

## WOMONWRITES, THE SOUTHEAST LESBIAN WRITERS' CONFERENCE AND FEMINIST CULTURAL CAULDRON

Rose Norman, Merrill Mushroom, Kate Ellison

Every year lesbians gathered under the tall Georgia pines, to sleep in uncomfortable barracks meant for scouts and listen to some of the most amazing writing you would ever want to hear. Often the lake was open for swimming, floating, and long talks. Afternoon readings were held inside and had an intimate feel, while the evening readings were held under the stars. We bared our souls and developed our novels. Attendees dressed as Xena the Warrior Princess and Mighty Dyke to read their comedy pieces and powerful lesbian fairy tales. Spontaneous private readings cropped up around the camp. It was everything lesbians care about, but most especially, our writing.

One of the first things lesbians will tell you about *Womonwrites* is that it was emphatically *not* a festival. It was a lesbian *writers* conference. Over the forty years of its existence, *Womonwrites* was always a group of lesbians intent on making a space for writing, reading that writing, and listening to others read theirs. Since 1983, *Womonwrites* privately published writings by *Womonwriters* in an anthology included in the registration fee, which was a sliding scale. That emphasis on the writing identity may be what kept *Womonwrites* going since a group of lesbians cooked up the idea, inspired by a workshop on writing and publishing at the Southeastern Conference of Lesbians and Gay Men, held in Atlanta in April 1978.<sup>1</sup> The handwritten sign-up list

from that workshop became the core planners who arranged the first *Womonwrites*, held at a state park near Atlanta in June 1979, and every May or June since then, and every fall since 1997.<sup>2</sup>

Festival or not, *Womonwrites* had many qualities of women's music festivals, most notably an enactment of lesbian-feminist ideals—equality, respect for human rights, the personal is political, valuing lesbians' perspectives, etc.—making lesbian-positive space for a brief time, and in so doing working through most of the feminist issues that have occupied lesbian-feminists over these last four decades. In that respect, a herstory of *Womonwrites* is also a herstory of lesbian-feminist activism from a broad spectrum of lesbians, a melting pot of lesbian-feminist thought. By "melting pot," we mean that *Womonwrites* regularly brought together lesbians with different ideas, approaches, and feelings, and that we inevitably faced controversial issues. It made a difference that *Womonwriters* got to hear each other read their work, sometimes on controversial issues, often emphasizing personal experience. Moreover, running a conference with an all-volunteer staff ensured that quite a few lesbians were putting something into it, often in a big way, and usually with a big heart. Most *Womonwriters* have been highly motivated to keep it going.

Back in the day when women's music festivals were flourishing,<sup>3</sup> you would often find workers from Robin Tyler's Southern Women's Music & Comedy Festival migrating over to *Womonwrites*, which often fell on the weekend after Southern. Those festival workers didn't necessarily go to *Womonwrites* because they were writers, but because they were hungry to continue occupying lesbian space and to be with other lesbians,

2 For security, *Womonwrites* does not publish the name of the park.

3 See Barbara Ester and Rose Norman, "Timeline: Women's Festivals in the Southeast," *Sinister Wisdom* 104 (Spring 2017): 172-75. They list eighteen different women's festivals held in the Southeast from 1974 to the present.

1 See also Merrill Mushroom, "Womonwrites," *Sinister Wisdom* 93 (Summer 2014): 127-132. Duke University archives a great many *Womonwrites* papers, including publicity, schedules, and annual anthologies of writings by *Womonwriters*. Contact the Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture.

and they were often “high consciousness” lesbians, veterans of consciousness-raising groups and the kind of radical thinking you would quite often find at women’s festivals of the 1970s and ‘80s. They came primarily from Georgia and the Southern states nearest Georgia, especially Florida, Tennessee, and North and South Carolina. As word filtered out through lesbian networking, they also came from all over the United States and Canada, and even from farther afield. According to Mab Segrest, seventy-five women attended that first *Womonwrites* June 14–17, 1979.<sup>4</sup>



Photo by Rand Hall

Some of *Womonwrites*’ cofounders at the 10th *Womonwrites*, June 1988. (l to r) Minnie Bruce Pratt, Susan Wells, Elizabeth Knowlton, Alice Teeter, Linda Yates

One of the feminist principles enacted at *Womonwrites* has been a commitment to non-hierarchy. “No stars” was a watchword. There were no paid speakers or performers, no

paid workers (except childcare, and, in recent years, cooks), no producers, no camping (against park rules), and no official leaders or officers. It had always been participant-led, and never even had a formal organization with mission statement and bylaws. The commitment to non-hierarchy may be the only feminist issue that has never been seriously challenged, although challenging to sustain. Many *Womonwrites* had been coming for ten and twenty years, and a few had attended that first *Womonwrites* in 1979. Most attendees have taken one or another planning position over the years, and every year one or two lesbians volunteered as “Coordinators” for the spring conference, and two others for the fall conference. Volunteering happened onsite, either by signing up where the planning positions were posted on a wall at the conference (Coordinator was a planning position), or in answer to a call at Saturday night readings. Sometimes women had to step back from a position, and always someone stepped up. Some positions benefit from continuity—registrar, treasurer, mailing list mistress, archivist—and that happened. A willingness to step up and do what needs doing is a characteristic of the women who kept coming back to *Womonwrites*. As one now-anonymous *Womonwriter* said long ago, “*Womonwrites* is who shows up.”

Besides working directly on issues during workshops, group discussions, and group speakouts, we encouraged writing (since it was a writers’ conference). We encouraged women to communicate with one another openly, directly, and respectfully when individual issues came up, and lesbians volunteered as mediators and facilitators for these interactions.

From the very first *Womonwrites*, we have been processing around issues of racism/ethnicity, classism, our own internalized sexism, general inclusiveness, disability issues, sobriety, and sexual proclivities. We have done endless discussion about accommodating all of us in all our differences, values, needs, politics. We have processed around race, size, age, BD/SM, dietary needs, and, most recently, gender identity.

<sup>4</sup> “*Womonwrites*,” introduction to *Feminary* 10.3 (1980): 6-8. Segrest says that most of the writing in this issue comes from “participants in last summer’s *Womonwrites*” (6). This piece also links *Womonwrites* and what would become the lesbian arts journal *Feminary*, explaining how both developed simultaneously through work by Segrest, Minnie Bruce Pratt, Cris South, and Susan Ballinger.

It was the gender identity issue that finally caused Womonwrites to split. One group wanted to keep female lesbian space as a feminist commitment to listen to women and provide safety. The other group wanted to include everyone who feels like they belong at Womonwrites, that is, the wide variety of gender identities that currently include those who grew up male and those who now reject their femaleness. Through 2018 and 2019 the controversy raged, and this time, unlike all the others, there was name-calling and disrespect, especially on social media. The Womonwrites Facebook page had to be closed to comments to stop the insults and hurtful language.

In the end, a compromise could not be found. It felt like a divorce, a bitter loss, a failure. We sold the sound system, retired the name, and split the bank account. Both groups took new names and organized their own writers' conferences. In that sense, there are now more opportunities for lesbians to gather and share their writing, and the Womonwrites legacy flows through both new groups.

## WOMONWRITES

*Sheilah Grace Shook<sup>1</sup>*

**W**omonwrites! Those first couple of years I didn't get there in person. I had to rely on Minnie Bruce's accounts when she'd get together with those of us living on the fringe of Lesbianism. How to keep her talking about this place in the woods where Lesbians roamed bare-breasted and shared stories, poetry, politics, hugs, and energy? Finally, I got my act together, burst out of the closet, and said, "I am ready for Womonwrites, how do I get there?" Minnie Bruce said for me to write Rand Hall, and I thought it strange that I wrote what sounded like the name of a dormitory, but whatever it took. Rand Hall turned out to be WHATADYKE. And I survived my first Womonwrites in 1982. Survived because the expectations I went with and the outrageous over-fulfilling of them could have easily killed me with love. I've never been let down since.

I'm a part of Womonwrites that lives on the edge. Out back, removed from serious, studious wimin who come to Womonwrites to commune quietly and catch up on rest, is the Bertha Harris Cabin, where the lights are always on, and the wimin always ready for whatever is happening next. Maybe I'm there and running my mouth because I consider myself more of a storyteller than a writer, and sometimes get damned aggravated at attempting to put it on paper. But talking it—telling it—oh yeah, love to wind them words around my tongue and fling them out like webs pulling the wimin in closer—can you hear me—oh yeah honey, it's you I'm whispering to.

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<sup>1</sup> Originally published in the *1988 Womonwrites Anthology*, this story is published in memory of Sheilah Grace Shook (1943-2010), from Fayetteville, NC, who was a regular at Womonwrites from 1982 until about 1999.

Listening in the Rowdy cabin is both an art and an education! Goddess, I couldn't miss it. I honestly can't decide which is more fun—the golden oldies we're used to being there or the new, maybe shockable (but definitely brave) wimin who decide to try us—and usually become part of next year's regulars. Maybe I'm there 'cause I couldn't be anyplace else. Somebody has to be there to keep an eye on TJ and Victoria and Sandy (the one who snores loudest) and Aggie, who is prone to Tarot, and Kay, who snuggles—it's a hard job, but I volunteer—year after year.



Photo by Rand Hall

At Womonwrites 1987 (l to r) Aggie, Sheilah, Kay, Barbara, Nancy, Becca

Womonwrites. I go to share my writing and get an ounce of recognition, of support, of energy that is so missing in most of my everyday experiences. I go because every year I am astounded by some other wimins' words I hear. I feel pain and joy and love and fear and most of all discovery and excitement. I am compelled to go to Leslita's workshop, even if she is sadistic and insists on 8 a.m. And Minnie Bruce's and Merrill's and Jeanine's and then there's two at the same time and that requires choices—there shouldn't have to be choices at Womonwrites. I am so boggled sometimes I just have to go sit on the pier. Then here's those

lovely wimin I haven't seen for a year. Gotta find some catchup time. Sleep—that's a state for back at home.

Only way to tell it is to say we are all WomonWriters. That's what we are, and whether we tell it or sing it or pound it out of our souls on parchment, we are writers and recorders of our lives, and we get together to celebrate.