Our Names in Print

FRANCES ROONEY

Les livres nourrissent et décrivent l'évolution d'une culture. L'auteur retrace le développement remarquable de nos lectures pendant les dix dernières années.

Books foster and record the evolution of cultures. Ten years ago most culture that women had was derivative, imitative, vicarious. Any culture that was distinctly our own we denied and devalued simply and almost entirely because it was our own. Even feminist thought and activity was largely based on and derived from the male society from which we were in rebellion.

Anyone who questions whether or not that situation has changed need look no further than her own bookcase. What did we read ten years ago? The richness of our reading matter now, compared to the poverty of it only one decade ago, is nothing less than overwhelming. Now our reading reaches into every corner of our lives. It instructs, challenges, comforts, supports, feeds us. Sound grandiose? Sure. The first definition of grandiose is 'grand in an imposing or impressive way.' That's exactly what it is.

In 1970 *The Feminine Mystique* was seven years old. *Born Female* had been out for two years, and Kate Millett had just published a book in which she dared to define the relationship between the sexes as a political one, a power struggle. Much as we didn't want to, we considered Virginia Woolf a rather pleasant loony; we lumped people like Willa Cather, Rumer Godden, Carson McCullers and Mary McCarthy (remember the shock waves caused by *The Group?*) together as Fabulous Female Freaks—they were women who wrote books. As for George Eliot, the Brontes and Jane Austen; well, they were different, exceptions who proved the rule that at puberty a woman's brain dissolves and sinks to some mysterious place behind her navel. Much of our reading, though vital, was poorly written and poorly printed in the form of pamphlets or the struggling, intermittent and often short lived women's liberation newspapers. Closet feminists, most of us, we guiltily devoured these heretical writings, busily analyzed our lives and were horrified at what we found. We thought and searched and sharpened our ideas on what reading matter we could find, and when that ran out, we all too often sharpened ourselves on each other. When we needed a break, when we had to get away from the pain and harshness of being women, we returned to the masculine mainstream and read books by and about 'society as a whole'—a term that we were agonizingly discovering meant everybody except our 53 per cent.

Gail Geltner

The Female Eunuch, Vaginal Politics, Sisterhood is Powerful, Woman In Sexist Society, Our Bodies, Our Selves, classics all—it is difficult to imagine a time before any of them—appeared for the first time in 1971. It would be another year before we saw *Woman's Estate, Feminism: The Historical Writings, Sappho Was a Right on Woman,* or *Lesbian/Woman* (these last two books more than any others unlocked the closet; women read them and cried with relief). Another guage of how much we have accomplished lies in the fact that much of the material in these books quietly became dated: *Is it reasonable for a woman to challenge her doctor's decisions? What is the purpose of a consciousness-raising group? What tactics are used by those women who dare to speak in public? What do lesbians* do? *The vaginal orgasm exposed! The Miss America contest a sexist plot!* These issues now seem elementary and naive. At the time they were compellingly pertinent. Which of us, after all, had never dreamed of being the object (yes, object) of Bert Parks's leer?

As the number of books grew and our insecurity decreased, we began to dare to be selective. The relief of not having to praise everything that was written by a woman was immense. We eagerly awaited what was to be the great novel of the Women's Movement, Marge Piercy's *Small Changes,* and when it came out we were disappointed. She had said as much as she could and still be published, we felt, but it wasn't enough. A year later, 1973, we loved to loathe *Fear of Flying.* Things were looking up.

Then came the lull of the mid-Seventies. The newspapers said that the Women's Movement was dead—and many of us were tired enough to be afraid that they might be right. Even such a remarkable book as *Against Our Will, Men, Women and Rape* was given a subdued reception.

We had always talked about and believed in supporting women: that, after all, is much of what feminism is about. In practice, however, most of us had been too frightened, too fragile, too torn to take care of anybody but ourselves. While we struggled we had defined our problems, we had articulated a workable ideology, we had formed groups and networks, we had developed a degree of political sophistication. We had worked hard. Now, almost imperceptibly and with the work far from done, the returns started to come in. One of the earliest and far from the least of these was that feminism grew a bit gentler. Our response was mixed. At the same time as we welcomed the change and its reflection in the writings of people like Anne Kent Rush and Hogie Wyckoff, in *Getting Clear,* we wondered whether this was the beginning of wholesale cooptation by the human potential movement, the return of women and our problems to individual isolation. Where was it all heading?

It was headed for an explosion of new and renewed energy. Suddenly our activities broadened (some said they grew, some said they became watered down), and so did our reading matter.

We began to claim, individually as well as collectively, a place in the workplace with the aid of books like *Managerial Woman* and *Games Mother Never Taught You.*

We went in search of our mothers. Un-

fortunately, the best known (and best-selling) title, *My Mother/My Self* is a specious and precious and vacuous piece. With any luck, *Her Mothers* will prove to be a more typical example of the genre.

We began to admit that women get old. For the first time in western tradition, we started to explore this fact. Books concerning old women's poverty and non-place in society continue to appear, while Doris Grumbach and May Sarton in *Chamber Music* and *A Reckoning* have provided us with real and unsettling old women.

We attacked the language that had always attacked us. *Words and Women* and *Language and Woman's Place* explored the problems. Kate Millett added a phrase, 'sexual politics,' to the language, and Marge Piercy desexed it with the pronoun 'per' in *Woman on the Edge of Time.*

We are learning to laugh with ourselves as many-faceted people—rather than at Them, the mothers-in-law. A little guiltily at first, then more heartily—compare our responses to *Rubyfruit Jungle* and *Six of One.* And now, with *The World According to Garp,* John Irving has been able to push feminist lunacy to its limits, to poke fun at it in a manner that is neither vicious nor voyeuristic, but one that still leaves feminists reading and laughing.

It's even possible to read feminist murder mysteries. I hope Eve Zaremba will write more. So far, Amanda Cross is the most prolific. *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* is a feminist romp in Mickey Spillane land. The rest of her books, including the delightful *Question of Max* and *Theban Mysteries,* feature Kate Fansler, professor of English and sometime sleuth.

Our attitudes toward finding ourselves had, by the mid to late Seventies, very clearly changed. Indicative of that change is the proliferation of books about women artists. For several years we had been asking, "Why are there no women artists?" Then, almost in one jump, we moved to wondering who the women artists had been, to developing entirely new research techniques in order to find them, to such books as *The Hidden Heritage: Five Centuries of Women Artists, From Women's Eyes, Women Painters in Canada* and *Women Artists, 1550-1950.*

Nowhere has the amount of information grown so fast as in women's history and Canadians have been particularly active. In 1971, when most people still believed that women had no history, Vancouver's Corrective Collective published *She Named It Canada Because That Was What It Was Called.* The Women's Press has produced several valuable volumes including, in 1976, the beautiful and informative *A Harvest Yet To Reap.* Their *Everywoman's Almanac* and the *Herstory Calendars* of the Saskatoon Women's Calendar Collective provide tantalizing bits on innumerable topics, and it is impossible to overestimate the importance of the bibliographies which continue to come out of OISE's Women's History Project. In this country as elsewhere, the countless biographies and diaries and letters of women famous and obscure along with the thematic and periodic monographs and anthologies continue to swell our knowledge.

Because publishers were quick to note the increased demand for women's books, they have reissued and reprinted books which give us greater access to our literary and, to a lesser extent, social history than ever before. Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* came as quite a shock in 1972, showing as it did a woman who drowned herself rather than live as a middle-class 'decent' Victorian wife. Since then publishing houses have put out widely varied works. They include most of V. Sackville-West's at best mediocre novels, Janet Flanner's 1926 novel, *The Cubical City,* Djuna Barnes's uproarious *Ladies' Almanac,* Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Women and Economics* and *Herland.* The works of people like Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir are readily available. Less easy, but no longer impossible to find are all the novels of Aphra Behn, eight of Colette's works, nine of Isak Dineson's (Karen Blixen), fourteen of Willa Cather's and seventeen of May Sarton's. Arno, a subsidiary of the *New York Times,* put out a series of lesbian reprints that would have been more welcome had their prices not been prohibitive: their edition of *The Ladder*'s nine volumes sells for almost $400. Most lesbian works—including Naiad's edition of Renée Vivien's *A Woman Appeared to Me* and Diana Press's edition of Jeannette Foster's superb bibliography *Sex Variant Women in Literature*—have been resurrected thanks to the efforts of small women's presses.

As we have grown more confident we have started to seek to explain the world with ourselves, our needs, rhythms and definitions as the starting point. In that process we are consciously reconstructing our mythology and, with it, our metaphysics. In the long run, since mythology/metaphysics is what frees minds and potential from the encumbrances of everyday manmade life, this may prove to be our most dangerous activity. Elizabeth Gould Davis provided a wonderful start. While many people contribute directly and indirectly, the process continues most obviously with Adrienne Rich, E.M. Broner, Robin Morgan and the people who are creating a new kind of science fiction writing. But the dominating figure is, of course, Mary Daly who, with *Gyn/Ecology* takes feminist thinking into new realms. What more earthquakes are to come?

This is, obviously, the good news, the story of our strength. It is deceptive. Women's books are still segregated from the mainstream in libraries, bookstores and people's minds. More women are writing and being published, it is true, but we are also still paid poorly, if at all, in our own publications, and the rest of the publishing world remains an old boys' club to which we are admitted by the side door. Because we still have no real (i.e., money) power base in publishing, manipulation by poor distribution and publicity can still create the illusion that there is no market for those very books for which we hunger. I am afraid that the only women's books not in jeopardy are those concerning health and sexuality that either appeal to male prurience or contain the possibility of increasing or enhancing woman's availability to the male. I also believe that lesbian literature could either almost disappear as it did for so long, or go the way it did in the 1950s. At that time a few serious books were hidden in a mass of adolescent prurience about female couples written by and for men. Not a pleasant prospect.

An article such as this must say at once too much and not enough. I have not, for example, stated why I consider *Our Bodies, Our Selves, The Women's Room,* and *The First Sex* the most important books of the decade. Nor have I mentioned the people who are documenting the growth of our culture—playwrights like Anne Cameron and Nora Randall and poets like Helene Rosenthal. Sociology, psychology, anthropology, wife abuse, women in traditional occupations: these and countless other subjects have been mentioned only in passing if at all. What this kind of piece can do is cajole, prod and make readers re member [sic] the patterns and processes with which we have lived. If people have objected to my choices, have discovered that my priorities and observations are all wrong, that that's not how it was at all, *this* is the real story. . . . . I will be assured that I have accomplished what I set out to do.

Thanks to Marie Prins and Patti Kirk for letting me pick their brains and haunt the Toronto Women's Bookstore while doing my homework.