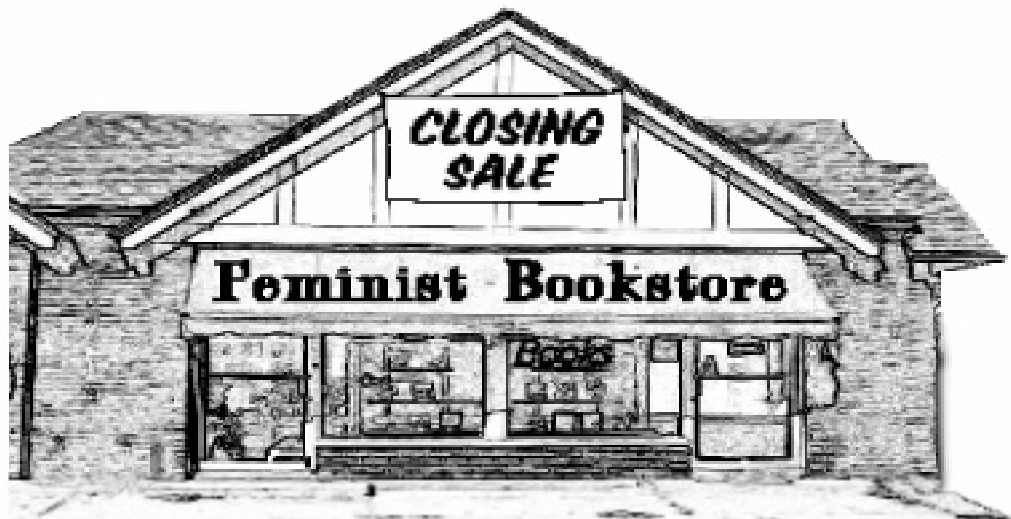




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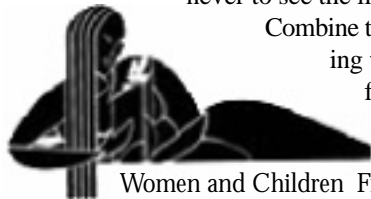
Rose Norman
University of Alabama in Huntsville

Last year, *Firebrand Books*, a pioneer in feminist publishing who helped bring now-famous writers like Dorothy Allison, Audre Lorde, Jewelle Gomez, and Alison Bechdel to national attention, sold its backlist and ceased publication. From 1999 to 2000, one-third of the country's feminist book stores closed for good. These events are part of a trend that threatens not just the livelihood of independent publishers and booksellers, but the very support structure without which the modern feminist movement could not have

The facts are scary. Five media conglomerates now sell 80% of the books in this country.

been born, let alone survived and thrived. As Dorothy Allison explains it, "Without the bookstores, magazines and presses that have encouraged and sustained my imagination I would not have known what to do with the stories I wanted to tell" (1998-99 *Feminist Bookstore Catalog*)

Independent publisher Andr'e Schiffrin tells the story of how some of this happened in *The Business of Books* (Verso, 2000). The facts are scary. Five media conglomerates now sell 80% of the books in this country. For companies like these, books are merchandise, and only those expected to earn their cost plus profit get published. The profits these publishers expect are more than double what publishers have traditionally expected to make, and the conglomerates have little understanding of the long-standing practice of bringing along new authors with low predicted sales, subsidized by big sellers. As Antigone Books' Kate Randall points out, "With the focus on a K-mart bestseller mentality, any kind of 'radical' or non-mass appeal book is more and more likely never to see the light of day."



Combine this mentality in publishing with a similar mentality from the chain superstores, who began demanding big discounts in ex-

change for big purchases. The normal markup on a book is 40%, so when those bookstores were routinely selling bestsellers at 40% off, they were selling them at cost in order to corner the market. These practices in the superstores and their online counterparts have driven some 2000 independent booksellers out of business since the early 1990s (Schiffrin 125).

To learn more about how these things are affecting feminist bookselling, I interviewed fourteen feminist booksellers from around the country. All of them are members of



Mev Miller
Amazon Bookstore Cooperative

the *Feminist Bookstore Network* (FBN), six are on its steering committee, and several have been in feminist bookselling for twenty years or more. The news is encouraging, not least because many of the pioneering feminist booksellers are still in business and doing well: *Amazon Bookstore Cooperative* in Minneapolis (founded 1970), *Antigone Books* in Tucson (founded 1973), *New Words Bookstore* in Cambridge, MA (founded 1974), *A Room of One's Own* in Madison, WI (founded 1975) all report optimism about the future of feminist bookselling. *Women & Children First*, in business in Chicago since 1979, last year grossed over a million dollars in sales. The trouble is that they had comparable gross sales back in 1992-93, but sales declined from 1994 to 1998 due to a variety of unfair business practices that the superstore chains began about that time.

W&CF was one of 26 independent booksellers who were named plaintiffs in the *American Booksellers Association* (ABA) lawsuit against *Barnes & Noble* and *Borders*. Co-owner Ann Christophersen testified in the trial, and her testimony was crucial in the \$4.7 million settlement that was inadequately reported in the media. Christophersen's W&CF partner, Linda Bubon, reports that the press focused on the

amount of the settlement (which was less than what ABA spent), but failed to report the many things the lawsuit achieved, such as an end to some of the secret deals with publishers that allowed discounts that disadvantaged independents. Publishers now offer independents some of the same deals, and those across-the-board discounts that the superstores were given are gone as a result of the lawsuit and others filed against publishers in the 1990s. (For details direct from ABA see www.bookweb.org/news/btw/4591.html).

In addition to these pioneers who have fought hard, many of these storeowners are young and filled with some of the same enthusiasm and activism that fueled the second wave women's movement. Helen Roman was only 24 years old when she bought Brigit Books in June 2000 from its founder, Patty Callaghan, who was ready to retire. Maia Ramnath was 26 in 1999 when she joined the collective that founded *Bluestockings*, the only feminist bookstore in New York City. Catherine Sameh was 28 when she opened *In Other Words Women's Books and Resources* in Portland, OR. It was 1993, and was her first bookstore. All of these women demonstrate, in Helen Roman's words, "the passions and motivations other than money that drive feminist bookstore owners and staff."

They certainly need passion and motivation other than money. Many stores (like some feminist publishers) have had to form a non-profit organization to manage fundraising and programming in support of the store. Some were set up as non-profits or cooperatives from the beginning, recognizing that they are much more than a business. Feminist bookstores have been at the center of feminist activism and political change since the early 1970s, when the first ones were founded. As Carol Seajay (formerly publisher of *Feminist Bookstore News*) puts it, "it's hard to imagine in this day and age, but one of the major successes of women's bookstores and feminist publishers was to prove that there

was not only an interest, but a demand for books by/for/about women." Over the years, these stores have often been the place where women's community developed, safe spaces where women could expect to be affirmed. Many also have excellent children's books sections offering positive and diverse im-



ages of women and girls.

Now more than ever, those of us in Women's Studies need to pay attention to what is going on in book publishing and bookselling, and take action. These stores are in many ways our grassroots, our connection to the general public, to our own graduates, and to women and girls who may never go to college.



The fact is that feminist bookstores both are and aren't like other bookstores. They are as much about creating women's space and valuing women's words as they are about selling books, which is why they all sell such sidelines as women positive posters and bumper stickers, women's music, women-made jewelry and crafts, lesbian and

gay books and gifts, etc. Catherine Sameh describes the multiple functions feminist bookstores serve: "We are an outlet for women's community and culture and literature and activism and education—all at once." Often the feminist book store is the place where people find out what feminist activities are going on in town, the place activists return to after the *Take Back the Night* march, the place newcomers come to check the bulletin board for book groups, or roommates, or women-owned businesses. At the same time, feminist booksellers are the ones who know their stock, handselling books that might never have been noticed in today's media-controlled market. Barbara Kingsolver, writing to the *Arizona Daily Star* when her local independent bookseller failed, says it well: "I owe my career to people such as those at *The Book Mark*," who handsold her books before she became famous.

Certainly it is important for Women's Studies books to get into the mainstream, and it is true that many of the superstores have (or used to have) sections devoted to Women's Studies, usually located somewhere in the back of the store. Anyone who has shopped these stores knows that their clerks often know little about their stock. Moreover the chain stores have rigid rules about returning unsold books to publishers: a staffer at one major chain told me that any book that hasn't sold 9 copies in 30 days is returned. Beth Dingman, publisher of *New Victoria Books*,

Feminist Booksellers

reports that where they used to average 7-10% returns, that rate has climbed to 30-40%. Those pioneers still in business and the younger women following in their footsteps need our support if these stores are to succeed. There is plenty we can do. We can link our websites to the *Feminist Bookstore Network* ("<http://www.fembooknet.com/stores/stores.html>, www.fembooknet.com), which includes a state by state index of feminist bookstores in the U.S. and Canada. We can include the place of feminist bookstores as cultural

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centers in our curriculum. We can buy from feminist booksellers and publishers at NWSA conferences, and invite feminist booksellers into any conference we happen to be organizing.

Those of you lucky enough to have a feminist bookstore in town can do all your book shopping there and order textbooks from them. Textbook sales are an important part of many feminist bookstore revenues (15-30%), and there are many good reasons to send our students to a feminist bookstore rather than to the campus bookstore. For one thing, they are a living demonstration of much that we teach in our classes, as well as an important part of our herstory. Sara Luce Look, co-owner of *Charis Books & More* in Atlanta, says she first discovered *Charis* when her Women's Studies teacher took the class on a field trip to visit the store, learn about its history, and its activist role in the early days of women's studies. Before that field trip, she was actually afraid to visit the store! Perhaps such unarticulated fears keep many women away from feminist bookstores, if they even know they exist.

Unfortunately, colleges & universities have been hit by corporate bookselling practices as much as anyone. Many university bookstores are now owned by chains who insist on exclusive contracts and intimidate administrators into believing that it is illegal to allow an independent bookseller to bring books to class to sell. There are ways to get around these restrictions. At the very least, we can promote feminist and independent bookstores to our classes, no matter what we are teaching or where we order our books.

For those like me, for whom the nearest feminist book-

store is 100 miles away, the internet provides a good alternative to shopping at local chains. All but one of the booksellers interviewed is already offering online sales (some with discounts of 10-20%), along with book reviews and recommendations. Many of these are through a website operated by the ABA, which makes it as easy to order from an independent as from *amazon.com*. (FYI: *Amazon Bookstore Cooperative*, the oldest of the feminist bookstores still in operation, sued *amazon.com* for name confusion and settled out of court.) For those who do not feel comfortable ordering over the internet, many of the feminist bookstores have toll free numbers and welcome mail orders by phone.

Still, cyberspace is a weak substitute for the needs that feminist bookstores fill. Actual, physical feminist space is important too. As Sandy Torkildson puts it, "We're a place that takes women seriously."

It's time we as feminist educators took feminist booksellers seriously.

Interviewees:

Mev Miller, Amazon Bookstore Cooperative, Minneapolis, MN

<http://www.amazonbookstorecoop.com>

Kate Randall, Antigone Books, Tucson, AZ

<http://www.antigonebooks.com>

Maia Rammath, Bluestockings, New York City, NY

<http://www.bluestockings.com>

Suzanne Corson, Boadecia's Books, Kensington, CA

<http://www.bookpride.com>

Helen A. Roman, Brigit Books, St. Petersburg, FL

<http://www.brigitbooks.com>

Sara Luce Look, Charis Books & More, Atlanta, GA

<http://charis.booksense.com>

Catherine Sameh,

In Other Words Women's Books and Resources, Portland, OR

<http://www.inotherwords.org>

Heather Ruzicka-Furr, Lodestar Books, Birmingham, AL

<http://www.lodestarbooks.com>

Mary Ellen Kavanaugh, My Sisters' Words, Syracuse NY

<http://www.mysisterswords.com>

Gilda Bruckman, New Words Bookstore, Cambridge, MA

<http://www.newwordsbooks.com>

Sandy Torkildson, Room of One's Own Bookstore, Madison, WI

<http://www.roomofonesown.com>

Anjula Gogia, Toronto Women's Bookstore, Toronto, Ontario

<http://www.womensbookstore.com>

Dotty Faibisy., Wild Iris Books, Gainesville FL

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Linda Bubon, Women & Children First, Chicago IL

<http://womenchildren.booksense.com>