



Interview with Suzanne Pharr



Interview with Pam McMichael



Interview with Mab Segrest



Interview with Joan Garner

## WOMONWRITES

*Merril Mushroom and Rose Norman*

This special issue of *Sinister Wisdom* is a project of Womonwrites, the Southeast Lesbian Writers' Conference. Womonwrites has been meeting every year since 1979, and in 1997 began convening twice a year. The idea for a conference for Southern lesbian writers came from a workshop on writing and publishing organized by *Sinister Wisdom* cofounders Catherine Nicholson and Harriet Desmoines and held at the Southeastern Conference of Lesbians and Gay Men in Atlanta in April 1978. Nicholson and Desmoines moved to Nebraska shortly thereafter and were not involved in future planning, but they left a seed well



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Workshop on the front porch of the dining hall, known as Radclyffe Hall. Left to right: Elizabeth Knowlton and Susan Wells (two of the Womonwrites cofounders), [unidentified], Judy Keathley, Susan Gorrell, [unidentified], [unidentified], Leslita Williams, [unidentified], Lynn Tippetts, [unidentified], [unidentified].

planted. In June 1978 seventeen women from North and South Carolina, Washington, DC, and Atlanta, Georgia, gathered for a planning meeting in Columbia, South Carolina. After two more



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Merril Mushroom (left) hugging Linda Yates at Womonwrites 1983.  
Linda was a founding mother of Womonwrites,  
and Merrill has attended every conference since 1980.

meetings, and diligence to find a site that was lesbian friendly, the first Womanwrites (also known as WomanWrites, later changed to Womonwrites) convened June 15-17, 1979, at a state park in Georgia. Womonwrites continues to meet at the same park today. Twelve planners hosted about seventy women that first year,

including women from Florida, Kentucky, and Tennessee, as well as the states involved in the initial planning. Today attendees come from all over the United States and even worldwide, but most of the women are from the Southeast.

Womonwrites is run entirely by participants. There are no speakers or “stars”—women of all levels of ability and achievement are equally important. The only people who get paid are cooks and childcare workers. It is a testimony to the power of collective action that lesbians have kept this conference going for over thirty-five years with shared, collective leadership. Different women volunteer every year to make it happen. For each gathering there are coordinators who communicate with various planners to set up workshops, work shifts, readings, and any other activities that women care to facilitate. Womonwriters volunteer at the end of each gathering for planning positions, and attendees volunteer for work shifts on site at the beginning of each gathering. A how-to manual describing the various planner positions, tasks, and responsibilities was compiled by the Womonwriter who became our archivist/herstoryian, making the jobs much easier.

Womonwrites welcomes all women who think they belong at a Southern lesbian writers’ conference. Womonwriters come from many different walks of life. They are teachers, healthcare workers, computer geeks, restaurant workers, massage therapists, musicians, artists, mechanics, construction workers, mothers, and some are unemployed. Some women claim to not be writers and then find that maybe they really are. We all are committed to providing a safe space for women to write and read from their hearts, without being judged in any way. Nothing is censored, but we ask readers to provide a “content alert” before they read material that might offend or trigger a listener, so that women can take care of themselves.

No one is required to participate in activities, but all women are encouraged to attend or even to facilitate workshops and to sign up to read their writing if they feel comfortable to do so. All

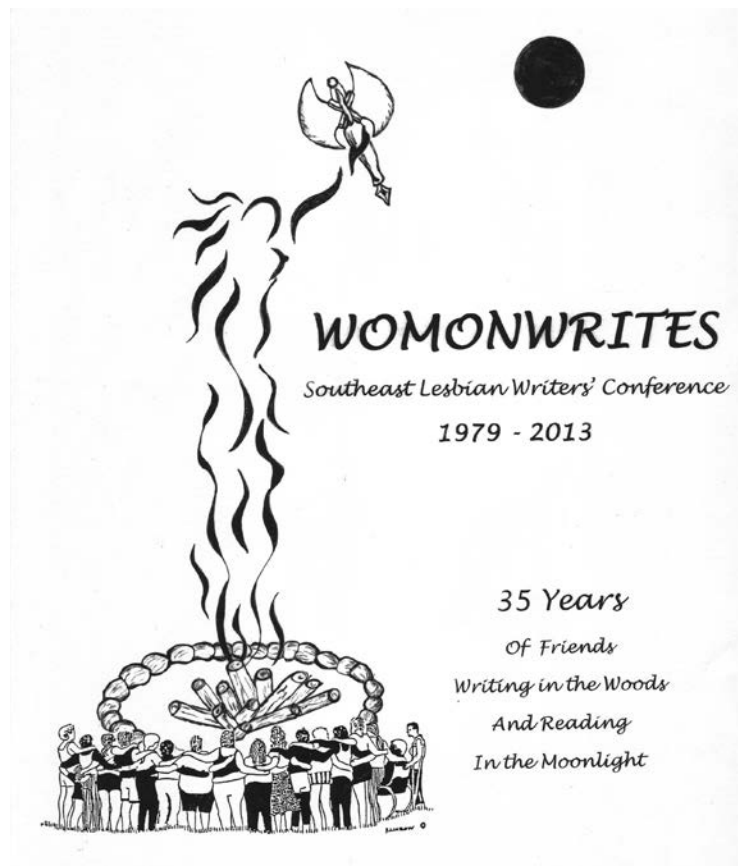
women are asked to volunteer for work shifts to help with meal preparation, serving, and cleanup, as well as general tasks such as registration, security, and running errands.

Women, likewise, are encouraged to volunteer for planner positions for the next conference, and in the winter we have a planning meeting open to all Womonwriters to go over evaluation forms, discuss feedback from attendees, and make appropriate modifications for the next conference. We work by consensus and continue to honor lesbian-feminist ideals that have been with us since the 1960s and 1970s.

We as Womonwriters continuously scrutinize our policies toward inclusiveness and continue to work through issues that are typical of lesbian gatherings—racism, s/m, disability issues, drugs and alcohol, transgender issues, and accessibility in general. What was said in a tenth-anniversary history of Womonwrites written in 1988 is still true today: “We have had hard and unresolved struggles over the racism we bring from the larger society—both in our writing and in conference participation.”<sup>1</sup> Although the participants have been predominantly white, we are, as we always have been, committed to inclusiveness and often offer writing workshops that explore attitudes and stimulate discussions to shift our internal and external struggles with racism and other forms of oppressive behavior.

Our costs are minimal—we pay for the campground, food, cooks and childcare workers, a storage locker for our “stuff,” and supplies like toilet paper, soap, cleansers, and a sound system. We charge participants on a sliding scale. Five days’ room and board is \$50–\$175, more if one is able, and no one is turned away due to inability to pay. There is no application or approval process for scholarships. Women are asked simply to pay what they will

1 MB Pratt Papers, Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture in the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, Box 40, p. 3 of untitled 3-page Womonwrites tenth anniversary history. Quoted with permission of the author. Womonwrites also retains a copy of this document.



Womonwriter Gail Reeder created this design to celebrate the thirty-fifth annual Womonwrites held in May 2013. The drawing of women by Rainbow Williams was used in publicity and on a T-shirt for the 1990 Womonwrites. The labyris pen by Jenna Weston dates back to at least 1988. Reeder added the campfire and other elements.

Photo Credit: Graphic design by Gail Reeder incorporating original art by Rainbow Williams (1990), used with permission of Reeder and Williams

at registration. The cooks cater to an incredible array of food requirements (vegetarian, vegan, gluten-free, meat-eaters, food allergies, etc.), and women also have access to the kitchen if they prefer to prepare their own meals.

Each Womonwrites begins and ends with a circle where each woman can speak, and we have a town hall-style meeting on Friday evening as a check-in. The coordinators are available if problems arise, and there also are facilitators, mediators, and

first-aid providers. The conference is whatever women make it. Some women bring their kayaks for boating on the lake where we also swim. Charis Books brings a selection of stock from their Atlanta store. Women have organized twelve-step meetings, *oneg* Shabbats (Jewish Sabbath gatherings), group performances, music, and an artists' marketplace, as well as holotropic breathwork, healing and memorial circles, cronings (celebrations of aging), massage, drumming, dancing, Scrabble, and bridge games. Our main focus, however, is on writing, and mornings, afternoons, and evenings are filled with workshops and readings. You could not ask for a better audience or a better time.

Next two conferences:

Oct 9-12, 2014

May 13-17, 2015

## HIGHLIGHTS OF LESBIAN-FEMINIST ACTIVISM IN THE SOUTH 1968-94

Events featured in this issue are noted with a ♀.

### 1968

**June** In Gainesville, Florida, Beverly Jones and Judith Brown, members of Gainesville Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), write "Toward a Female Liberation Movement," later known as "The Florida Paper." Later that summer, Judith Brown starts Gainesville Women's Liberation, which becomes an umbrella group for many consciousness-raising (CR) groups in Gainesville.

### 1969

**January** Judith Brown and Corky Culver start a lesbian CR group in Florida, modeled after the women's liberation groups but with lesbian realities taken into consideration. Just as Gainesville Women's Liberation was probably the first women's liberation group formed in the South, this lesbian CR group is probably the first lesbian-only CR group in the South, perhaps the first in the country. The lesbian CR group begins planning events, and decides it needs to buy some land in order to have access to safe, private, lesbian space, and to create a chosen family and security for a future unlikely to include children and biological family support. This led to the purchase of the North Forty, near Melrose, Florida, in 1972. To this day it remains a women's community (one resident is straight).