



Flying Confessions of a Free Woman, Jennifer Fox

★★★ 1/2



Six hours is a long time to spend with a total stranger, but by the end of filmmaker Jennifer Fox's remarkably honest and unexpectedly engrossing self-portrait, you may feel you know her better than you know many of your close friends. You may even miss Fox a little once the film ends, but she leaves you with plenty to think about.

In earlier era, Fox would be called "liberated." An accomplished filmmaker best known for her celebrated five-hour documentary AN AMERICAN LOVE STORY (1999) and a fearless world traveler who's struggled her whole life to steer clear of the constraints that keep independent-minded women down and limit their options. Growing up in middle-class suburbia where women became wives and mothers, Fox longed to be more like her strong,

high-flying amateur pilot father than the three unhappy, fearful and angry women who actually raised her: Her mother, a college educated teacher and professional accordionist who gave up everything to become a stay-at-home mom; her aunt, who remained unhappily unmarried her entire life; and Fox's vigilant and at times emotionally cruel grandmother. Now in her forties (Fox was 42 when she began filming), still determinedly single and living the independent life she always thought she wanted in New York City, Fox begins to question how much of this life has been defined by precisely the struggle to remain unfettered, modern and free. With camera in hand -- and often pointed at herself -- Fox sets out to explore her life and the lives of her friends, hoping to better understand what she calls the "modern female predicament."

The film chronicles three years in Fox's life, beginning with a terrible emotional blow that serves as the impetus for the project: her best-friend Pat, a talented musician, is diagnosed with a brain tumor. Pat's struggle comes as a wake-up call that leaves Fox taking stock of her past and her present, and thinking seriously about her future. Fox is currently in two complicated relationships with different men: a married man whom Fox refers to as "Kye" and who lives in South Africa, and Patrick, a good-natured but reticent Swiss filmmaker Fox isn't sure she loves. For help and perspective, Fox turns "passes the camera" over to her friends: Mindy, a young woman in her 20s who's about to fully embrace what Fox once vowed to avoid -- marriage and children; and L'Dawn, an old friend whose dream marriage to "Mr. Right" ended in bitter divorce and an endless legal battle over child support. Fox also keeps the camera running as she travels to places as far afield as Berlin, Paris, Pakistan, Russian, Cambodia, South Africa and London. In each port of call, Fox passes the camera to women she's just met and to old friends known for years, many involved in women's groups and human rights causes. Through women like Chanthol, a Cambodian war survivor who now works with prostitutes, Paromita, an Indian lawyer devoted to improving the lives of women in her community, and Amina, a Somali refugee in London fighting against female circumcision, we begin to see a much larger picture.

As self-centered as the project might sound, Fox only uses the drama of her own independent, financially secure western life as a springboard to talk about the ways in which women and their sexuality are controlled by men, societal expectations and, interestingly, other women. Fox's personal epiphanies may seem small compared to the conversations she has with Somali survivors of female genital mutilation or villagers in rural South Asia, where rape victims are routinely murdered by their families in "honor killings." But they're all connected, Fox asserts, and she's right; in the end this very personal journey becomes a valuable universal document from which we can all learn about the way women live today. --Ken Fox