

Address at opening
WBE at Duke

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Once upon a time it was hard to find books by women. The books about women were mostly written by men. Women evidently had written less than men; what they wrote was published less often, what they published was reviewed less often, and sold in bookstores or added to libraries less often, so it was read less often, and didn't stay in print for as long. Virginia Woolf's brilliant essay on this phenomenon, "A Room of One's Own," written in 1928, ~~is~~ is still in print, and still eerily accurate on the status of women's writing.

As recently as the early 1980's, it was quite possible to graduate with a degree in English literature from a major university without having read a single book by a woman. It was quite possible to be an aspiring woman poet and to be told by one's writing teacher that there had never been a great woman poet.

Imagine how that student felt. Imagine her nodding her head tentatively, not wishing to contradict someone who knew so much more than she did, whose judgment was the basis of her own training. Imagine her wondering, if she was fortunate enough to have discovered Sappho or Emily Dickinson or Adrienne Rich on her own, why they were barred from greatness, but accepting that somehow they must be -- they must be too personal, too strange, too political, too female. Imagine her accepting wordlessly that her own work could be second rate at best, that a female voice could not be universal. Now imagine that she was an aspiring engineer, or physician, or theologian, and was told that no woman had ever achieved greatness in that discipline. The ignorance, and the harm, were never limited to departments of English. I fear that they were not limited to that time.

Out of that time, out of my own hunger for the written records of women's lives and thoughts, I helped to found a women's library in 1983. We named it The Women's Book Exchange. It began as 200 scrounged volumes in a donated office space, with four excited volunteers presenting the books they'd discovered to fifty people willing to pay five dollars a year for the privilege of borrowing books by, for, and about women. WBE grew over the years to 5,000 volumes, and a membership of 200 people; it sponsored everything from reading and discussion groups to Take Back the Night marches. Activism seemed to grow naturally out of the reading and talking we did together around those books. My knowledge of women's literature and women's lives is due largely to WBE and the people I met through it. It has been an education I would not have missed for worlds.

I don't know if the writing teacher saw the light go out of his student's face when he made that awful pronouncement. All of us at

WBE saw the opposite, the light coming on, when someone found the book she needed, the joy and relief and astonishment that the history, the example, the advice, the story she needed, did exist. We learned from our clients, too; that there were such things as presses devoted to women's writing. We found the Women In Print Movement that had barely reached our local bookstores, but not the libraries or classrooms; we collected all the books we could find from the feminist presses, the lesbian presses, the presses specializing in women of color. We collected the feminist titles that were only three to eight years old but had already gone out of print. We found new books, too -- new scholarship on women, new activist works that documented women's resistance to violence, incest, rape, racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, pornography, poverty, misogyny and injustice in all its forms. We found books by and about women that we couldn't have dreamed up: a Victorian who had climbed Mount Everest in her hoop skirts; an enslaved woman who stole herself and her husband out of the ante-bellum south by impersonating a white man. We found women warriors, saints, union organizers, architects, doctors, poets, ecologists, inventors, priestesses, crusaders, artists, prophets, and heroines, all incredibly against the odds. The odds were against those women, our mothers and great-grandmothers, living such free and self-determined lives, then their being remembered, then there being books written about them that our small group could get its hands on.

We found and collected WBE's books with practically no money, great enthusiasm, and sheer stubbornness. Most of our books were donated to us; we added what we needed to WBE, and swapped in the rest to used bookstores, becoming expert in tracking down scarce, out-of-print, and unusual women's titles. We flourished in the back room of an alternative bookstore, where we were cold in the winter and mosquito-bitten in the summer; we later left a much wealthier home when we were threatened with censorship. We learned the hard way that even women who were excited about WBE could lose, our steal, our hard-won books. By 1993 the library had shrunk to fewer than 2,000 volumes in order to fit the small space we were able to afford; later that year, WBE found its way to a permanent home in the Duke Women's Center.

1993 marks The Women's Book Exchange's tenth birthday, and some larger occasions for women's literature: Maya Angelou reading at Clinton's inauguration, Rita Dove chosen Poet Laureate, Toni Morrison winning the Nobel Prize. Books by women are easier to find now; the Women in Print Movement, nearly twenty years old, has profoundly affected mainstream of publishing. This years'

bestseller lists have include Amy Tan, Terri MacMillan, and Dorothy Allison, all not only women but members of previously "unpublishable" groups: Asian-American, African-American, and lesbian, respectively. Feminist publishing and scholarship are thriving, and the libraries in our community have solid collections in women's studies. Do we still need a feminist library?

Yes, we do. Delighted as I am by this year's spate of high honors to women writers, I haven't forgotten that Gwendolyn Brooks' poetry was largely out of print for decades in spite of winning the Pulitzer Prize, or that Muriel Rukeyser's work only came back into print last year, in spite of its quality and significance. We still need a repository for works that have not survived, or may not survive, the pressures of the marketplace to remain available. We also need a place where works of special significance to women, and to men concerned about gender issues, are readily available to readers who may not know what authors or titles they need, where works are grouped together for convenient browsing and exploration. We need a safe environment for readers to find information on private or sensitive subjects: incest or date rape, sexuality or spirituality. We need a collection that preserves and honors the early publishing tradition, and activist tradition, that have rescued women's words and experiences from obscurity. We need the records of women's lives of ten and twenty years ago so that we can see for ourselves how much has changed, and how much has not changed, in that short time. Finally, we need a library to inspire women to become whatever they need to become, to assure them that we have always managed to do things some people thought we weren't capable of doing. We have always scaled mountains, struggled our way to freedom, and written great poetry, even when the odds were enormously against us. We have always written, and our writing matters; every book in the Women's Book Exchange is proof.