leisure experiences are essentially gendered. Any study that claims to be gender neutral is to be gender blind as it ignores the historically constituted structures of male dominance in leisure and in nearly all aspects of social life, as prudently pointed out by Wearing in this landmark book of Leisure and Feminist Theory.

References