

Creative Merchandising, Attention to Detail Help a Feminist Bookshop to Flourish

by Patricia Holt

PERHAPS because they are so attuned to the special interests of their customers, booksellers who specialize in certain fields sometimes develop unusual methods of merchandising that, given a few changes, could be adapted by other booksellers—especially those in personal bookshops where there is a close and abiding relationship between customers and owner.

Take for example a system of "mini-reviews" that has been introduced at Old Wives' Tales, a feminist bookstore in San Francisco. Here customers browsing for a new book by a favorite author may find it displayed above a handwritten note tacked onto the shelf by a member of the staff. Such a note usually provides a brief description of the book's contents, a reference to the author's previous works (or to other books in the field), and a personal recommendation by the person who reviewed it. Most often the review is favorable, such as co-owner Carol Seajay's note on "Taxi" by Helen Potrebko (*New Star Press*), in which she describes the author as "a Vancouver woman who drove a taxi for five years" and who brought to this book "some of the best social analysis I've read anywhere in the last couple of years." Sometimes the mini-review is mixed, such as one signed "OWT" to indicate that the whole staff at Old Wives' Tales got in on the debate—about "The Eagle and the Raven" by Pauline Gedge (*Popular Library*): "A very strange book about a wonderful Amazon—it would appear—but she only makes three bit appearances before page 700! We think that a few mass market houses have decided to 'cash in on the Amazon fad.' We'd be interested in any experience you've had with this."

Such comments and recommendations are highly valued by customers at Old Wives' Tales, for like other feminist bookstores, this store is recognized on its own turf as a center for information on just about every aspect of the

women's movement. A few weeks ago, when co-owner Sherry Thomas taped up a positive mini-review of Joanna Russ's latest novel, "On Strike Against God" (*Out & Out Books*), the store sold out its supply of 60 copies within seven days. Similarly, although Carol Seajay's personal backing of Sally Gearhart's "Wanderground" (*Persephone*) prompted a series of successful in-store promotions, the mini-review displayed next to the book helped build the sale to an astonishing 780 copies in this store alone within 12 months.

Mini-reviews also stimulate sales of hardcover titles such as "The Writer and Her Work," a book of essays edited by Janet Sternberg (*Norton*) that so far has sold 20 copies at \$14.95. And there is no doubt that the positive mini-review taped below copies of Louise Bernikow's "Among Women" (*Crown*) helped to build this sale to 71 copies at \$12.95 over six months.

In-Store Review Clout

But perhaps the best example of the power of the mini-review can be seen in the sales history of a relatively unknown first novel called "Give Me Your Good Ear" by Maureen Brady (*Spinsters Ink*). During its first eight months of sale, customers bought this title at the rate of about four copies per month. Then, after a staff member put up a positive review of it, sales jumped to 30 copies a month. Finally, after the

note was taken down, sales dropped again to about four copies a month.

While totally negative reviews are not posted for a book, store personnel will verbally let a customer know if the book was not well received. Generally, when the customer brings the book to the cash register, one of the owners or store staff might say: "This is not very good. A better book on the subject might be. . . ." or "This book is not as good as the author's previous work(s)." According to Seajay, such comments have often caused the customer to buy the recommended titles and/or earlier works by the same author.

But the fun of experimenting with mini-reviews is only one advantage of operating a special interest store, observes Thomas. "The best part about specializing is that it makes your buying decision easier because it forces you to focus on the interests of your customers and the books that will appeal to those interests. We go a step further here because our staff not only shares those interests but also feels a personal commitment to certain principles behind them. For example, we refuse to stock any book that carries oppressive images of women, but we insist on carrying a broad range of books that aren't necessarily feminist. Margaret Atwood, Kay Boyle, Alice Adams, Ella Leffland, Diane Johnson and others are not usually described as feminists—I'm sure some of them nev-

Carol Seajay (l.) and Sherry Thomas, co-owners of Old Wives' Tales



Photographs © 1981 Patricia Holt

er use the term—but they have a great deal to say about women, and that's what we hope this store is all about."

But Thomas adds that there are disadvantages to specializing as well: "For one thing, there is an incredible amount of detail and extra work involved in keeping your inventory up-to-date and complete, and in finding those hundreds of specialty suppliers whose books are never listed in traditional publishing/bookselling directories. It takes much more effort to find and purchase such titles as 'Feminist Japan,' 'The Changing Role of Women in Southeast Asia,' or 'The Legal Rights of Battered Women in California,' but to our audience it's absolutely crucial that we stock these titles here." As it turns out, Seajay and Thomas buy from no fewer than 2500 suppliers—1500 book publishers and 1000 suppliers of nonbook merchandise (feminist records, greeting cards, posters, jewelry and magazines). Nonbook items account for 30% of total sales, and many of them are carried on consignment.

In addition to keeping track of all these suppliers, Seajay and Thomas have perhaps doubled their workload by insisting upon ordering extremely small quantities of every title or item they buy. This ordering system was devised by Seajay when she first opened the store with former partner Paula Wallace (who has since gone on to open her own store, Full Circle Women's Books in Albuquerque, N.M.). At that time (1976) Old Wives' Tales began with an \$8000 loan and an inventory of 1500 titles housed in a tiny, 450-square-foot store. Today, following a move down the street to larger quarters (900 square feet of selling space), the store carries 7000 titles, employs four full-time people and last year grossed a very healthy \$200,000. Throughout, ordering in small quantities has been "the only way," Seajay says, "that we could stay current with publishers and at the same time gradually expand our inventory."

Thus inventory records of the Pocket Books edition of Maxine Hong Kingston's "The Woman Warrior" show that this title was reordered 40 times over a period of three years, for a total sale to date of 400 copies. Similarly, the Bantam edition of Toni Morrison's "Sula" has been reordered 50 times for a sale to date of 286 copies. And the Norton edition of "Dream of a Common Language" by Adrienne Rich was reordered 41 times in three years, for a total of 347 copies. Even in-store best-sellers, such as Dorothy Bryant's "The Kin of Ata Are Waiting for You" (Random House and Ata Books), which sold 400 copies over the last four years, had to be reordered in lots of 10 on each of the 40 reorders made for that title.

It takes about 10 to 12 hours a week for Thomas and Seajay to keep this

system current. Every Saturday they take the carbon copies of their front counter sales book and check stock on each title purchased that week. "I know that some booksellers prefer to transfer sales information onto inventory cards rather than physically check the stock from shelf to shelf," says Thomas. "But in a small store we have found it helpful to work with the books themselves so that we can come away from a stock check with an absolutely up-to-date, visual image of what we have on sale." This working familiarity with their inventory has given Seajay and Thomas an accurate mental record of updated stock information on about 4000 out of the 7000 titles in their inventory. "With so many reorders made in such small quantities," says Seajay, "we feel we have to carry this information in our heads—otherwise we couldn't serve customers as efficiently as we need to in this store."

Selective Remaindering

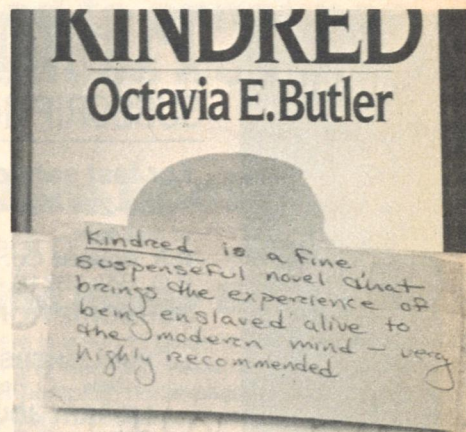
Ordering frequently and in small quantities may ease cash flow problems, but it can slightly cut into the bookseller's profit margin, and it does take time. So at Old Wives' Tales a number of attempts have been made to push up the gross, including a surprisingly lucrative system of selling selected remainders. "Our customers have always resisted hardcover prices," Seajay observes, "which is why trade

paperbacks and mass reprints comprise 85% of our inventory. But these customers also value hardcovers of authors they care about" (Kate Millett, Germaine Greer, Rita Mae Brown, etc.). Thus Seajay and Thomas, working closely with remainder distributors who are attuned to feminist markets (such as Daedalus in Washington, D.C.), will sometimes buy as many as 100 copies of a hardcover remainder, place 70 on sale over a gradual period of time, and keep the remaining 30 to sell at full retail price when the book has officially gone out of print. Meanwhile, during the sale of the remainder, every attempt is made to pass on extra savings to the customer. The hardcover edition of Rita Mae Brown's "Six of One" (Harper), for example, currently sells for \$2.25—25 cents less than copies of the Bantam edition sitting alongside it.

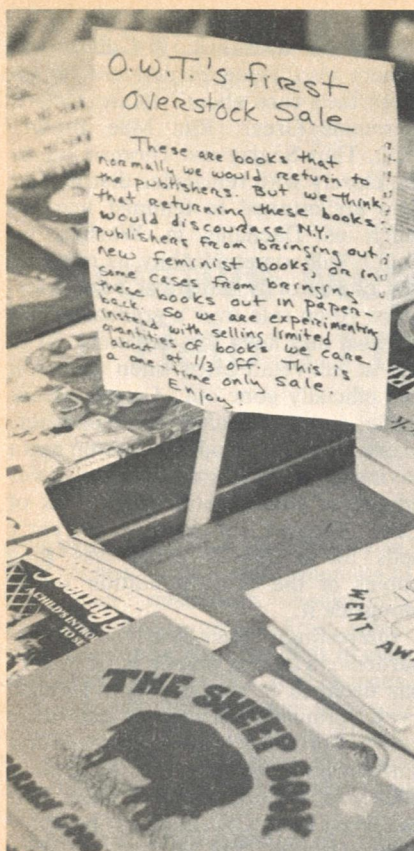
Interestingly, price resistance to new hardcovers among women book buyers has declined in recent years, Thomas says, "primarily because the difference between prices of trade paperbacks and hardcovers is no longer as large as it once was. We noticed this a short time ago when both 'Gyn/Ecology' by Mary Daly (Beacon, \$14.95) and 'Women and Nature' by Susan Griffin (Harper, \$12.95) sold 50 copies each in hardcover. At one time a sale of 10 each would have been excellent for this store."

Still, with prices of hardcovers in-

At right, a mini-review up close; below, handmade gondolas (by Carol Seajay) sit on rollaway casters and can be moved to the sides of the store during autograph parties. The little squares of paper tacked at various angles on the shelves are mini-reviews



Photographs © 1981 Patricia Holt



The sign on the table reveals a great deal about the bookstore's political and professional commitment

creasing dramatically, Thomas and Seajay have designed a new in-store rental library that they believe will help their less affluent customers read more books and will also add to store profits. "We tried a rental library once before and lost about 600 books," recalls Seajay with a grim smile, "perhaps because we were committed to an honor system that was too loosely defined at the time." That system required rental customers to pay \$5 for a lifetime membership and 25-cents per week per book rented. "At those rates we had no way of keeping track of the books rented out," she says. "But even though we lost money on it, the library pulled in so much traffic that we feel it's worth it now to try again."

The new system requires the customer to pay a \$15 deposit and \$2 per week per book rented. If the book is not returned, its list price will be deducted from the \$15 deposit. If it is returned, the deposit remains with the store (unless the customer wishes to withdraw her membership. Then, if the customer decides to buy the book, the \$2 rental fee is deducted from the retail price. "If on the average we can rent each selection four times in seven weeks," says Thomas, "we will have made our cost back when the publisher's bill is due. Say for example we rent a \$10 hardcover three times in a month,

charging the \$2 rental fee each time—that means that \$6 will be returned to us in 30 days, which (at an average 40% discount) is the amount we then owe the publishers on that book. After that every rental is pure profit, and when the book is taken off the rental list we can sell it as a used book and add more profit from that sale."

But "the only way this will work," says Seajay, "is if we select books that will appeal to our particular customers—that's why I suspect an in-store rental library could work brilliantly in special-interest stores. Last fall, for example, we sold four copies of 'Sister Wolf,' a hardcover novel by Ann Arensberg (Knopf, \$9.95) relatively quickly, and it occurred to us that this would be the kind of book we could use as a rental leader—we would probably sell the four copies anyway, and meanwhile we could rent it to many other customers and generate the kind of word-of-mouth that would lead to more sales. This is why we don't feel a rental library hurts publishers' sales—in the long run it might actually generate sales." For the bookseller, however, "There will always have to be a break-off point: the book can't be less than \$8.95 or we might lose sales, but it can't cost us more than \$15 wholesale or we would lose money if the copy weren't returned."

The in-store rental library, remainder sales, mini-reviews and Thursday night readings by such authors as Louise Bernikow, June Jordan, Isabel Miller, Dorothy Bryant, Esther Broner, Mary Daly, Kathleen Berry and Marta Randall have all helped to enlarge Old Wives' Tales' market beyond a close circle of feminists to the larger community of general women readers that includes many professional women, scholars of women's studies, teachers of female hygiene, mothers at home and women who have reentered college or business.

This expanding community has been so supportive, Seajay says, "that it has made things happen twice as fast. When word got out two years ago that we were relocating to a larger store, 50 customers showed up and helped us move the entire inventory in one day."

Surprisingly, the new store provided twice the display space, while the inventory (about 5500 titles then) stayed the same—yet sales after the move increased by an incredible 41%. "I think that's probably a lesson for all of us in the value of displaying books face-out," says Thomas. But what was even more surprising was that the 41% never levelled off—it simply kept increasing until January of 1981, when the store took in \$23,000 in sales, representing an astonishing 91% increase over sales in January 1980.

How to account for such an enormous growth rate? "I think it's a com-

bination of circumstances. The store is known and better established. Publishers are beginning to see that there is a huge market for books in the community; and the growth of the women's movement is just getting visible and more every day."

Obviously something is happening with women's publishing in San Francisco, but Thomas expects it is spreading throughout the country as well. One reason why Seajay launched the *Old Wives' Tales* Newsletter, an informative and educational publication that is mailed to 130 female subscribers in the U.S. and Canada, is that subscribers contribute to the store's operating costs, including bill paying, by sending in their own articles; wonder in the collective, a national store convention; and Women In Distress, a distributor of women's books out of business.

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ination of circumstances," responds Seajay. "The store is getting better known and better equipped every year. Publishers are beginning to see that not only is there a huge women's market 'out there' somewhere, but also there are huge markets within markets in this community; and finally there is the growth of the women's audience for books—it just gets larger and more visible and more hungry for books every day."

Obviously something very dramatic is happening with that audience in San Francisco, but Thomas and Seajay suspect it is spreading throughout the country as well. This is perhaps the reason why Seajay, backed by owners of other feminist bookstores, has launched the *Feminist Bookstores Newsletter*, an idea-packed, highly informative and often entertaining periodical that is mailed out every two months to 130 feminist bookstores in the U.S. and Canada. In it, member subscribers contribute ideas for swap sales, autograph parties, store advertising, bill paying and in-store promotions; wonder in print about the possibility of launching a feminist ordering collective, a national feminist bookstore convention, or a replacement for Women In Distribution (WIND), the distributor of women's books that went out of business in 1979; provide tips

and lists on new books from hundreds of different suppliers; argue about issues within the movement, such as the difference between oppressive images of women as presented in books from "established" houses and positive images of women in books from women's presses; and provide, finally, a running account of the state of the women's book industry in North America today.

Expanding the Network

With some reluctance and after a great deal of debate, FBN subscribers will now accept subscriptions (\$25 per year) from anyone who is committed to feminist principles (previously only women who worked for women-controlled businesses could join) and will also accept advertising at \$250 per page. Publishers can rent FBN's subscriber list for \$25, and Seajay also offers rentals of WIND's two-year-old customer list of 1800 booksellers, librarians and heads of women's studies departments.

Like Carol Seajay, Sherry Thomas is visibly active in women's issues. A former editor of *Country Women* magazine and co-author of the popular (nearly 60,000 copies sold in trade paperback) Doubleday/Anchor title, "Country Women," she has just written a new book, again for Doubleday/Anchor, called "We Didn't Have Much

But We Sure Had Plenty"—a book of true stories about rural women.

To Thomas, sales statistics at Old Wives' Tales may portend other possibilities within the women's bookselling community in general. "If in this store alone we can sell close to 800 copies of one title ['Wanderground'] in one year," she muses, "imagine what would happen if all of the 90 feminist bookstores in the U.S. got behind one title—if each of us sold, say, 500 copies of a book we all believed in, why that would mean 45,000 copies sold before the book even got distributed to general or chain stores.

"What I mean to say is that there is an extremely responsive women's market for some particular books, and frankly the established major houses are not yet ready to publish to it—they still see this as a very specialized audience. But since there is a need for these titles—especially reprints of out-of-print feminist classics, first novels by good women writers, nonfiction analyses by women essayists and scholars, etc.—there is a chance that those of us who work as booksellers in this market could begin to publish to these needs ourselves." Wouldn't that place a heavy risk on an already strained cash-flow situation? "We don't see it as a risk," Seajay responds. "We see it more as a personal commitment." □

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