

From: June Thomas WhereAre@buttondown.email
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To: julierenszer@gmail.com

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off our backs

\$1.50 a women's newsjournal



The only time I've been on a magazine cover ... so far

A couple of weeks ago, I did a Zoom interview with Julie Enszer and Chloe Berger of *Sinister Wisdom* about my time on the *off our backs* collective. I can't remember my exact dates as a collective member, as opposed to an intern or friend, but I was at the magazine between about 1985 and 1990. (I was the world's worst intern, mostly because I had no idea what an intern was--we didn't have them in the U.K. back then. I'd also never had an office job--so I was maddeningly oblivious to concepts like the office worker needing to know when I might show up and for how long.)

Chloe and Julie asked great questions, and I immodestly suggest you [watch the video](#) or read the transcript linked in the top matter. (I also recommend [carol anne douglas' take](#) on her much longer time on the collective. And yes, I can only write collective members' names in lower case.)

We talked about how getting involved with a feminist publication was a great, concrete way to get involved with feminism, because it was a project with a meeting place and a schedule and a concrete purpose. We talked about the big issues in feminism during that period--the sex wars, the Dworkin-MacKinnon ordinance, and the fallout from the Barnard conference--and the pieces I remember from that era. I admitted that my favorite perk was getting to see the books and especially the exchange subscriptions with other feminist magazines, and I talked a lot about how being part of the *off our backs* collective, especially as the office worker, was the best journalism training I can even imagine.

We did everything ourselves, and the only thing that no longer pertains is the painstaking method of doing layout. (We'd type out the pieces on a Selectric typewriter at column width, put hot wax on the back of those pieces of paper, and then place them on layout "boards." When you proofed pieces, you had to retype any fixes and paste them over the typos. You absolutely ALWAYS got home from layout weekend with words stuck to your sleeves.) Everything else--figuring out what needs to be covered, deciding whether to accept articles that have been submitted, writing stories and news briefs and reviews and the chicken lady column, writing headlines, and running the business of the paper? So much better than journalism school.

Oh, I forgot the big one. The best way to learn how to write is to be edited--and we edited each other's pieces. In the interview, I mentioned Paula Krebs, who was a friend of the paper (and is still a good friend of mine), because her responses to my early writing efforts were memorably tough (I was WAY TOO FLORID), but every woman on the collective gave great feedback.

As the office worker, I had to pay the bills, make sure new subscriptions and renewals were processed, figure out how much the bookstores who sold *oob* owed us and send them regular invoices (this was Alice Henry's specialty), and take the layout boards to the printer in Northern Virginia the day after layout weekend. (A

layout boards to the printer in Northern Virginia the day after layout weekend. (A few years ago I finally stopped having anxiety dreams about being unprepared for exams, but for a while that was replaced by panic at realizing I'd forgotten to deposit all the checks that *oob* subscribers had mailed in.)

One thing I didn't mention was dealing with Herman Obermayer, the owner of the *Northern Virginia Sun*, which printed the paper during my days at *oob*. Thanks to [Wikipedia](#), I've since learned that he served in World War II, attended the Nuremberg Trials, and did all kinds of work with newspapers in emerging democracies, but I knew him as a conservative old geezer who loved to torture the feminists! At the same time, he believed in free speech and was willing to print our paper and take our money to do so. I also remember that he once took me to lunch at some kind of member's club--it was the first (and maybe the only) time that I was presented with a menu that bore no prices!

Chloe asked what I wished we'd done differently, and although I stick by my answer, another thing that occurred to me after the interview: I wish we had had as much ambition for the business side of the paper as for the content. Our editorial ambition was immense--we really wanted to be the feminist magazine of record, and I know from experience as a researcher that pretty much every big conference, debate, book, and idea got a good going-over in *oob*. It was a volunteer project--only the office worker was paid, and that was a pittance (but also all we could afford)--and women put in at least 30 hours of uncompensated labor each month because they wanted to write and put out a paper not because they wanted to run a business. No one joined the collective because they were determined to find more bookstores to stock us, to generate more subscribers, or to sign up more advertisers--but it would've been great if someone had!

Recommendation: I [read eight books](#) in March, seven of which were nonfiction. The one novel was a classic thriller. *The Day of the Jackal*, by Frederick Forsyth, is one of those books that never lets up--it's all action from the first page to the last--but I do love a book in which all the characters, the heroes *and* the villains, are smart and mega-competent. My only cavil is that Mick Herron and Adrian McKinty have accustomed me to a bit of humor in my thrillers, and Forsyth forgot to provide any.

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