

The Pledge Signers

Writers Support Feminist Bookstores

4/4/96

Dorothy Abbott
Max Airborne
Lisa Albrecht
Meena Alexander
Dorothy Allison
Julia Alvarez
Gloria Anzaldua
Bettina Aptheker
Jane Ariel
Barbara Ascher
Arlene Avakian
Lauren M. Baldwin
Ann Bannon
Alison Bechdel
Patricia Bell-Scott
Doris Binet
Mary Kay Blakely
Lucy Jane Bledsoe
Martha Boethel
Barrie Joan Borich
Sandy Boucher
Blanche McCrary Boyd
Robin Bradford
Maureen Brady
Beth Brant
Mary Bricker-Jenkins
Marlis Manley
Broadhead
Rebecca Brown
Elly Bulkin
Christine Burton
Sandra Butler
Wendy Cadden
Karen Cadora
Jennifer Camper
Jane Caputi
Marie Cartier
Wendy Chapkis
Suzy M. Charnas
Sandra Cisneros
Pearl Cleage
Michelle Cliff
Catherine Coger
Johnetta B. Cole
Nicole Conn
Blanche Wiessen Cook
Teresa Cordova
Tee A. Corinne
Clare Coss
Georgia Cotrell
Alma Cremonesi

Barbara Cully
Martha Clark Cummings
Mary Daly
Miriam DeCosta-Willis
Alison Deming
Jennifer DiMarco
Nisa Donnelly
Madeline Drexler
Joan M. Drury
Linnea Due
Jacqueline Dumas
Elana Dykewoman
Nachman
Barbara Ehrenreich
Riane Eisler
Cynthia H. Enloe
Karen Falkenstrom
Susan Faludi
Leslie Feinberg
Doris Fields
Kathleen A. Forde
Marion Foster
Dorothy A. Fowler
Maria C. Fraser
Marcia Freedman
Ellen Frye
Nancy Gage
Beatrix Gates
Tirzah Gerstein
Jewelle L. Gomez
Ibis Gomez-Vega
Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb
Janice Gould
E.J. Graff
Barbara Grier
Hattie Grossett
Rachel Guido de Vries
Marilyn Hacker
Kay Leigh Hagan
Susan Elizabeth Hale
Joy Harjo
Bertha Harris
Ellen Hart
Denise R. Harvey
Michele Hays
Carolyn Holderread
Heggen
Cynthia Heimel
Peggy J. Herring
Nicole Hollander
Jynx Houston

Dorothy Howard
Ruth Hubbard
Holly Hughes
Jade
Rebecca Johnson
Hettie Jones
Judith Katz
Barbara Kingsolver
Maxine Hong Kingston
Susan Kinsolving
Irena Klepfisz
Terri de La Pena
Ann Lamott
Louise Lamphere
Gail Leonda-Wright
Elana Levy
Caitlin Libera
Gordene MacKenzie
Barbara Macdonald
Patricia Shaw Mathews
Judith McDaniel
Catherine McKinley
Franci McMahan
Toni A. H. McNaron
Diane Wood
Middlebrook
Honor Moore
Rosario Morales
Mary Morell
Robin Morgan
Patricia A. Murphy
Merril Mushroom
Nancy R. Nangeroni
Joan Nestle
Leslea Newman
Cris Newport
Naomi Shihab Nye
Ellen Orleans
Grace Paley
Sara N. Paretsky
Laura M. Pelton
Gail Pemberton
Suzanne Pharr
Sandra Pollack
Merri Helen Ponce
Patricia Powell
Minnie Bruce Pratt
Sarah Pryor
Louise Rafkin
Margaret Randall
J.M. Redman

Bessy Reyna
Adrienne Rich
Cynthia Rich
Ray Riess
Faith Ringgold
Cathianne Roslud
Sue Rosser
Bear Rowell
Jane Rule
Kate Rushin
Cristine Salat
Sonia Sanchez
Sandra Scopetone
Joni Seager
Linda Seese
Edith Royce Shade
Susan Sherman
Alix Kates Shulman
Patricia Clark Smith
Linda Smukler
Lorrie Sprecher
Diane Stein
Gloria Steinem
Sandra Steingraber
Linnea A. Stenson
Susanna J. Sturgis
Amber Coverdale
Sumrall
Sunlight
Cecilia Tan
Dena Taylor
Becky Thompson
Carla Tomaso
Lily Tomlin
Kitty Tsui
Cynthia Grant Tucker
Kay Turner
Kim Vaith
Lisa Vice
Patricia Victour
Linda Villarosa
Jane Wagner
Alice Walker
Debra Riffin Waugh
Audrey Webb
Mimi Wheatwind
Mary Wings
Jacqueline Woodson
Shay Youngblood
Natalie Zarchin
Yvonne Zipter




**Support Your Local Feminist Bookstore.
She Supports You!**




**Feminist Bookstore Week • North America
MAY 11-19, 1996**

Sponsored by Feminist Bookstore Network




Celebrate
Feminist Bookstore Week
 — North America —
MAY 11-19
 Call Your Local Feminist Bookstore For Details


MAY 11-19



Celebrate
Feminist Bookstore Week
 — North America —
 Call Your Local Feminist Bookstore For Details




Celebrate
Feminist Bookstore Week
 — North America —
MAY 11-19
 Call Your Local Feminist Bookstore For Details




Celebrate
Feminist Bookstore Week
 — North America —
MAY 11-19
 Call Your Local Feminist Bookstore For Details
 For a complete list of Feminist Bookstores, send \$1 and SASE to:
 Feminist Bookstore Network
 P.O. Box 882554
 San Francisco CA 94188


MAY 11-19




Celebrate
Feminist Bookstore Week — North America
 Call Your Local Feminist Bookstore For Details



Celebrate
Feminist Bookstore Week
 — North America —
MAY 11-19
 Call Your Local Feminist Bookstore For Details



Celebrate
Feminist Bookstore Week
 — North America —
MAY 11-19
 Call Your Local Feminist Bookstore For Details
 For a complete list of Feminist Bookstores, send \$1 and SASE to:
 Feminist Bookstore Network, P.O. Box 882554, San Francisco CA 94188



Celebrate
Feminist Bookstore Week
 — North America —
MAY 11-19
 Call Your Local Feminist Bookstore For Details
 For a complete list of Feminist Bookstores, send \$1 and SASE to:
 Feminist Bookstore Network
 P.O. Box 882554
 San Francisco CA 94188

National Feminist Bookstore Week

Success Stories



By Beth Morgan

Feminist booksellers across the U.S. and Canada celebrated National Feminist Bookstore Week, May 13-20, 1995, and from the reports we've heard so far, the week was an outrageous success! Participation ranged from putting up posters, selling tee-shirts and giving away bookmarks, to a full week of events that made a big local splash. And the press came on board in a big way — local newspapers covered the event, and several radio stations aired Mev Miller's superb documentary *A Labor of Love: A Tribute to 25 Years of Feminist and Lesbian Publishers and Bookstores*. At the national level, *Publishers Weekly* featured NFBW twice, Carol wrote a wonderful full-length article for *Ms. Magazine*, and National Public Radio invited Carol to speak about the state of independent bookselling on *Talk of the Nation*.

The result was a significant increase in visibility for feminist bookstores and a golden opportunity to educate book lovers about the politics of shopping at chain bookstores and the importance of where they

Photo: In Other Words, Portland, Oregon

choose to spend their book-buying dollars.

As we go to press, here's the latest from bookstores all across the country (and if you're not in here, call us and tell us how you celebrated NFBW at your store)!

Publishing Tie-In

MERISTEM (Memphis TN): Audrey May at Meristem was so excited about NFBW she decided to become a publisher! *On Resurrecting Roses*, an anthology of writings by local women authors on the subject of mother/daughter relationships, was published in time for NFBW, and last we heard, every single copy had been snapped up. Meristem also received fabulous support from County Commissioner Linda Rendtorff and City Council Chair Mary Rose McCormick, who each sponsored proclamations in honor of NFBW. Mary Rose came to Meristem's party celebrating their new book, read the proclamation, and then stayed for the whole event.

THE WOMEN'S BOOKSTOP (Hamilton Ontario): Renee Albrecht tells us that they put together an anthology especially for NFBW. Local women wrote



Photo at left and on facing page: Mother Kali's Books, Eugene, Oregon

stories, each of which had a recipe in it; then they held a book launching party at the store, with a performance by local musician Shelley Whitehead.

Using the Feminist Writers Pledge

THE READER'S FEAST (Hartford CT): Tollie Miller and Carolyn Anderson, creators of the Feminist Writers Pledge, report that they blew up the Pledge and the list of signees and posted it in their window, facing in and out. And Mary Kay Blakely, author of *American Mom: Motherhood, Politics and Humble Pie*, and Linda Villarosa (editor of *Essence* magazine) both did readings at the store.

Special Programming

ORLANDO BOOKS (Edmonton Alberta): Owner

Jacqueline Dumas (also an author and a signee of the Feminist Writers Pledge) scheduled three events for NFBW: The Northern Alberta Women's Archives Association, which focuses on women's history and the importance of their contributing memoirs, diaries, etc., to their community archives, gave a presentation in the store; Vjera Boniface, just back from Croatia, presented material she has gathered on how women have grouped together, often crossing ethnic lines, to support each other and oppose the war; and Edmonton Working Women released and discussed their report on job-related sexual harassment.

PRAIRIE MOON BOOKS (Arlington Heights IL): A publisher, an editor and a contributor to *The Woman-Centered Economy* (Third Side Press) came for an evening in the store. Their most visible positive result came from people who read about them in *Ms. Magazine*.

GERTRUDE STEIN MEMORIAL BOOKSHOP (Pittsburgh PA): At GSMB they declared National Feminist Bookstore Week a week of women's health awareness, and held a safe sex workshop for women and a breast cancer awareness workshop.

Promoting Feminist Presses

IN OTHER WORDS (Portland OR): The Eighth Mountain Press teamed up with In Other Words to create local visibility by sponsoring a 10% discount on all Eighth Mountain Books sold that month and donating enough copies of *Incidents Involving Mirth* (Anna Livia) so that In Other Words could give a free copy of the novel to each customer who purchased any book from a feminist press during NFBW. Co-director Catherine Sameh says it was great fun watching customers scout the store for feminist press books they could buy to get their free book! A local feminist author who signed the Feminist Writers Pledge did a reading at the store, and Ruth Gundle (owner of Eighth Mountain Press) taught an evening workshop for writers about getting published. In Other Words also distributed copies of Theresa Corrigan's *Sojourner* article and Carol Seajay's *Ms.* article, and as a result several people volunteered to help out in the store. Catherine reports that without all the advance publicity packets,

posters, buttons, tee-shirts, etc., they never would have had such a successful celebration!

Open Houses

CRAZY LADIES (Cincinnati OH): All books were discounted 15% in honor of NFBW, and on Friday they held an open house from 5 PM to 9 PM, during which they drew for a \$100 gift certificate.

Getting Media & Rotating Sales

LIONESS BOOKS (Sacramento CA): Owner Theresa Corrigan reports that they did their biggest ever newsletter mailing — 4000 copies! — announcing a three-part event, "A Celebration of our Sexuality." Author Robbie Sommers did an evening of performance art; Karla Jay, author of *Lesbian Erotics*, came to the store for a reading; and Dr. Joanne Marrow hosted a free-flowing discussion about female sexuality. Each day of NFBW a different section of the store was on sale at 20% off. In addition, Theresa picked out some select stock (i.e. impressive looking but too late for return), wrapped it up as presents, and gave a present each day to the person who spent the most money at the store (the wrapped presents were displayed, with an explanation). Lioness got more press coverage for NFBW than it has at any other time, but it didn't bring in the hordes of people they would have liked. The academic semester had ended a week previously, so maybe if NFBW comes earlier next year ...

Having a Good Time

WOMEN & CHILDREN FIRST (Chicago IL): Most of what they did was just *fun!* They loved the *Ms.* article — pithy and powerful. The most fun thing they did was to hide a gift certificate in a feminist press book or children's book every day, and then have a limerick that was a clue to where the certificate was hidden. People loved it! They also raffled free store memberships and sets of encyclopedias.

Street Fair Generates 34% Sales Jump

THE BOOK GARDEN (Denver CO): The Book Garden held a two-day street fair for local artists. Fifteen vendors came, as well as political organizations, healing artists and local publications. The fair filled an entire side of the block and down the alley next to The Book Garden. From this fair, they created a media list in their computer which has already come in handy since NFBW. Kasha Songer reports that The Book Garden made an extra \$3-4,000 in sales that week due to the fair. All in all they spent about \$600 promoting NFBW, and it bumped sales up 34% in May!

Making Feminism Visible

FULL CIRCLE (Albuquerque NM): Full Circle did a big window display, hosted several readings, and threw a Solidarity Party for people to celebrate and honor the store, including special invitations to luminaries of the women's community. It was just a party, not a sale, but they did \$900 in business that night. Their community was so pleased with the party that they're still getting thank-you letters for making feminism visible in Albuquerque. All of this despite the fact that Ann and Mary were down with hepatitis during much of the lead time. Mary was

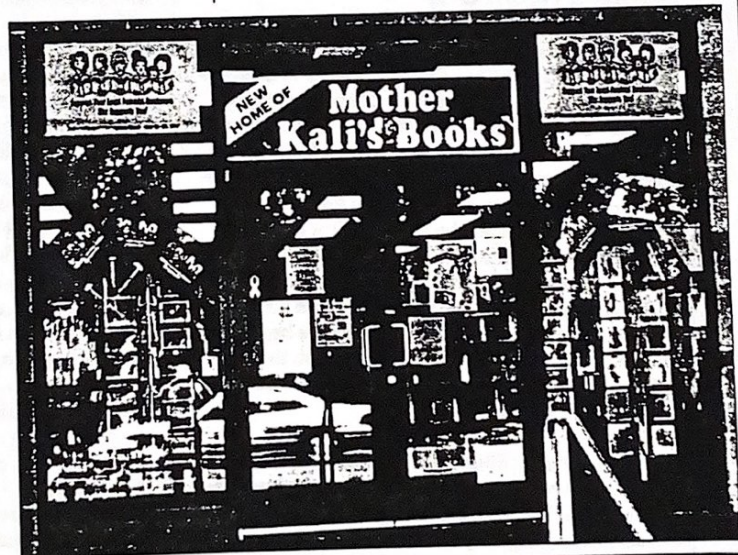




Photo at left and on facing page: Solidarity Party at Full Circle, Albuquerque, New Mexico

back on her feet in time to do a local radio show, followed by an airing of Mev Miller's *A Labor of Love: A Tribute to 25 Years of Feminist and Lesbian Publishers and Bookstores*.

Standing Room Only

MY SISTERS' WORDS (Syracuse NY): In addition to coverage in local newspapers, store owner Mary Ellen Kavanaugh tells us that *My Sisters' Words* was featured in a six-minute spot all its own on the evening news! Her favorite NFBW event was when a local poet read a poem she had written for Marge Piercy, and dedicated it to the bookstore workers because they treated her so well every time she came into the store, whether she spent \$100 or just browsed. But the most popular NFBW event was the night Mary Ellen and her employee Kay Steinmetz read from their current favorite books — to a standing-room-only crowd! Folks are begging them to do it again. And last but not least, the NFBW tee-shirts were a big hit — they sold fifteen shirts in two weeks.

A WOMAN'S PREROGATIVE (Ferndale MI): The store held one big event with four local authors, including Beth Brant, and it was by far the most successful reading they've ever had.

BRIGIT BOOKS (St. Petersburg FL): Diane Stein, author of fourteen books on healing and women's spirituality (and one of the authors who signed the Feminist Writers Pledge) came to Brigit Books to sign her newest book on May 20th. Attendance was fantastic! The store got some press coverage in local gay/lesbian venues, but not much mainstream press attention. Owner Patty Callaghan also made a map

of all the feminist bookstores in the U.S. and Canada, and gave it out with copies of the *Feminist Bookstores' Fall Catalog*.

NFBW Book Tables

AN UNCOMMON VISION (Wynnewood PA): NFBW coincided with *An Uncommon Vision's* planned participation as a dealer at the annual meeting of the American Association for the History of Medicine, in Pittsburgh PA. As an out-of-print specialist in women's history and women's lives, *An Uncommon Vision* had a sales table featuring women in medicine — physicians, nurses, technicians, patients, etc. — in all formats (autobiographies, biographies, novels written by women physicians or nurses, women's textbooks, manuals, diseases relating to women, women's health, photographs, postcards, posters and ephemera. They displayed original posters of WWII nurses and nurse recruitment; original paperback novels from the 1950s and 1960s with medical themes (such as the sexy nurse and the sex starved woman physician who is a closeted lesbian); and original photographs and autobiographies by women physicians and nurses who served as volunteers in Europe during WWII. *An Uncommon Vision* distributed its seventh out-of-print catalog during NFBW, celebrating its third year in business.

"Click!"

AMAZON BOOKSTORE (Minneapolis MN): The gals at Amazon got a lot of press in the locals and dailies, and local radio station aired Mev Miller's documentary *A Labor of Love: A Tribute to 25 Years of Feminist and Lesbian Publishers and Bookstores*. They received many positive phone calls in response to the radio spot, and an author who heard the tape and was scheduled to read at Borders that night actually plugged Amazon Books during her reading, saying that without feminist bookstores like Amazon, her work wouldn't have gotten the visibility that got her to Borders that night. Lots of women who signed the Feminist Writers Pledge live local to Amazon, and nine of them — all published with feminist presses — came to the store and read. And Sandra Martz, founder of Papier-Mache Press and editor of *I Am Becoming the Woman I've Wanted*, came to the store with local contributors to the anthology and gave a reading.

Special Sales

NEW WORDS (Cambridge MA) moved their annual birthday sale (already very well known locally) to coincide with NFBW. All the NFBW "gear" — buttons, tee-shirts, posters, flags, etc. — was great and worked very well. Lots of folks commented on the Ms. article.

OLD WIVES' TALES (San Francisco CA) hosted two wonderful readings: Editors Cathrine McKinley and Joyce Delaney of *Afrekete: An Anthology of Contemporary Black Lesbian Writing*; and Emily Shihadeh, author of *Grapes & Figs Are in Season: A Palestinian Woman's Story*. And on Mothers Day they discounted by 10% all books in the store that had the words sister, sistah or sisterhood in them.

Celebrating the Store

CHARIS BOOKS & MORE (Atlanta GA): Everyone loved the NFBW tee-shirts, and they had to order more! Charis had an evening celebration where people came in and shared anecdotes about their community experiences at Charis, and they played Mev's documentary on the history of feminist bookstores and feminist publishing. It wasn't a sales-oriented event, but they did do a nice display of books by signers of the Feminist Writers Pledge, and next year will do the same but will have a sale on those titles. The local gay/lesbian press did an

article on the store and NFBW, but since Charis just had their 20th anniversary in November, the press had already recently given them lots of attention.

Celebrating Staff

NORTHERN WOMEN'S BOOKSTORE (Thunder Bay Ontario): Margaret Phillips gave away NFBW bookmarks and put up NFBW posters, and threw a grand surprise birthday party for Anna McLeod, co-founder of the store. Margaret also took books to a conference in Sudbury and received a great response from the women there, who were thrilled to have access to quality feminist books.

SWEET VIOLETS (Marquette MI) reports that some of their customers even brought them gifts to celebrate "our week!"

**Celebrating the Network**

A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN (Madison WI): They did a huge window collage of promo "gear" from feminist bookstores all over the country and hung tee-shirts from the ceiling all over the store. They also had a sale on all feminist and lesbian press books during NFBW. The displays from other bookstores generated a lot of discussion and several customers asked to buy tee-shirts from the displays. "Next year," Sandi Torkildson reports, "we'll set it up so that we can sell the shirts instead of returning them."

Can You Say "Feminist"?!

LAMMAS BOOKSTORE (Washington DC) gave folks a discount if they would say they were a feminist — some people wouldn't say it and did not get a discount! Lammas reports that because of the NFBW article in Ms. Magazine, old customers they hadn't seen in a while have begun returning to the store.

Making the Local Gay Rag (Finally)

BOOK•WOMAN (Austin TX): NFBW offered the perfect opportunity to convince the local gay rag to (finally) do a front page story about the store, and Susan Post did a spot on a co-op radio station. They blew up a list of the Feminist Writers Pledge signees and posted it in the store, so every customer could see which of their favorite authors have "taken the pledge" (as did several other stores). Alaskan feminist singer/songwriter Libby Roderick made an in-store appearance, and Lin Sutherland did a reading and signing for the book *A Different Angle: Fly Fishing Stories by Women* (Seal Press)

Doing It With Display

MOTHER KALI'S (Eugene OR): made displays out of tee-shirts and flags throughout the store and posted turquoise and magenta NFBW posters in the windows and around the store. Owner Izzie Harbaugh said that the best part of NFBW was that it gave her an opening to talk about the importance of supporting feminist bookstores all week long — and she did!

And lots and lots of stores displayed articles and the Feminist Writers Pledge, wore buttons and tee-shirts, put up posters, and just generally made NFBW visible to all of their customers.



Planning For Next Year

All in all, NFBW was wildly successful in generating publicity and media attention and educating both our own communities and the industry about the importance of feminist bookstores. Several publishers — including Ballantine, The Eighth Mountain Press, Dufour Editions and U.S. Games — called to express their enthusiasm and support for NFBW and to find out how to be a part of the event.

Next year's events are scheduled for the week of May 11-18, and the biggest change will be the name. Several Canadian booksellers felt that the "national" part of the name kept the focus primarily on the U.S. (even though we had hoped the term national would simply apply to the country of whatever store one found oneself celebrating in). So the feminist booksellers in attendance at the FB-Net Conference in June came up with something they felt was both more accurate and more inclusive: **Feminist Bookstore Week/North America**. They also voted to use the same graphics next year, so please use the NFBW graphic only for NFBW/FBW-NA related events.

Next year, the Feminist Bookstores' Spring Catalog will be timed to coincide with FBW/NA so that it can be used as a mailing piece for The Week.

Recipients of the First Annual Feminist Book Awards will be featured in the Spring catalog, giving The Week an even higher profile. And our goal is to have 1,000 names on the Feminist Writers Pledge by the time "our week" rolls around again.

If you'd like to be part of planning Feminist Bookstore Week/North America for 1996, call FB-Net at 415-626-1556. ○

Book Garden Street Fair,
Denver, Colorado

Ms.



Feminist Bookstores Fight Back

BY CAROL SEAJAY

In Memphis, Tennessee, it's a celebration of mothers and daughters featuring local writers. In Edmonton, Alberta, a party will commemorate the release of a manual for survivors of sexual harassment. In Houston, Texas, it's in-store music with singer-songwriter Libby Roderick. In Arlington Heights, Illinois, it's a reading from *The Woman-Centered Economy*. All are different ways, each as distinctive as the bookstore that organized the event, to mark the first annual National Feminist Bookstore Week (NFBW), to be held May 13 to 20.

The Feminist Bookstore Network, a group of booksellers throughout the U.S. and Canada, created NFBW as part of a campaign designed to promote feminist bookstores as they face new challenges. Of particular concern is stiff new competition from chains and their superstores, which sell their books at heavily discounted prices or stock two or three times as many titles as the average independent bookstore is able to carry. In some communities, the chains are aggressively targeting feminist bookstores and their customers.

*If decisions about which books will
be sold are made by a few buyers,
what will we be able to read?*

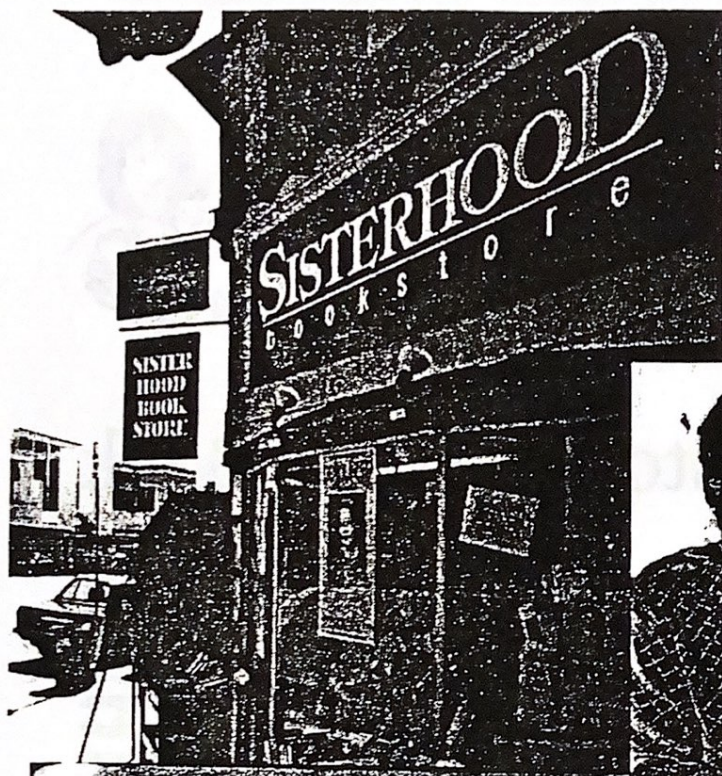
By 1993 chain store sales had caught up to those of independent bookstores, and the corporations that own the chains expect their stores to become the dominant channel of book distribution within two to three years.

In order for this to happen, some—or many— independent bookstores have to close. Many highly esteemed and historic independents have already closed. Locating

new stores near successful independent bookstores or surrounding a successful independent with several chain stores are tactics that have been used again and again. The new stores move in with all the resources of their chains and parent companies, target the independent's customer base, and use a combination of discounting, publisher-sponsored advertising, big-name author appearances, and, to many, ethically questionable practices to draw customers away from the independent or to drive it out of business altogether. The chains are then free to cut back on staff, the number of titles, the range of stock offered, and even the number of stores operating in a community. And the community may well end up with less access to books—or to fewer kinds of books—than it had before the chains arrived in town. After all, you can have a lot of McDonald's around town, but it doesn't mean you have a lot of choices about what to eat.

The domination of chains centralizes the decision-making about what books stores will stock—and what books people will (and won't) find when they shop in these stores—in the hands of a very small number of people. The consolidation of book buying is already more extensive than most people realize. The 16 leading chains—B. Dalton, Barnes & Noble, Bookland, Books-a-Million, Books & Co., Bookstar, Book Stop, Borders, Brentano's, Coles, Coopersmith's, Crown Books, Doubleday, Scribners, Super Crown, and Waldenbooks—are owned by just four parent companies: Barnes & Noble, Books-a-Million, Crown Books, and Kmart.

In October, when Borders moved in across the street from Sisterhood Bookstore in Los Angeles, Sisterhood, with the aid of local press, responded with a tremendous education campaign. The *Los Angeles Times*, as well as alternative, lesbian, and feminist papers, ran major stories discussing the loss of locally owned independent bookstores as the chains moved in over the last few years. Even with Borders right across the street, buyers have



Clockwise from left: Borders moved in across the street from Sisterhood Bookstore in Los Angeles; Faye Williams, owner of Sisterspace and Books, a new black feminist bookstore in Washington, D.C.; Izzie Harbaugh, manager of Mother Kail's Books in Eugene, Oregon; staff members and friends at Women & Children First in Chicago.



kept shopping at Sisterhood. Will sales hold? That will depend on decisions that Sisterhood's customers make every day over the months and years to come.

The "bookstore wars" started earlier in Connecticut, apparently something of a testing ground for the surround-and-destroy method of expansion. In Hartford, owners of the Reader's Feast, a feminist and progressive bookstore-café, and other independent booksellers watched with horror as the chain-surround approach drove Huntington's, an excellent independent that was

also the oldest continuously operating bookstore in the country, out of business in 1993. Sales at the Reader's Feast held nearly steady during this first wave of the chain invasion, only to drop 12 percent "the minute Borders opened ten minutes away," according to co-owner Carolyn Gabel. "It was Borders' active solicitation of our customers that made the difference in our sales," she says. Other femi-

nist bookstores have reported sales drops ranging from 3 percent to 10 percent when chains opened near them.

Susan Krikorian, the owner of Valley Women Books and Gifts in Fresno, California, reported that when a superstore moved into town, it looked at Valley Women's services and programs and duplicated them. "We have a weekly poetry night, now they do a monthly poetry night," she says. "We have regular reading groups, they started a gay fiction group. We do a newsletter, and they started a newsletter." Other feminist stores report chain

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: LOS ANGELES TIMES PHOTO; CHARLES FORD PHOTOGRAPHY; JIM FOLTZ; JASON SMITH



Writers have a vital stake in the future of feminist bookstores. The Feminist Bookstore Network has invited feminist and lesbian writers to sign a pledge of support that reads in part:

"Independent bookstores are now an endangered species because of the rise of corporate-owned chain bookstores who engage in predatory pricing and discount policies." Among the approximately 150 writers who had signed on as of March were Mary Kay Blakely, Joan Nestle, Linda Villarosa, and all the writers pictured here. "We will remain committed to supporting independent and feminist bookstores," the letter reads. "And we ask you, as readers, to do the same. Please shop at independent and feminist bookstores as often as you can. Think of it as an investment in freedom of expression and independent thinking."

store staff coming into their stores and copying down titles.

Industry experts estimate that publishers give most chain stores an additional 15 percent discount over and above the legal discounts to which they are entitled; this is why the chains are able to offer discounts that independents can't.

In some cases, the discounters are able to retail books, profitably, at prices substantially below the best wholesale price available to independent bookstores.

The American Booksellers Association (ABA) filed suit in May 1994 against Penguin USA, Houghton Mifflin, and St. Martin's Press, Inc. (three of the ten largest publishers in the country), and Rutledge Hill Press, charging them with giving illegally discriminatory price breaks to large chains and warehouse clubs and giving promotional allowances that are not available to independent bookstores. (A fifth defendant, Hugh Lauter Levin Associates, has settled with the ABA.) The ABA expects to spend as much as a million dollars a year on the suit until it is settled.

But lawsuits can run on for years. And waiting for lawsuits to be settled in one's favor is like waiting to be rescued. Feminist booksellers decided that it would be much better to take some steps on their own behalf.

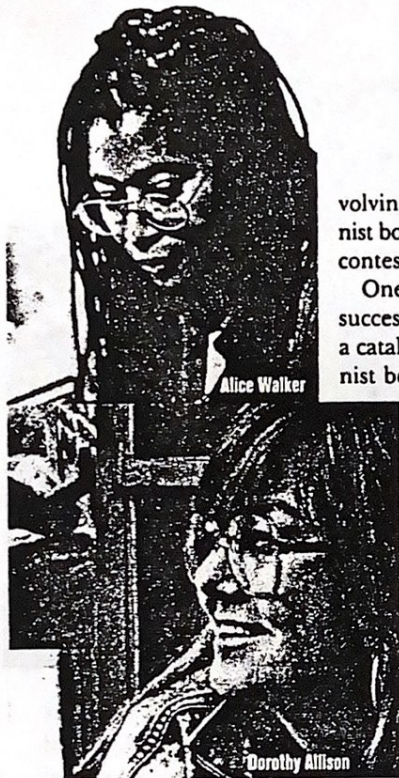


Maxine Hong Kingston

Twenty-five booksellers from 17 feminist bookstores traveled to Chicago in October to pool their ideas and experience at the first Feminist Bookstore Network Strategic Planning Conference. As each woman spoke of her own bookstore's experience, it became clear that some chain stores were targeting feminist bookstores. It was after this session that the network began making plans for the NFBW as a way to draw attention to the strength and impact of feminist bookstores. NFBW would give each store an opportunity and a reason to celebrate its own work and its successes, invite our communities to celebrate with us, encourage women to reflect on the importance of feminist bookstores in their own lives, and inspire both feminist and mainstream media to discuss the issues involved. The network would organize national publicity, and each store would plan its own celebration and contact local media.

Beginning in 1996, the Feminist Bookstore Network will also sponsor Feminist Book Awards to spotlight books that represent the best of feminist writing and publishing. Other long-range plans include developing a re-

CLOCKWISE FROM LOWER LEFT: JERRY BAUER, RUBEN GUZMAN, LINDA EBER, VAL WILMER, MARGARET RANDALL, ROBYN STOUTENBURG, JEAN WEISINGER, JILL POSENER



Alice Walker

Dorothy Allison

volving loan fund for feminist bookstores and an essay contest for young feminists.

One of the network's first successes was the launch of a catalog for all of the feminist bookstores in the U.S. and Canada. The first edition, published last fall, was a full-color, 40-page volume that featured 159 books from 113 publishers and listed the names and addresses of 116 Feminist Bookstore Network members. It was the largest single promotion of femi-

nist books undertaken to date in the United States and Canada—300,000 copies were circulated—and was very effective both in promoting specific books and in introducing readers to feminist bookstores.

The question is not whether feminist bookstores are valuable or useful. The question is, in an industry where the profit margin is 1 to 3 percent, how will feminist and other political bookstores survive when a new superstore opens in the neighborhood and sales drop by 3 to 10

percent? And the answer is, with education. Feminists in general, and feminist book buyers in particular, are renowned for making intelligent and informed decisions and for going the extra mile to vote with their dollars for the kind of bookstore they want in their future.

If the decisions about which books will be sold becomes centralized into the hands of buyers for a few corporations rather than being distributed among thousands of independently owned bookstores, what will we be able to read? Whose ideas will be selected for mass distribution and whose ideas will be excluded as too marginal? Which

Sales at the Reader's Feast fell 12 percent right after Borders opened near the store.

books will not be published because there will be no way to sell them? What will this mean to a multicultural and diverse society?

National Feminist Bookstore Week runs from May 13 to 20. Call your closest feminist bookstore to see what its plans are. Take a friend or a sister who's never been to a feminist bookstore with you. If you have ever had the urge to buy a stack of books at your local feminist bookstore or to send flowers or a note of thanks to your feminist booksellers, this is the time to do it. **Ms.**

Carol Seajay, a cofounder with Paula Wallace of *Old Wives' Tales* bookstore in San Francisco, is the publisher and editor of the trade magazine "Feminist Bookstore News."

Subscribe!

SAHGO

Please send this form in your envelope to:
Ms., P.O. Box 57132, Boulder, CO 80322-7132.

- U.S. 1 year (6 issues) only \$35. (Basic Rate: \$45) Save \$10
 Canada 1 year \$42
 Other International 1 year surface mail \$42
 1 year airmail \$78

- I want to pay for ___ subscriptions to be sent to shelters for battered women and others in need.
 I want to give Ms. as a gift. I'm enclosing a list of addresses.

- Bill me
 Payment enclosed (must be in U.S. currency).
 Charge my Visa MasterCard

Card # _____ Exp. _____

Signature _____



Name _____

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____



"Women reviewing / reviewing women"

Last fall *The Women's Review of Books* celebrated its tenth anniversary with a conference, "Women Reviewing / Reviewing Women," which focused on the art, craft and politics of book reviewing. Several hundred participants gathered over the first weekend in November 1993 to hear women from the worlds of reading, writing, teaching and publishing talk about the role of reviewing in what they do. Conference topics included "Censorship and self-censorship," "The cultural marketplace" and "Reviewing in Academia," among many others. During 1994 we are presenting a selection of the papers from the conference. This month's contribution was given in a panel on "Combating Marginality: Lesbian Writing": Carol Seajay, editor of *Feminist Bookstore News*, who spoke along with writer Judith Barrington and publisher Nancy Bereano, filled in the practical context of publishing and bookselling which make reading and reviewing possible in the first place...

The backlash and the backlist

by Carol Seajay

I'D LIKE TO BEGIN this discussion by taking a moment to state the obvious: Lesbians *are* a marginal population. We comprise about five percent of the population in a society that hates women—and, essentially, has no way at all to value lesbians.

And now a moment to state the amazing: We *have* a lesbian literature. We complain about it, we say there isn't enough of it, that we want better, that our diversity isn't adequately represented... But we do have a literature to complain about—and that's a world of change from 25 years ago.

And now to state the essential but sometimes overlooked fact in the mainstream-worshipping nineties: lesbian literature is primarily published by lesbian and feminist publishers. Lesbian literature exists *because* it is published from the margin, by publishers who exist in the margin,

for a people who live on the margin of society. I know it's tempting to say "But so much work is being published by the mainstream publishers now"—but what we're referring to, when we fall into that line of thinking, are the exceptions. If you look at any of the surveys of lesbian literature—Bonnie Zimmerman's *The Safe Sea of Women*, for example—you'll find that 85 to 90 percent of the books are published by lesbian, feminist and other small publishers. Granted, denial is one of the major sports of the nineties, but we cannot intelligently discuss lesbian literature unless we get real about where it isn't coming from.

Let's take a moment to look at that ten to fifteen percent of the literature that is published by the mainstream press. First off, we need to be conscious of the fact that much of what is published by mainstream publishers is not (let me

try to be tactful) trustworthy. Mainstream-published lesbian fiction is replete with lesbian characters who are mentally ill, who are batterers and/or engage in truly brutal sex or, alternately, desexed or asexual "lesbian" characters. And then there's the brilliant mainstream strategy of publishing out lesbian authors—as long as their books have no lesbian content or the lesbian content is written in code so subtle that half of the lesbian population can't recognize it.

OK, so who writes books about normal happy people? Literature is about drama. But neither are lesbians represented among the stock characters of mainstream non-lesbian novels. We rarely number among the store clerks, school-teachers and everyday people who make up the non-central characters of novels. When was the last time you read: "The cabbie, a handsome dyke in her late fifties, looked Fred up and down and decided to do him a favor"? Note, too, that lesbian characters who make mainstream print almost always exist at a remove: they're from another era, they're mad, or Southern (or both), or from an "exotic" culture... Mainstream lesbian literature is clearly telling us that lesbians are *not* mainstream.

Like it or not, one of the vital functions of literature for marginalized people is to provide a mirror in which they may see themselves reflected. Mainstream-published lesbian literature is a very dangerous mirror for contemporary lesbians to peer into.

SO THAT'S THE BAD NEWS about mainstream-published lesbian literature. Are there exceptions to this gloomy picture? Of course there are. Some wonderful books have been published by mainstream publishers. But it's a good thing that we haven't had to wait for mainstream publishers to provide us with a lesbian literature. It's a good thing that we did it ourselves—because if we hadn't, we'd still be waiting.

We have a flourishing lesbian press and a flourishing feminist bookstore movement. I know it's tempting to cite doomsday statistics and to let our hearts linger over the presses and bookstores we cherished that have closed. We

need to grieve these losses, but we also need to know about the new stores and new publishers that open. We need some real statistics—and I just happen to have some.

In the 1993 fall publishing season, 46 women's presses published a total of 129 books, 87 of which are significantly lesbian in content. Not only do we have a lesbian press, we have an entire distribution system: there are 130-plus women's bookstores in the US and Canada, up from 110 stores only two years ago. In the last two years, 25 new women's bookstores have opened—that's more new stores than in any period since the seventies. Women's bookstores do an estimated business of \$35 million a year, 40 to 60 percent of which is in lesbian books.

I'd like to tell you all this came easily. I'd like to tell you that lesbian presses—and lesbian literature—could exist without women's bookstores and vice versa. I'd like for the world to be that simple. But it isn't. It took a lot of vision and hard work on the part of a lot of women to get here. The first five to ten years of lesbian literature saw a lot of presses springing up—and closing down. We saw a lot of bookstores opening—and closing. Publishers couldn't survive financially until there were enough bookstores to sell their books. Bookstores couldn't survive until there were enough books to sell to pay the rent (never mind salaries). We are all in the debt of the women who, in the early days of lesbian literature, started lesbian presses and opened bookstores that didn't have a chance of surviving. I respect these women tremendously. Their dreams—and their hard work against incredible odds—laid the foundation for the lesbian literature we have today.

Because we have the women's bookstores, lesbian presses have a distribution network. Women's bookstores stock and sell lesbian- and feminist-press books. Not just the three or four "bestsellers" from each publisher, not just the new books each season, but *all* of the books published each season. And they stock and sell the backlist, keeping it alive and active. General independent bookstores have learned to stock and sell frontlist lesbian and feminist books from

lesbian and feminist presses. Sometimes they even stock some of the best-selling backlist titles. This is very important. But it is backlist sales that keep the lesbian and feminist presses alive and solvent. And it's feminist bookstores that make it their business to stock backlist books from the lesbian presses. Because we're idealists? Partly, but also because we know that the presses won't survive if we don't. Because there still isn't enough lesbian literature published to satisfy the demand. And because the women in our communities want and buy backlist lesbian books.

OK, NOW LET'S TALK about chain bookstores and superstores and all those pretty, new, well-lit discount stores for books that are springing up in every town and city. What do they have to do with lesbian literature and marginality? Surprisingly, a lot. General independent bookstores have worried, with good cause, about the explosion in superstores and chain discounters. The superstores are predatory: they generally move into communities that already have successful independents and, much too often for coincidence, move to locations within blocks of the most successful bookstores in town. Sometimes two or three superstores will open around a single, successful independent bookstore. And, increasingly often, they're driving the independent bookstores out of business.

Not only do they not play fair—according to the Federal Trade Commission, these stores have wangled unfair (and illegal) discounts and benefits from publishers that make them “favored retailers” and turn independent and specialty bookstores into “disfavored retailers.” Industry experts estimate that most chain stores are getting an additional fifteen percent discount over and above the legal discounts to which they are entitled. (Just in case you wondered why chains are able to offer discounts and independent and feminist bookstores don't.) The FTC sees this as a very dangerous situation for independent bookselling and the book industry in general, but they have been very slow to resolve the cases that are before them.

In 1992 the combined income of chain bookstores was \$39 billion—about 40 percent of total book sales in the US. Their stated goal is to be “the dominant channel of book distribu-

tion” within five years. What this means is that a handful of book buyers working for a handful of corporations select 40 percent of the books that are sold. Their decisions have tremendous impact on print runs, on promotion budgets, and even on what gets published. Entire publishing companies are being restructured to focus on publishing mega-sellers, which is to say books that will sell well in chains, and entire imprints that have been known for publishing quality literature, are being disbanded.

In the 1970s we used to say “Freedom of the press belongs to those who own the presses.” In the 1990s freedom of the press means the freedom to publish and circulate ideas—including books. If book sales become centralized into the hands of a few corporations rather than being distributed through thousands of independently owned bookstores, what will we be able to read? Whose ideas will be selected for mass distribution—and whose ideas will be excluded as too marginal? What books and ideas will not be published because there may cease to be a way to sell them? These are some of the most serious and least acknowledged issues of the 1990s.

I'd like to dwell for a few moments in what I hope is paranoia. What I want to know is this: Is this sudden concentration of power in one aspect of the book industry just coincidence—a “natural” development of advanced capitalism in which large corporations devour independent businesses (as happened in the hardware industry, the pharmacy industry, and with the chicken farms of the fifties), or might there be something more at work here? We aren't talking about chicken farms, we're talking about the information industry, and my paranoia dwells on right-wing think tanks and plots to undermine the dissemination of ideas in this country. We do know that one of the two major book distributors in the US was recently purchased by a group of men with deep ties to the Reagan/Bush administration. Who are the rest of the players in this game, and how are they related?

ENOUGH PARANOIA: let's get back to lesbian literature. Until about two years ago, conventional industry wisdom was that the chains would hurt independent bookstores significantly, but that they wouldn't seriously affect feminist, lesbian and gay bookstores. We

were “boutique” stores. Too specialized a market to go after.

Wrong. Virtually every superstore in the country has a gay-and-lesbian section as well as a women's section. Many of them actively go after the lesbian and gay (and feminist) markets. I've seen sales in some feminist bookstores drop by ten percent and more during the first six months after a superstore and/or discounter opens in the neighborhood. If you will contemplate, for just a moment, the effects of a ten percent drop in sales in an industry where the average net profit is between one and three percent, you'll understand the situation completely.

I don't think that we can afford to lose women's bookstores. If you cut out the women's bookstores, I think you'd see most of the lesbian and feminist presses fold within two to three years—and, I suspect, all of them within five years. Think, for a moment, about the consequences of having no lesbian press in this country. No new lesbian press books and no backlist titles. Think about what you *do* get from the mainstream presses and think about how the quality of even that would slip if they had no feminist presses to challenge them, no feminist presses to raid for new authors, and no feminist bookstores to hold them accountable or to prove that there is a market for quality, ground-breaking lesbian and feminist books.

The importance of spending your book dollars in feminist bookstores can't be overstated. When you're tempted by convenience or location or parking or by those tricky little discounts, take a moment to weigh the value of these things against the value of your access to lesbian literature. Ask yourself if your chain store would carry lesbian books if they weren't competing with a store that did—or would their lesbian section dry up? Do they have all the new lesbian titles or just the easiest to get and the easiest to sell? Ask yourself if they stock as much feminist-press and lesbian-press backlist as they can afford. Ask yourself where you will be if lesbian-press backlist goes out of print because no bookstores will stock it. Ask yourself how lesbian presses—the presses that publish 85 percent of the lesbian literature in this country—will finance new books if their backlist revenues

dry up. Ask yourself what's your best long-term investment for the money you have to spend.

As a movement, feminists are fortunate that, whenever mainstream publishing tried to say “It's over. There's no more interest in feminist work,” we have been able to point to the ever-growing network of feminist bookstores and say “Wrong!” When they didn't believe our analysis, they did believe our sales figures, and that made all the difference to the continued publication of feminist literature.

Margaret Atwood, in this conference's opening plenary, told us that Canadian literature didn't exist until a generation of Canadian writers didn't leave, didn't go abroad to those foreign centers of literature, but stayed home and created Canadian publishing houses and a Canadian review media. And now we benefit from a proud and strong Canadian literature that is confident about what it is. I think there's a lesson here for lesbians. We can't afford to give up our visible, outlaw, “marginalized” status and strength. If we do, we will disappear. ♦♦

• National Feminist Bookstores Week will be celebrated May 13-20, 1995. Call your local feminist bookstore to see how you can contribute to local festivities or national publicity.

• For a complete list of feminist bookstores, see the *Feminist Bookstores' Fall Catalog* or send \$1 and a SASE to Feminist Bookstore News, PO Box 882554, San Francisco, CA 94188.

SUBSCRIBE! You can read more terrific articles like this one, plus reviews of current books by and about women in all fields, every month in *The Women's Review of Books*.

The Women's Review is published eleven times a year: single copies \$2.00, one-year subscription \$18.00 (US); overseas subscriptions add \$5.00 postage. Order from *The Women's Review*, Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA 02181; 617-283-2087/Fax 283-3645.

Sojourn

The Women's Forum

Feminist Bookstores: Part of an Ecosystem

by Theresa Corrigan

Feminist bookstores have never been stronger. Numbering at least 135 in the United States and Canada, with combined gross sales in 1992 of \$35 million, feminist bookstores are a formidable grassroots industry. For over twenty years, feminist booksellers have balanced sound business practices with political commitment to their communities. The result has been, in most cases, thriving bookstores that, in addition to providing books, periodicals, music, and sidelines unavailable anywhere else, offer a multitude of community services such as bulletin boards, reading and community events, referrals to social services, and meeting places for women. Who among us hasn't gone to our local feminist bookstore to find a roommate, support group, therapist, woman carpenter, or tickets for the Sweet Honey in the Rock concert?

When Lioness Books in Sacramento, California, opened in 1981, our entire stock could fit on a few shelves; now we fill 2,500 square feet of store space with about 15,000 titles. Like all feminist bookstores, we have grown with the proliferation of feminist publishers, periodicals, authors, and most importantly, audience. In the early '70s, a few publish-

ers such as Daughters, Diana, the Women's Press Collective, and Shameless Hussy began publishing a few feminist and/or lesbian titles; we now have at least 154 feminist or lesbian presses publishing over 300 titles per year, along with 300 to 400 independent publishers producing feminist and lesbian books.

Having said all of that, I do not wish to paint an overly rosy picture of feminist bookstore land. Like all independent booksellers, we are facing tremendous predatory competition from the chains and superstores (huge chain stores carrying, on average, over 100,000 books in each location). Currently 40 percent of all books are sold by chains, primarily by Waldenbooks and Borders Bookstores (both owned by the K-Mart Corporation with revenues of \$39 billion last year), Barnes & Noble which also owns B. Dalton, and the Crown Book Corporation. However, industry spokespeople predict that the voracious proliferation of superstores (Barnes & Noble plans to open 150 new superstores by the end of 1993) could mean the end of many independent and specialty bookstores. *The Sacramento Bee*

Continued on next page

Continued from previous page

(November 16, 1992) quotes Lois Connelly, assistant director of investor relations at K-Mart, "We think superstores will become the dominant channel of book distribution within five years."

The marketing strategy of superstores is to move into a location well established by one or more independent or specialty bookstores, target the independent's customer base, and use a combination of discounting, publisher-sponsored advertising, big-name author appearances and, to many, questionable ethical practices to outsell their competitors.

A young man recently told me that you can never have too many bookstores in any community. Others add that the free enterprise system and competition are the backbone of excellence. That might be true if the playing field were level. The expertise and experience of feminist booksellers would provide the competitive edge. But the arena is not equitable. The superstores discount many titles at prices at or below what feminist bookstores pay wholesale. It doesn't take mathematical wizardry to figure out that a business cannot survive selling products at a loss. Nor are the chains taking a loss. They have special arrangements with publishers to purchase books wholesale at discounts independents can only dream of. According to the Federal Trade Commission, "Discrimination in prices and terms offered by major book publishers has created two categories of book retailers: favored book retailers (chains) and disfavored retailers (independents). Because disfavored retailers pay higher prices for their books and have limited access to publishers' co-op advertising funds (where the publisher pays the store's advertising costs to promote their titles), it is very difficult—often impossible—for disfavored retailers to compete." William Petrocelli, owner of Book Passage in Corte Madera, California, says that the price disparity between what chains and independents pay for books now appears to be 15 percent or higher.

Superstores also hope to entice customers away from feminist stores by offering readings by well-established authors, such as Gloria Steinem or Rita Mae Brown, whose original audiences were built in feminist stores. Mary Kay Blakely, contributing editor to *Ms.* magazine and author of *Wake Me When It's Over*, says that 70 percent of the sales of her books are in feminist bookstores, but her publisher ignored those stores when planning the tour for her first book. For her new book, she has chosen a publisher respectful of her wishes to include feminist stores in the promotion. "My career only stays alive because of feminist and women's bookstores," she says. "People like me stay in print because feminist bookstores are willing to carry backstock and to reorder." According to the *Chain Store Age Executive* journal, the chairman of Bookstop (a superstore in Texas and Florida) says that if a new release does not do well (in his stores) in its first few weeks, it is replaced. However, he adds, the classic

works stay forever. We all know what he means by "classic." And he doesn't mean 99 percent of the books carried by feminist bookstores.

The chains are also capitalizing on the lesbian and gay markets, having discovered that we buy so many books. However, the chains primarily stock mainstream press titles, so don't expect to find most of your favorite authors there. Few lesbian authors are published by the big houses. Mainstream publishers want a track record before they're willing to risk money. Most lesbian authors now published by the big houses, such as Dorothy Allison, Sarah Schulman, and Jeanette Winterson, established their track records through the feminist presses and bookstores. Most new authors don't have a prayer of being published by the mainstream houses, or if published, won't be sold by the chain stores.

When the mainstream houses do publish lesbian titles (which isn't often—of the 1993 Lammy nominations, mainstream presses published 65 percent of gay men's titles compared with 19 percent of the lesbian titles), they publish stories they think will play in Peoria. Victoria A. Brownworth, in "Desexing the Story," a recent article in the *Lambda Book Report*, describes what happens when lesbian authors go mainstream—the lesbian sexual content is absent, and lesbian characters are presented stereotypically as nonsexual friends or as obsessed and dangerous. She quotes a gay male editor at a mainstream house: "Who wants to read about two girls getting it on?" If mainstream publishers and chain stores do indeed damage the feminist bookselling and publishing industries, they will destroy the source of literature that reflects the richness and diversity of lesbian lives.

Carol Seajay, publisher of *Feminist Bookstore News* (the trade journal for feminist booksellers), describes the interrelationships among feminist bookstores, women's music labels, feminist and lesbian publishers, feminist periodicals, and authors as an ecosystem. When each part thrives, the entire system is healthy. When one part suffers, the rest feel the effect. Feminist publishers are dependent upon feminist bookstores to carry their books; the chains will only order those books they can get at discounts most feminist publishers cannot offer. Without feminist bookstores, one would probably never have encountered the works of Cherrie Moraga, Kitty Tsui, Chrystos, Katherine Forrest, Barbara Wilson, Jewelle Gomez, Dale Spender, or even the works of authors who are household names like Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor or Robin Morgan, whose writing was first promoted through feminist networks. Many first books are hand-sold by feminist booksellers. We know what is important to our political and literary movements, and we promote books as cultural and intellectual expressions, not merely as commodities.

Corporate America views books as just another commodity to be sold in mass quantities. Mary Morrell, co-owner of Full Circle in Albuquerque, New

Continued on next page

Continued from previous page

Mexico, says, "When price becomes more important than substance, we get cardboard tomatoes, cheap but tasteless. Then when we want real tomatoes, we have to pay through the nose." Morrell adds that the issue is difficult because women don't make the "big bucks" in society and cost is an important factor, but she compares women's communities to ethnic communities. "Ethnic communities that have supported their own businesses have created healthy endeavors that have reinvested in their own communities." Feminist bookstores reinvest in their communities every day through all the services they provide.

Feminist bookstores are a resource the chains can never be, according to Gilda Bruckman of New Words in Cambridge, Massachusetts. "We have twenty years of history about our communities and our movement; people come to us to make use of the knowledge we have acquired. We are consistent. For example, we don't suddenly alter our face for gay/lesbian

book month; we are there for lesbian and bisexual women all the time." When asked how feminist booksellers are dealing with the competition from the chains, they all emphasize customer service, knowledge of the literature and their community resources, and dedication. Lammas in Washington, D.C., is not waiting for customers to come to them. "We are going to lesbian bars, women's studies instructors, and any place else to reach women," says Jane Troxell, the new co-owner. "We also organize special events for the community, such as self-defense classes, financial planning workshops, camping and rafting trips, and will soon exhibit the only existing lesbian dollhouse (based on *Heather Has Two Mommies*, by Leslea Newman)." She adds, laughing, "We may carry fewer of the mainstream bestsellers, but Crown doesn't have menstrual goddesses or Margie Adam tapes."

Pokey Anderson of Inkling in Houston, Texas, points out that "the demands on a feminist bookstore are high; as well as running a business, we do referrals, sell tickets, provide emotional support, listen, and lots of other things that can only exist if customers matronize the business. It's hard, sometimes, when you know someone buys lots of feminist books, but the only time they come in to the store is to post a flyer."

Tollie Miller from A Reader's Feast in Hartford, Connecticut, is going one step further in defending from the onslaught of the chains. Connecticut has the largest concentration of chain stores of any state, and

most of the independents are sorely feeling the results. A Reader's Feast, along with fifteen other independent bookstores from around the state, have organized the Connecticut Independent Bookseller's Day, during which local authors will read at each of the participating stores. The stores will pool money from the events to place ads in national media celebrating the diversity that independent bookstores bring to the intellectual environment of the country. They have even gotten financial support from some publishers. Miller echoes the sentiments of other feminist booksellers when she says, "We have a commitment to carry and disseminate progressive ideas, not merely to sell commodities." She adds, "We do so much more than sell books; over the last ten years we have helped innumerable women through life crises, not by counseling them, but by empowering them about the choices they have."

Many people assume that one sale here or there won't make a difference. So what if someone buys *Backlash* or *Revolution From Within*

at a chain? The independent book business, unlike many others, operates on tiny profit margins. Most feminist bookstores are lucky to have a 1 to 3 percent yearly net profit. Some feminist bookstores have experienced a 10 percent or more decline in sales after a chain store has moved into the neighborhood. When a business operates on such small margins, it can ill afford even small fluctuations in sales.

To have intellectual, political and literary diversity, we must have diversity in the marketplace. Without feminist bookstores, the kinds of books you see at your local store will cease to exist for the most part. Every time each of us invests in a feminist bookstore, we are helping to protect the range of literature available: from lesbian and gay novels, to nonsexist, nonracist children's books, to goddess-centered books, to feminist theory. The future of progressive and quality publishing is in our hands—simply by making conscious decisions about where we spend our money.

Sally Owen, co-owner of Judith's Room in New York City, describes the potential effect of the superstores quite simply: "If people buy books at Barnes & Noble, small stores (including feminist stores) will go out of business, presses will suffer and books will disappear." This process she calls "economic censorship." "We are contributing to our own censorship by supporting the chains," she adds. "If we allow this to happen, Barnes & Noble (and the other chains) will decide what gets sold, what is in print, the size of

Continued on next page

*Every time each of us invests
in a feminist bookstore, we are helping to
protect the range of literature available:
from lesbian and gay novels, to
nonsexist, nonracist children's books,
to goddess-centered books,
to feminist theory.*

Continued from previous page

the print runs, and ultimately what people have access to. The question is not who gets a piece of the pie; the pie itself will be drastically changed."

Now time for a parable. Twenty-five years ago, I first went into the Off Key, Sacramento's only women's bar, which was huge, grungy, and owned by a man, but ours to do with what we wanted. It had been there for as long as anyone could remember and hadn't changed much. The neutral cultural borderlands between the traditional gay women's world and the emerging lesbian/feminist one, populated with diesel dykes, hippie lesbians, politicians, butches, femmes, and an occasional queen, the Off Key was home to all of us. We had performances; marriages performed by the old preacher woman, Mama Lou; pool tournaments; birthday parties; and protest meetings.

Then four years later, some men from San Francisco opened a glitzy new bar about a mile away. The new bar had everything we thought we could want: a rotating glitter ball over the dance floor, a hard liquor license, a restaurant, a live DJ, and fancy everything. Most of us shifted loyalties and became regulars at the Hut. The Off Key did not survive, but we hardly noticed. Only a few weeks after the Off Key closed, the owners of the Hut put a sign on the front door, "Men are welcome. Women will be tolerated with three forms of ID." The harassment escalated with aggressive male bouncers, mandatory drink policies, and verbal abuse. We clearly were not wanted but had no place to go. Sacramento, by the way, hasn't had a successful women's bar since.

This experience taught me a valuable lesson about loyalty, not necessarily to a particular person or place, but to an alternative that I, as part of a community, had created. The Hut courted women only as long as we were needed to establish the business. I know that

the book industry (publishers and mainstream bookstores) will only court lesbian and feminist communities as long as it is in vogue and profitable.

An editor from Penguin, USA, spoke at the Publisher's Triangle meeting at the American Bookseller's Association convention this year. At one point, he said, "Let's face it folks, we're in this business to make money." That was his bottom line. This statement reflects the fundamental philosophical difference between the Off Key and the Hut, between feminist bookstores and chain stores. Feminist stores are not in the business to make money, but we need to make money to stay in business. Those of us who operate feminist bookstores are very smart women; if making money were our priority, we would all have chosen more lucrative means. We are in the business to educate, to end sexism, racism, homophobia, classism, ageism, and all the other inequities that threaten our society and survival, and to create a safe place for our sisters and brothers. We are in the business to change the world. That will never be profitable or in vogue. Feminist bookstores are in it for the long haul and proud to be part of a larger movement for social change.

Author's note: For a complete list of names and addresses of feminist bookstores throughout the United States and Canada, send \$1.00 and a SASE to Feminist Bookstore News, P.O. Box 882554, San Francisco, CA 94188.

Theresa Corrigan owns and operates Lioness Books, teaches Women's Studies at California State University, Sacramento, and writes. She is the co-editor of a two volume anthology about women's relationships with other animals, published by Cleis Press.

This article may not be reprinted without permission. Contact Karen Kahn at 617-524-0415.

Sojourner: The Women's Forum is a national women's newspaper covering political, social, economic, community, and cultural issues from a wide range of feminist perspectives. To subscribe for a year (12 great issues!), send \$19 in check or money order (U.S. funds only) to: SOJOURNER, 42 Seaverns Ave., Boston, MA 02130. For addresses outside the U.S., add \$10/year for postage. Or, pick up your copy each month at your local feminist bookstore! For information on library and institutional subscriptions, bulk orders, classroom use, reprints, or classified and display advertising, please call 617-524-0415.

Ms.

20 YEARS OF FEMINIST BOOKSTORES

By Carol Seajay

There was a time when a committed feminist could store everything in print about the women's liberation movement in a few file folders on her desk. Now there are more than 100 women's bookstores scattered across the U.S. and Canada. The larger stores stock 15,000 to 18,000 titles, and most have more books than any one woman could read over the course of her lifetime.

The women's liberation movement became a print movement out of necessity. In the late 1960s, little of what we needed to know was available in any written form. When we did get coverage in mainstream publications, our ideas were distorted and trivialized, and it became increasingly clear that if we wanted feminist ideas in print we would have to do it ourselves.

Freedom of the press, we learned by the early 1970s, belonged to those who owned printing presses. When male printers refused to print our articles about self-help vaginal exams, the real lives of women in prostitution, or lesbian self-esteem, we established our own printing presses so that no man could ever again tell women what we could read. To further that autonomy, we established our own typesetting shops, binderies, wholesale distributors, and bookstores to put the literature into women's hands. It was a wonderfully exhilarating time. Women were doing everything we'd been told we couldn't do: opening auto repair shops, running abortion clinics (legal and otherwise), moving furniture for one another, starting construction companies.

The development of the women-in-print movement was a part of that drive for women's independence, and its growth has been phenomenal. Articles like "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm," "The Woman-Identified Woman," and "Why I Want a Wife," as well as women's liberation magazines and newspapers, were passed from hand to hand. Newspapers and pamphlets with no visible means of distribution traveled thousands of miles in the backpacks and cars of women who took the new publications everywhere they went.

Activists set up tables filled with the new feminist literature at conferences and demonstrations, at women's liberation meetings, and, later, in women's centers. These tables offered pamphlets, newspapers and magazines, and the first books published by the first feminist pub-



lishers (staple-bound copies of *Child of Myself*; *Edward the Dyke and Other Poems*; *Notes from the First Year*; *Notes from the Second Year*; *Our Bodies, Ourselves*; *Sleeping Beauty: A Lesbian Fairy Tale*; *Songs to a Handsome Woman*; and *Woman to Woman*). They were the first generation of women's bookstores. Some contemporary stores, such as Lioness Books in Sacramento, trace their beginnings back to when these literature tables moved to permanent quarters in women's centers. Other early bookstores started on front and back porches, or in an extra room in a women's living collective. Legend has it that Amazon Bookstore in Minneapolis, now one of the largest women's bookstores and the oldest continuously open feminist bookstore in the U.S., started on a front porch and was compelled to move inside to the Lesbian Resource Center when the Minnesota winter set in. Later it moved into storefront locations.

Even when women deliberately opened bookstores in storefronts, it was difficult to tell the difference between a women's bookstore and a women's center. There were always places to sit; the coffeepot was always on; there were usually more plants and bulletin boards than books. Toys, "kids' corners," and even playrooms welcomed children. The women who worked in the bookstore provided information and meeting space. They were as likely to be found answering questions or aiding a battered



woman as they were to be selling books. Many who wanted the help or information that a women's center could offer had been so intimidated by the media's portrayal of bra-burning, man-hating feminists that they were afraid to go to the centers. Socialized to shop, they found women's bookstores a safer entryway into feminism. One could look at the books until she found the courage to ask the questions she needed to ask.

Feminist bookstores had—and still have—tremendous impact on their communities. Women from all walks of life and experiences found community and resources as well as books and ideas. Some women walked around the block many times before they found the courage to enter. Once they made it through the doorway, they took what they found and changed their lives—left abusive relationships, found new self-images, came out, found sisterhood and a community. Many went on to become activists whose work has changed all of our lives. At least one feminist comedian, Roseanne Arnold, got the boost she needed working in a large collective bookstore, Denver's Woman to Woman Bookcenter, where her humor was understood and supported.

There was one important difference between women's centers and women's bookstores, however: selling the

It was hard to tell the difference between a women's bookstore and a women's center.

books paid the rent. During the years when women's centers lost funding or were "deprioritized," the financially independent bookstores stood firm.

Many of the stores in the early 1970s were the result of a burst of energy in a circle of women who worked together on other projects. If someone had the idea to start a bookstore, two or five or 20 women would join together and start one. Most of these stores were collectively run in styles as diverse as the communities that started them. Many, if not most, of those who felt strongly enough to get involved, raise funds, build bookcases, and do volunteer shifts week after week were lesbians. For all

the women, their weekly shifts were an important part of their social and community networks. Some of these stores lasted only a few months. Others, including Everywomans Books, Fan the Flames, Mother Kali's, Sisterhood Bookstore, and the Vancouver Women's Bookstore, are still serving women's need for information today.

In those wonderfully anarchistic days, little attention was given to details of ownership, structure, long-term goals, or financial planning. Creating equality-based, nonhierarchical organizations where each woman would be respected for her unique gifts was deemed to be far more important than setting up procedures to deal with such unlikely eventualities as conflict, collective members who failed to keep commitments, or (unthinkable lack of faith in women!) embezzlement. Traditional business practices (the domain of the patriarchy) were automatically suspect. Most stores survived—and thrived—on constant fund-raising, volunteer labor, and donated supplies (often "liberated" from patriarchal institutions). Collective members often wrote personal checks to pay for books or magazines they wanted to see stocked. "Long-term financial planning" often meant raising money—or saving it out of sales—to pay the rent.

The earliest feminist bookstores closed for various reasons: the constant turnover among volunteers, the loss of skills when staff turnover occurred more rapidly than skills could be passed on. Some collectives developed structures to deal with disagreements, but others were closed by unresolved and unresolvable conflicts. Lack of access to enough capital to allow a bookstore to prosper has probably killed more bookstores than any other single problem.

While the women's movement has made great strides in many areas in the last 20 years, access to capital isn't one of them. There's a glass ceiling in lending as surely as there is in corporate promotions. Money to start feminist bookstores generally comes from personal savings, cashed-out retirement programs, loans, and other private sources. As the size of inventory needed to open women's bookstores has increased, the number of women with access to adequate capital has declined.

Despite these obstacles, the survival rates for feminist

stores are surprisingly high. Of the 60 women's liberation bookstores in the U.S. and Canada in 1978, 19 are still open 14 years later. More than half of the 73 feminist bookstores that were listed in the September 1983 issue of *Ms.* are still serving their communities nine years later. These are excellent survival rates for any small businesses—never mind undercapitalized, politically based bookstores.

Better yet, more feminist bookstores open each year than close, and the total number increases each year. The demand for books that tell the truth about women's lives, contrary to the impression given by the mainstream media, continues to grow rather than decline. Even a recession of current proportions has not stopped that climb. Sales in feminist bookstores increased from \$4 million to \$30 million between 1981 and 1991.

But staying open should not be the only measure of success for feminist bookstores: during the months and years the now-defunct stores *were* open, these hotbeds provided women with access to books, magazines, pamphlets, *ideas* that weren't available anywhere else—and they changed women's lives. They helped to build our information and communication networks. Simply by existing, these stores taught women to feel entitled to books that reflected their experiences. Lesbian fiction, for example, ranged from elusive to nonexistent in the 1960s. By the early 1970s, thousands of women were walking into feminist bookstores *expecting* to find novels and non-fiction that portrayed lesbian women's lives in a positive and affirming way. It was an enormous change that was achieved in just a few years.

Financially speaking, *none* of the first generations of bookstores or publishers should have survived: there simply weren't enough books for feminist bookstores to sell to stay afloat, nor enough bookstores to sell enough books to make feminist publishing financially viable. But women kept opening feminist bookstores and publishing companies just the same, and kept them open as long as possible, until the time came when there *were* enough outlets to make feminist publishing viable and enough books to support feminist bookstores.

These booksellers explained to their customers the economies of scale that made feminist-press published books more expensive than books churned out in larger quantities by better-capitalized mainstream presses. They pointed out new feminist-published books and taught women to value and support feminist presses.

Initially feminist bookstores were able to start with very little capital. A Woman's Place-I.C.I. in Oakland, California, started with \$350 in cash and a \$200 credit line at a local distributor in 1972. By using all of the proceeds from book sales to expand stock, it became one of the largest feminist bookstores in the country during its heyday. A Room of One's Own, a collectively run store that is still thriving, started in 1975 with \$5,000 in donations and loans raised by the Madison, Wisconsin, women's community. New Words in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Womanbooks in New York City started at about the

same time with \$8,000 to \$10,000 each. Diligent work turned these stores into three of the largest and best stocked feminist bookstores in the U.S. The six largest feminist bookstores were able to turn these kinds of investments into stores that grossed \$300,000 to \$400,000 a year by 1981. As the stores grew larger and more complex, booksellers learned to value selling skills along with political priorities, and to excel at both.

Over the years feminist booksellers have developed ways to work together and provide mutual support, by meeting at the National Women-in-Print Conferences,

Sales in feminist bookstores increased from \$4 million to \$30 million in ten years.

the American Booksellers Conventions, and the International Feminist Bookfairs, and by developing professional associations. *Feminist Bookstore News*, for example, is a networking tool for the women-in-print movement. The Feminist Bookstores Network has become a visible public body and organizes joint projects such as a series of ads reminding women to support feminist bookstores.

By the 1980s new bookstores were less likely to be run by collectives; more stores were opened by triads, partners or lovers, and sole proprietors who, in addition to providing a community with literature, wanted to create a satisfying livelihood for themselves. Volunteer labor was in increasingly short supply, and more and more of the stores were staffed by paid workers. There were many more books and fewer coffeepots (booksellers having learned how many books can be damaged with a single spilled cup of coffee), and ever more nonsexist, antiracist children's books, reflecting the baby booms in both the lesbian and heterosexual communities. Overstuffed couches gave way to the additional bookcases needed to display all the new books. Sidelines such as cards, calendars, music, and woman-oriented jewelry continued to provide images not available elsewhere as well as to supplement bookstore incomes. Potted ferns were no longer essential, but virtually every feminist bookstore now had large sections of books by and about women of color, out of a passion for validating the diversity of women's lives and experiences. International sections grew as more feminist works became available in translation. Stores that were thriving had broad-based stock, reflecting the wide range of class, age, race, sexuality, politics, and priorities of the women who use the stores. Women's bookstores are still the first place women turn to find community resources of all kinds.

Bookselling in the 1990s is a complex (though eminently learnable) skill. Lacking experience and capital, many women have built thriving community centers/bookstores through vision, idealism, and commitment. There's nothing like telling a feminist that she can't do something to guarantee that she will. ❧

Theresa writes: This was published in *News & Review*, our largest alternative newspaper. I contacted them about sending a letter to the editor and they suggested I write a guest commentary. It's obviously a shortened version of the *Sojourner* article. If you want to use it for any reason, feel free. If other stores want to use it and substitute their particulars, that's fine with me. -- Just credit me as the writer and say it was first published in (or an earlier version was published in) the *Sacramento News & Review*, March 28, 1996.

GUEST COMMENTARY

By Theresa Corrigan

Preserving Feminist Bookstores



Theresa Corrigan owns and operates Lioness Books, writes, teaches Women's Studies at California State University, Sacramento and does consulting work to help support the bookstore.

In San Francisco and New York City, feminist bookstores (Old Wives Tales and Judith's Room) have closed in the past year. Dozens of others are facing incredible financial difficulties and possible closure, Lioness included. Feminist bookstores risk being the latest casualty of monopoly capitalism.

In 1992, feminist bookstores were a formidable industry, with combined sales of more than \$35

million. We spent 20 years balancing sound business practices with political commitment to our communities to create thriving sources of literature mostly unavailable in other stores. We've also served as resource centers in our communities, particularly since in many cities, Sacramento included, women's centers have closed.

However, like all independent bookstores, we are facing tremendous predatory competition from the chains. Currently, nearly 50 percent of all books are sold by the chains, namely Barnes & Noble, Waldenbooks and Borders (both owned by the K-Mart Corporation) and the Crown Book Corporation. Industry spokespeople predict that the voracious proliferation of superstores could mean the end of most independent and specialty bookstores. The marketing strategy of superstores is to move into a location well-established by independent bookstores, target their customer base and use a combination of discounting and publisher-sponsored advertising to out-sell their competitors.

According to the Federal Trade Commission, "Discrimination in prices and terms offered by major book publishers has created two categories of book retailers: favored book retailers (chains) and disfavored retailers (independents). Because disfavored retailers pay higher prices for their books ... it is very difficult (often impossible) for disfavored retailers to compete." The result is a kind of de facto censorship. In a recent article, researcher Shere Hite states, "Censorship today is increased by the consolidation of publishing, magazines, film and television into a few

hands. The term 'free' market is Orwellian doublespeak when media conglomerates buy up publishing houses not because they are so profitable but because books are part of the creation of public opinion."

And those publishing houses work in conjunction with the chains, ultimately, to determine what the public can buy and read. Sally Owen, former co-owner of Judith's Room, describes this as "economic censorship." "If we allow this to happen," she stated in an interview, "the chains will decide what gets sold, what is in print, the size of the print runs, and ultimately what people have access to. The question is not who gets a piece of the pie; the pie itself will be drastically changed." It doesn't take genius to figure out that the power brokers will not promote ideas and inquiries critical to their interests.

Without feminist bookstores, the kinds of books you see at Lioness will cease to exist.

To have intellectual and political diversity, we must have diversity in the marketplace. Without feminist bookstores, the kinds of books you see at Lioness will cease to exist. The majority of books we sell are not

profitable on the scale chain stores demand. In fact, one chain store executive says that if a new release does not do well in his stores in its first few weeks, it is replaced. Without feminist bookstores to nurture and continually carry feminist/lesbian/gay titles, most of their publishers would go out of business or cease to publish those books.

This is one area of political struggle where we can have immediate and visible impact. Every time we make a purchase at a feminist bookstore, we are protecting the range of literature available and ensuring the future of progressive and women-centered publishing. We are assuring that our voices are not silenced.

Lioness Books has been a viable community resource for 15 years, but we will not survive without support from the entire community. People in New York and San Francisco are lamenting, "If only we had known ..."

Well, now you know. The fate of feminist bookstores is in your hands. And to the staunch supporters of Lioness, we thank you. □