

# The Toronto Women's Bookstore

## – An Interview with Patti Kirk and Marie Prins

Carol Zavitz

**C:** Tell me a little about the history of the store — how you got started.

**MP:** The Bookstore started in 1973 at the Women's Place on Dupont Street — there was a book corner, actually, with some mass-market books and a lot of pamphlets. There weren't many books published then. The Women's Place closed in 1974 and the store moved to the Amazon Workshop on Kensington Ave. It was run collectively then by a group of five to seven women. Patti and I became involved then; we had both been teaching pre-school and started to do volunteer work at the bookstore.

**PK:** After about a year, the store moved again to Harbord Street, which is a much better location, and later that year we restructured, so we could work more efficiently. We went from a cooperative to having a board of directors of three: Joy Wilson, Marie and myself. Marie and I work in the store full-time now, with another part-time worker.

**C:** What was the work like in the early days? Where did the money come from?

**PK:** Well, there was no money. We had the stock from the Women's Place and a small loan. We sold books and paid the bills, and if there was any money left over at the end of the month we bought some more books. That went on for two years. It became more and more apparent to us as we were involved in the bookstore that there was this huge lack: people couldn't find a comprehensive selection of books for women. We chose not to be paid, but increase the stock. That was our priority, and we were fortunate enough to be in a position to act on it. It's only in the past year that we've really been making a liveable salary.

**C:** The store has grown enormously in the past few years.

**MP:** Well, there are also a lot more women's books being published now than there were when we started.

**C:** Does this mean that publishing has changed its priorities as far as women's books are concerned?

**PK:** Well, the women's presses have grown in number, of course. But the big commercial publishers are in it for the money — if there was no money to be made in the field of women's books, they wouldn't be publishing them. Within that boundary, there are some publishers that are less tokenistic and paternalistic.

**MP:** But often, if they carry any at all, they're not well-written or well-produced; the books are picked up because this area happens to be popular and publishers don't want to miss out on sales.

**PK:** I think we're a pretty fair barometer of how a publisher feels about its women's books. If the publisher promotes the books, we'll sell a fair number, while other books, for no apparent reason, will sit on the shelves.

**C:** Are Canadian publishers any better or worse than others?

**MP:** Canadian houses are not, by and large, publishing books about women's concerns, but they *are* bringing out literature by women. I think that's because the good Canadian writers happen to be women, and not because the publishers have any fond feelings for women writers in particular.

**PK:** The Canadian publishing industry is cautious — they don't want to go out on a limb. But Canadian distributors, for U.S. and European publishers, are even worse. That's a big problem for us. Often they don't keep a good stock of women's books and it takes ages for us to get them. It puts us in a real bind.

**C:** Surely it's in their interest to keep a good stock of books that are selling, that people are interested in.

**MP:** Publishers are very slow in catching up with people's interests. People will come to us, right away, when they're interested in something, and two years later a book will come out on that subject. Like discrimination at work — women have been talking about sexual harassment on the job for a couple of years now but books are just recently available on this topic. There are three or four new titles coming out this spring.

**C:** What kinds of books are your customers buying most right now?

**PK:** We sell a lot of books on assertiveness training, women in management, fitness, domestic violence and sexuality. Right now books on men's feelings, lesbian books and non-sexist children's books seem to be getting published. General feminist theory books are not being published as quickly any more — in fact, *Essays in Feminism*, which is a new book written by a well-respected author, Vivian Gornick, is just sitting on the shelf. I think people have developed specific interests within the women's movement, and so you get books on feminist theory in specific areas such as anthropology, philosophy and language; women's history in specific times and cultures; women and ecology. The classic feminist theory books are still in print, of course, but there just isn't the interest you might expect.

**C:** Are older books by and about women being reprinted at all?

**PK:** Yes, but they're drastically expensive. Except for things reprinted by feminist presses — those are relatively affordable — most are simply out of sight.

**MP:** Most are being reprinted for libraries, so they do a very small print run. When you do a small print run, you still have to cover costs, and so prices go up.

**PK:** It's very frustrating, because there are some excellent pieces that are available, but so expensive that we don't carry them. Who can spend seventy dollars on a book?

**C:** What about children's books?

**PK:** We've started to emphasize the kids' books in the last year, since we've expanded into the back room. We've always had them, but not a very good selection until recently.

**MP:** There are better children's books being published now, but I still think a lot of junk is being published too.

**PK:** There have always been non-sexist children's books, like the Madeleine books, but it's been hard to hunt them out, or they've gone out of print. There certainly are more books available that are specifically non-sexist, but most of them are coming from the specialized publishers: feminist presses, the children's presses. I might add that they are finally starting to improve. They were very poor originally, very didactic, and badly put together, and I don't think many would have stood up to two weeks' wear with a three-year-old.

**MP:** I have still found, though, when I go through a catalogue advertising children's books, that most of the stories are still about little boys or male animals. The ones that are about girls tend to put them into traditional roles or deal with them in an emotional way — they don't give them any strength, they rarely give them any action. These are not little girls that go out and do things, they're mostly little girls that sit back and be.

PK: There are simply more books being published now. For every book you can find that's non-sexist, there are ten other, traditional books.

MP: We have more books to choose from, so there has been some progress, maybe not in percentages, but in numbers.

**C: Do you have any favourite books that you'd like to recommend to those who've exhausted the feminist classics?**

MP: *Silences*, by Tillie Olsen; *Women and Nature*, by Susan Griffin; *Gyn/ecology*, by Mary Daly; any fiction by Fay Weldon; *Songs My Mother Taught Me*, by Audrey Thomas; *For Her Own Good: One Hundred and Fifty Years of Experts' Advice to Women*, by Ehrenreich and English; *The Underside of History*, by Elise Boulding; fiction by Elizabeth Bowen; mysteries by P.D. James; *Song of Solomon*, by Toni Morrison.

The Toronto Women's Bookstore mail order catalogue for 1979 will be available in April, and can be obtained free of charge upon request. They provide mail-order service anywhere.

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