Feminist Publishing – Then, Now and in the Future

A talk given by Zoë Fairbairns
at Nottingham Mechanics
Organised by Five Leaves Bookshop

On Saturday 22 April 2017

Five Leaves Bookshop presents
(at Nottingham Mechanics)

Feminist Publishing

then, now, and in the future

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Debbie Taylor, editor of women writers' magazine Mslexia

Saturday 22 April 2.00-5.00pm

The UK now has only two feminist publishing houses – there were many more in the 1980s. Our panel will examine the gender issues around publishing, reflect on the achievements of the 1980s, and look at options for effecting permanent change. Come and join the discussion.

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Our theme is “Feminist Publishing, then, now, and in the future”.’ I’m going to start with ‘then’.

In the beginning – in my beginning - there was no feminist publishing.

There was no feminism - not that I knew about, as a girl growing up in the 1950s and 60s. Just an uneasy sense that adult women didn’t seem to have much going for them.

They didn’t have interesting jobs. They didn’t have their own money. Worst of all they didn’t have any fun. That was how it looked to me. At the age of about 12, I happened upon The Second Sex by Simone de Beauvoir. It seemed to confirm my worst suspicions – from the overweight naked woman on the jacket, to alarming items in the index: Abandonment. Abortion. Bad mother. Bad woman. Defloration. Divorce. Exhibitionism. Exploitation. And so on and so on, all the way down to War, Wedding Night, and Wifehood.

A few years later, I found a yellow-jacketed Gollancz hardback called The Feminine Mystique by Betty Friedan. I read it with astonishment – how did this American writer know so much about my mother’s life?

But when I read extracts to my mother, mainly the bits which exposed the day-to-day dreariness of being a full-time housewife, she said it was nonsense. She said she was perfectly happy - leaving me to wonder why in that case she spent so much of her time in floods of tears, fits of rage, long periods of self-starvation, or all three.

Perhaps tears, rage, and starvation diets were what happiness looked like in an adult woman.

While still in my teens, I wrote a novel in which one of the characters was a housewife who spent a lot of her time in floods of tears and fits of rage. It was called Live as Family, and Macmillan published it in 1968.

The summer of revolution. Too young even to sign my own contract, and while other students were rioting in Paris or sitting-in at the London School of Economics, I was having my 15 minutes of fame as a teenage novelist.

I was reviewed, interviewed, photographed, autograph-hunted, wined, dined, flirted-with and flattered. One male journalist was kind enough to describe me in print as 'an attractive brunette.'

I'm not going to pretend I didn't enjoy this. Of course I did. But I might have enjoyed it more if the journalist in question had actually laid eyes on me before making this judgement, instead of interviewing me over the phone and asking me what colour my hair was.

And the photograph of my face which appeared on the front of my book, wasn't really me. It had started out as a photograph of me, but the publishers' design team had obviously decided that in my natural state I wasn't good enough. I didn't have the long eyelashes of Sandie Shaw, the pallor and gauntness of Twiggy, or the cheekbones of Mary Quant. So they had got out their airbrushes and improved me.

Comparing this so-called portrait with what I saw when I looked honestly in the mirror, I felt as if I had lost a beauty contest. Which might not have been so bad if I had known I was going in for one.

Worse was to come when I started to become aware of the Women's Liberation Movement, and this awareness began to show in my writing.

Macmillan made it clear that they were no longer interested in my work, and neither were other publishers to whom I offered my early feminist fiction. One spoke for many when she said, 'I'm sure there IS a novel to be written about the Women's Lib movement – ' note the singular – 'but yours isn't funny enough.'

From being a teenage novelist, I had become a has-been in my 20s.

I've described this demoralising sequence of events in more detail in an article entitled 'I Was a Teenage Novelist,' published in More Tales I Tell My Mother

(Journeyman, 1987.) For now, suffice it to say that the British book world was not a congenial place for feminist writers in the early 70s.

By contrast, in July 1984, if you had walked along any High Street in Britain where there was a WH Smith's you would have spotted in its window the F-word: Feminist.

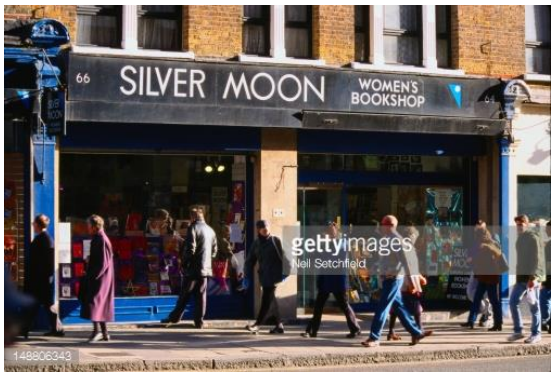
It was Feminist Book Week. Publishers and booksellers large and small, radical and mainstream, were coming together to promote feminist literature.

There were at least seven self-identified feminist book-publishers in the UK, including Virago and the Women's Press. And mainstream presses such as Methuen, Routledge and Pergamon were setting up feminist imprints and lists.

Even Macmillan – which had so unceremoniously abandoned me when my feminism started to show in my writing in the late 60s and early 70s, now, in the mid-80s, had a self-identified Feminist List, which included work by me.

There were other radical presses, such as Pluto, Journeyman and the Writers and Readers Co-op, which, while not being explicitly feminist, were radical in their thinking on gender, and made a point of publishing feminist work. (Five Leaves would join them in 1996.)

There were feminist bookshops: Silver Moon, Sisterwrite and Virago in London, Womanzone, and West & Wilde in Edinburgh, and one in York whose name I have forgotten.



There was a feminist literary prize – the Fawcett Prize.

There were Feminist Book Clubs – the Women's Press book club, and Letterbox.

There was also, by the mid-80s, a wide array of feminist magazines being published in the UK, such as Spare Rib, Women's Report, Women's Voice, Women's Review, Everywoman, Feminist Review, Women's Studies International

Quarterly, Trouble & Strife, For The Likes Of Us, Outwrite, Pink Pages, WIRES and numerous regional newsletters.

MsLexia was still just a twinkle in Debbie Taylor's eye – it began publishing in 1999 and has been with us ever since, a guide, support and friend to women who write.

Going back to 1984, and Feminist Book Week: it wasn't just about bookselling; it was about the people who read books getting together with the people who write them.

A feature in Spare Rib of the time shows more than 50 feminist book events all over the country.

They involved not only British writers such as Susie Orbach, Pat Barker, Eva Figes, Kate Figes, Michele Roberts, Michelene Wandor, Sara Maitland and me.

There were also visits and appearances by writers from overseas, including Maya Angelou, Marge Piercy, Valerie Miner and Lisa Alther from the USA; Urvashi Butalia from India; Buchi Emecheta from Nigeria; Frances Molloy from Ireland; Nawal el Sadaawi from Egypt; Dacia Maraini from Italy, and Manny Shirazi from Iran.

So what had brought this on, this sudden conversion to feminism in the book trade?

A situation about which Eileen Fairweather wrote in Cosmopolitan in 1984 "The catchphrase at the Frankfurt Book Fair was that the only two growth areas in the industry were floppy disks and feminism.'

And about which The Bookseller carried a cartoon showing a surprised-looking male publisher from an outfit called Token Books, exclaiming, 'suddenly they're selling like hot cakes.'

What had brought it on? Feminism, that's what. The Women's Liberation Movement, and its successes.

Yes, I said 'successes' These days it is fashionable in certain circles that I don't belong to, to wring ones hands and declare despairingly that nothing has changed

for women since the 1960s. People who say that must have very short memories; or perhaps they are too young or too ill-informed to be aware of a time *within living memory* when

- job advertisements in newspapers often appeared in separate columns – men's jobs and women's jobs. Sometimes the same job would be offered to both genders, but at different rates of pay.

- most married women were barred from filling in their own tax returns or applying in their own right for social security benefits

- women could be sacked from their jobs for getting pregnant. Even if they were allowed to stay on, they had no legal entitlement to maternity pay

- there were no refuges for women beaten up by the men they lived with, and few people had heard of rape crisis centres

- women unaccompanied by men could be refused service in restaurants in the evenings, in case they might be prostitutes plying their trade

- it was legal for married men to rape their wives

I've written in more detail here and here about the many ways in which, thanks to feminist campaigning, times were a-changing for women, and a lot of those changes happened, or at least were under discussion in the years leading up to the feminist publishing boom.

This was no coincidence. Gender politics were in the air. Feminists and our friends tend to be thinking people, and thinking people tend to read books, and sometimes write them. Hence the huge increase in demand for feminist literature, and availability of it.

And hence the Feminist Book Fair, Feminist Book Week and subsequent Feminist Book Fortnights which continued to occur every year from 1984 until the early 90s, alongside International Feminist Book Fairs and other similar events all over the world - Oslo, Nairobi, Montreal, Barcelona, Amsterdam and Melbourne.

You may ask: was this a genuinely radical movement, or was it just the mainstream capitalist publishing industry spotting a gap in the market and cashing in?

It was both.

The feminist organisation Women In Publishing were strongly active in running these events, as were feminist booksellers, librarians and writers. But it was a commercial operation too. Feminist Book Fortnights (FBFs) were funded partly by selling advertising in a booklet in which publishers could feature their main feminist titles. Small publishers – those that published fewer than 12 new titles per year – paid a lower rate than larger presses.

As well as advertising in the booklet, publishers could have their books considered for what was called the 'Selected 20' titles.

Not a 'top 20', the organisers hastened to add, as this would have been contrary to the egalitarian spirit of the event. Rather the selected 20 were intended to illustrate the range of feminist publishing, its strength and variety.

Lilian Mohin, founder of the lesbian feminist publishers Onlywomen, said in 1990 that the cost of the FBF promotion was money well spent: her company would expect to earn back at least four times the amount in extra sales. She also said:

We were feminist publishers long before there was a Feminist Book Fortnight, and our raison d'être has always been ideological rather than commercial. The Feminist Book Fortnight is a commercial book trade promotion. But I am very conscious that we need commerce to survive, and to publish the more radical politics that we espouse.[i]

Conflict between politics and commerce manifested itself in other ways. Carole Spedding, one of the FBF organisers, told me that sometimes, when organising events in libraries, she had requests from librarians that she tone down the name of the event to "Women's book fortnight" in order to reassure senior management that it was safe to participate.

I myself encountered a similar attitude. As a participating writer in Feminist Book Fortnight in the mid-80s, I was once invited to speak at something called a Women's Activity Day. The organisers explained that they didn't want to use the word 'feminist' as it was too scary for what they called ordinary women**.** 'Ordinary women don't like extreme, aggressive feminists,' they told me, 'so we decided to invite you instead.'
[ii]

I didn't know whether to be flattered or offended.

It was an exciting time to be a published feminist writer. Sara Maitland wrote this about the year 1986, when the feminist publishing boom was at its height and she was working on her magnificent Book of Spells.

Almost half of them were written in the three months around Christmas 1986; it was one of the best times I ever had. I thought, 'Shit, I can do anything.' If someone rang me up tomorrow and wanted a short story about the life of a male sperm whale in the Pacific Ocean, I'd think, 'right, give me half an hour.[iii]

No-one has ever asked me to write a story about the life of a sperm whale and I don't suppose they ever will, but I can identify totally with that 'I can do anything' exhilaration of the 1980s and 90s.

Between 1979 and 1997 I published six novels, all of which I regard as feminist. For much of that time, enough people bought those books to enable me to support myself financially as a writer. A feminist writer. As well as being financially convenient, this was also validating.

I was also a feminist reader. I've already described the ways in which the first feminist books I ever read - Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex and Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique - filled me with gloom and foreboding. But what I understand now is that this was because there was no context for them – not in my life, as a 60s teenager. There was no sense that things could get better. But with the growth of the Women's Liberation Movement and feminist publishing, they did get better. And yes, sometimes it was a case of two-steps-forward-one-step-back, but when that happened I could just read another book. Feminist books were piled on my shelves, waiting to be read: books published in the UK by Onlywomen, Virago, Honno, The Women's Press, Falling Wall, Pandora, Sheba, Stramullion – and countless other feminist presses throughout the world.

It's different now. Or is it?

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Linen Press in Edinburgh identifies itself as ‘the only independent women’s press in the UK’, but Honno in Wales and Persephone in London also describe themselves as independent. As does the very welcome new Silver Press, which says in its mission statement ‘We are committed to reaching beyond mainstream publishing and mainstream feminism, and we will choose those writers whose work reflects that.’

Hammeron in Bristol describes itself as being for ‘feminists, queers, nerds and weirdos’, and publishes, according to its website, one book per year. Virago is as we know alive and well and part of the Little Brown group. I’m not aware of any other UK book publishers or book shops which identify themselves as specifically feminist. (Please correct me if I am wrong.)

But there are plenty of feminist books out there, with in-your-face titles such as Everyone Should Be A Feminist, Everyday Sexism, How To Be A Woman, Reclaiming Feminism, I Call Myself a Feminist, Girl Up, Everywoman, Feminism Is For Everybody, and The Attack Of The 50ft Woman,
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There’s also lots of feminist fiction. I’ve compiled a list – see below. In keeping with the egalitarian spirit of the Feminist Book Fortnights’ Selected 20, this isn’t a ‘Top 20’.Rather it is a selection of novels and short stories which, published in the last 10 years, manage to be both hugely enjoyable and richly enlightening about the gender politics of the situations they fictionalise. (If you think I’ve left something out, I probably have. There is so much to choose from.)

On International Women’s Day earlier this year, publications as diverse as Stylist magazine, the London Standard, the Guardian, the Independent, and a website calling itself So Feminine – Women In Focus were falling over themselves to publish lists of ten or 20 recommended feminist books.

Even the Telegraph, not to be outdone, came up with ‘Nine Feminist Books that All Men Need to Read.’

We might not all agree with all their choices, but that’s not really the point. The point is that those choices were made, and that there was so much to choose from.

Mainstream media, and organisations that want to be seen as traditional or respectable, aren't rushing to dissociate themselves from the word 'feminist' as they did back in the day when I was invited to speak at a Women's Activity Day.

This may be a hopeful sign that as feminists and other women we no longer see ourselves as a specialist subject or a fringe activity. We're out in the mainstream where we belong.

Though I hope we can go on lurking on the fringe as well.

As for my own writing, I haven't published a new novel since 1997. That's 20 years.

This isn't a choice I've made, and it isn't – this time – a result of publishers refusing my work. I haven't completed any novels to offer them.

There may be many reasons for this. One is the 'you couldn't make it up' phenomenon. Every time I try to make something up, I find it pales into insignificance when compared with something that has actually happened.

Another possible reason for my silence as a novelist is that there doesn't have to be a reason. There's no law that says that just because you write one novel you have to write two, or just because you write eight you have to write nine.

I'm full of admiration for writers who go on producing high-quality and inspiring novels well past what would in many professions be regarded as retirement age – Fay Weldon, Susan Hill, Margaret Atwood, Valerie Miner. Margaret Drabble.

But I also admire people like Harper Lee who, after writing her hugely successful novel, To Kill a Mockingbird**,** resisted pressure to write another, saying, 'I've said what I had to say and I'm not going to say it again.'

I still write short stories and journalism, radio drama and teaching materials. I've worked in recent years as a subtitler and audio describer. But I do not currently feel as if I will write any more novels.

At least, I didn't.

I recently chanced upon the work of Bernardine Bishop – she's on the list - who published two novels in the 1960s when she was in her early 20s, and her third 50 years later in 2013.

. I've read all three with great enjoyment. I particularly admired Unexpected Lessons in Love which manages to make a lovely storyline out of that most unlovely of objects: a stoma bag.

I regard Bernardine Bishop, who died in 2013, as an inspiration. Never say never. As a teenage and 20-something novelist I thought a ten-year gap between novels was a mark of failure. 20 years – which is how long it has been since I last published a novel – was even worse. Now, though, I know that even 50 years can be taken in ones stride. If I follow Bernardine Bishop's example, my next novel will be published in 2047, a year before my hundredth birthday.

You are all cordially invited to the launch.

Recent feminist fiction:
Zoë's Selected 20
(in alphabetical order, by author's name)

Ali Smith: The Child (from her collection 'The First Person and Other Stories')

Anna Hope: Wake

Barbara Kingsolver: Flight Behaviour

Bernardine Bishop: Unexpected Lessons in Love

Caitlin Moran: How to Build A Girl

Chibundo Onuzo: The Spider King's Daughter

Chimamanda Ngozi Aidichie: Americanah

Eve Harris: The Marrying of Chani Kaufman

Fiona McFarlane: The Night Guest

Gillian Flynn: Gone Girl

Kate Westbrook: The Moneypenny Diaries

Kirstin Innes: Fishnet

Laura Wilson: My Best Friend

Marina Lewycka: A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian

Mary Lawson: Crow Lake

Nicola Monaghan: Starfishing

Sally Hinchcliffe: Witching Hour (short story in 'Tales of the DeCongested Volume 1', edited by Rebecca Lattin-Rawstrone and Paul Bailey)

Sarah Walters: The Paying Guests

Stella Duffy: The Room of Lost Things

Tania Hershman: My Mother was an Upright Piano (from her collection of the same name)

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[i] Quoted in my article "It's a Feminist Fortnight" in Everywoman magazine, June 1990

[ii]

[iii] Quoted in Nicci Gerrard: Into The Mainstream (Pandora, 1989) p165