Then she proceeds to demonstrate, through an account of her life from early times to the present, that indeed “the personal is political.” She became a feminist in the fall of 1969, as did so many. At the time she was in her second year of graduate study at Yale University, and the process of consciousness-raising was “life-changing.” As a woman who had cherished an ambition to become a rabbi, she found herself a rabbi’s wife: after one feminist meeting, she “spent half the night weeping, feeling at age twenty-two that [she] had wasted [her] life.”

Plaskow lists three main factors that assisted her moving from “an angry sense of powerlessness” to being able to have “a vision of a transformed Judaism.” They were the publication of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s In Memory of Her, Plaskow’s coming out as a lesbian, and the decision of the feminist spirituality collective to which she belonged to stop trying to reach consensus “on how to worship together” and rather to draw on differences in developing prayer and liturgy. She concludes the introduction by contemplating the interconnections in her life, a life that she has lived in deep involvement with feminism and Judaism, herself a major force in the development of feminist theology in North America.

Aside from reprinting most of Judith Plaskow’s important articles in feminist and Jewish feminist theology, the collection also makes available a number of short pieces Plaskow wrote from 1990 to 1996 for Tikkun: A Bimonthly Jewish and Interfaith Critique of Politics, Culture & Society. Though these pieces are popular and written to be accessible, they nonetheless address difficult subjects like the ambiguity of God, hierarchy, and Jewish antipaganism. As the editor says in the Foreword, “Judith’s work is not for the faint-hearted.” Indeed it is not, but, as this collection demonstrates, it is certainly worth the read. Not only does it deal with most issues in feminist theology, but it also tackles what Plaskow calls “the hard stuff” not just of text, but also, among others, of the maleness of the monotheistic god, the otherness of women that is embedded in the monotheistic traditions, authority and hierarchy in religion, sexual ethics, and gay and lesbian rights. Judith Plaskow is one of the most influential feminist theologians living today. This book demonstrates why.

Johanna Stuckey is the author of numerous learned articles, papers, book reviews, and a textbook on feminist spirituality. Her courses have been popular with students of all ages, and she has appeared often on television and radio. Joanna lives in Toronto and is currently working on a book tentatively entitled, Goddesses and Dying Gods in the Ancient Eastern Mediterranean.

BETWEEN FRIENDS:
A YEAR IN LETTERS.

Oonagh Berry and Helen Levine
Toronto: Second Story Press, 2005

REVIEWED BY CLARA THOMAS

In an introduction by Joan Turner, a friend of the authors and their editor, we learn that Oonagh, in her 60s, is a counsellor at the Amethyst Women’s Addiction Centre in Ottawa, and Helen, in her 80s, also in Ottawa, is an activist for women’s causes and in 1989 recipient of the Governor General’s Award for outstanding contributions to improving the Status of Women in Canada. Oonagh was born in Dublin and Helen in Ottawa. Both women are gifted writers, and practised speakers, teachers and writers, and both are married to men who accept and encourage their many activities. They began this friendly project in July of 2001, determined to revive the old letter-writing habit,
now threatened by the ubiquitous e-mail. They agreed to send long, hand-written letters to each other every other two weeks for a year—to their own great pleasure and pride, in July of 2002 they triumphantly finished their Correspondence Project, CP as they called it.

Helen was born in 1923 and Oonagh in 1938. Until retirement Helen taught in Carleton’s Women Studies Department; Oonagh is a social worker and counsellor; she retired from Amethyst during the course of this project. Both women are privileged; their daily lives are interesting and busy because their involvements are many and varied, from days of meetings, social gatherings, and travel—Oonagh to Spain, Ireland, and Mexico; Helen to Mexico and an accustomed holiday group in San Miguel, a kind of cultural commune. Both play tennis in Ottawa and see each other often, lunching together or playing bridge. The letters are an extra avenue of communication between them. Both of them have grown children whom they treasure. Gil Levine, a retired Labour Union worker and a keen tennis player, and two grown daughters, three grandchildren, are Helen’s immediate family; Christopher Levenson, poet, three children from her two marriages and two grandchildren, are Oonagh’s.

As one who for five years has had a daily correspondence via e-mail with the friend with whom I began school far far back in 1925, I do not share their distrust of e-mail; nor do I believe that there is anything intrinsically better, more complete or more civilized in writing letters than in e-mailing them. They are equally acceptable, though in this day and as age advances inexorably it is often physically more convenient to use e-mail rather than a pen and a computer rather than stamps and the post office. Also I have found from hard experience that in times of crisis, a medical crisis in the family for instance, e-mail communication is absolutely priceless. Levine and Berry are rather astonishingly and repetitively self-congratulatory about their choice of format for their project. They are also intensely self-conscious about it. Much space is taken up with lauding of their friendship and each other and of the revelatory effect of the correspondence on their self-knowledge. This becomes tiresome, of course. Their spontaneity is somewhat undermined, too, by their reporting of their luncheons. One cannot help surmising about the planning and reviewing of material that they may well have discussed on those occasions.

Both Helen and Oonagh are used to and easy with the language of counselling, group therapy and individual self-examination. The major benefits they find in the course of their writing year are certainly open to all who can find time and determination to emulate their example. Their method, however, is not necessary—I can assure you that e-mail will do as well and will cost you less effort as well as immediate access to your chosen partner.

Clara Thomas was one of the two first women to be hired by York. She has been with York since 1961, the year Glendon opened. She is now a retired Professor Emeritus. This year York did her the honour of naming the libraries’ Archives and Special Collections the Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections, York University.