



FEMINIST PUBLISHING

A look at women's publishing on the eve of the first international feminist book fair

Publishing in this country still retains many of the aspects of being a gentleman's profession: wine, although these days not always of the highest quality, flows at book launch parties, deals are negotiated over tasty lunches in Soho or candlelit dinners in private houses, while back in the office the employees, a large proportion of whom are women, work notoriously long hours for notoriously low pay, all for the privilege of 'working in publishing'. Yet gentleman publishers can no longer rely on family connections and good manners to get the authors, let alone the sales, that they want. Mass media advertising, which has spread to tube stations and the sides of buses as well as TV, and the kind of packaging that makes a book into a gift box to be unwrapped rather than a story to be read, aims to draw the readers; while higher and higher advances aim to draw the best-selling authors. Book fairs play an important role in the commercial business of publishing: Frankfurt, London, Cairo, Bologna are all fairs where people working in different aspects of the book trade, booksellers, packagers, distributors, editors and publishers come together to buy and to sell.

Buying and selling goes on at the 'alternative' book fairs too; but those fairs are aimed to a much greater extent at attracting the public, the politically conscious, at least, if not the general public. The annual Socialist Book Fair, held in November, is the ideal place to search for right-on, left-wing Christmas presents; this year the 3rd International Black and Third World Book Fair, with its exhibition and week of events, attracted 4,599 visitors. The recession notwithstanding, people are still willing to buy books.

This is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the boom in feminist publishing. The last eight years have seen the formation and subsequent growth of four feminist publishing houses in London, The Woman's Press, Virago, Only women and Sheba; while there is Stramullion in Scotland and Falling Wall Press in the West Country. The Women's Press is now established as a successful small publisher with 30 new books a year, while Virago, famous for its green covered modern classics, is almost part of the establishment — it has now joined its sales and services to

Chatto, Bodley Head and Cape services group. Sheba publishes children's books, illustrated books and cartoon books as well as modern fiction and politics. The London women's bookshop, Sisterwrite, is now in its sixth year; two more are opening soon. Silver Moon in the Charing Cross Road and Virago's own bookshop. Among the feminist presses attitudes towards commercialism differ, as do methods of working, which range from attempts at collectivism to the traditional hierarchies of mainstream publishing houses. One thing is certain though: feminist books are selling, and this without the outrageous hype that pushes so many books on to the market.

In fiction alone, the feminist publishing houses have uncovered a wide range of contemporary British writers, including Pat Barker, Eve Croft, Zoe Fairbairns, Gillian Hanscombe, Jill Miller and Michele Roberts, and that without the shenanigans that surround the Booker Prize. Who says that British fiction is dead?

It has not taken mainstream publishing houses long to realise that the feminist presses have uncovered a market hungry for books and willing to pay for them. Routledge Kegan Paul recently launched Pandora, a feminist list aimed mainly at the growing women's studies market and Methuen is now picking up on the demand for fiction with a list launched this year made up in part of writers first published by the feminist presses.

The wealth of feminist literature now available will be celebrated by the 1st International Feminist Book Fair, which starts on 7 June in Jubilee Hall, Covent Garden. Like the other political book fairs, it is intended to show the public the variety and scope of the literature. Many British mainstream publishers will be participating. As organiser Carole Spedding said, 'It's not up to us as organisers of the Book Fair to say what is and what isn't a feminist book. It is up to publishers to decide whether any of their books are feminist or not. I think publishers often don't recognise that some of their books, particularly in the areas of autobiography and social history, are of particular interest to women; those books often get lost in the middle of a general list.'

Yet the Fair has another, no less important aim. This is to point up and, it is hoped, to redeem the predominantly white, Western, middle class bias of feminist literature published here. The

first, and major task for the organisers, was to raise money to bring over women from abroad, bearing in mind that the visitors should not come preponderantly from North America and Western Europe, although it is precisely those women who are most likely to have access to funding bodies. There will be writers from such countries as Zimbabwe, South Africa, Nigeria, Colombia, India and Egypt at the Fair.

As it is a Fair for readers as well as for publishers and booksellers, the accessibility of the visiting authors to the general public is of major importance. They will be at the Fair during the day, and some will be travelling round the country in the Feminist Book Week that follows the Fair. Events are being organised in 47 different towns in Britain and Ireland: these will include writing workshops, own language workshops, events for schoolchildren, readings and critical forums. The closing symposium of the Book Fair, in which women from different countries will debate the particular meanings for them of the words 'liberation' and 'women' will, perhaps, illustrate what has become a major aim of the Fair, that is, to break the hegemony of Western feminism and to realise and celebrate the possibility of sisterhood because of, rather than in spite of, our differences.

Sarah Lefanu

**FEMALE DESIRE:
WOMEN'S SEXUALITY TODAY**
Rosalind Coward
Paladin, £2.95

**DESIRE: THE
POLITICS OF SEXUALITY**
Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, Sharon
Thompson (eds)
Virago, £6.50

Spring is in the air, and Desire is in the bookshops. There has been a positive flood of work about the politics and history of sexuality, and its relationship to radicalism in the past few months.

Although sexuality continues to be central to the agenda of the women's liberation movement, we have increasingly returned to a notion of the perverse, the sexually forbidden, even if the norms have changed; the 'personal is political' has often come to mean a grim struggle to escape the patriarchal straightjacket of heterosexuality, and heterosexual roles in lesbian relationships. Has sexuality then, perforce, returned to the private sphere, as

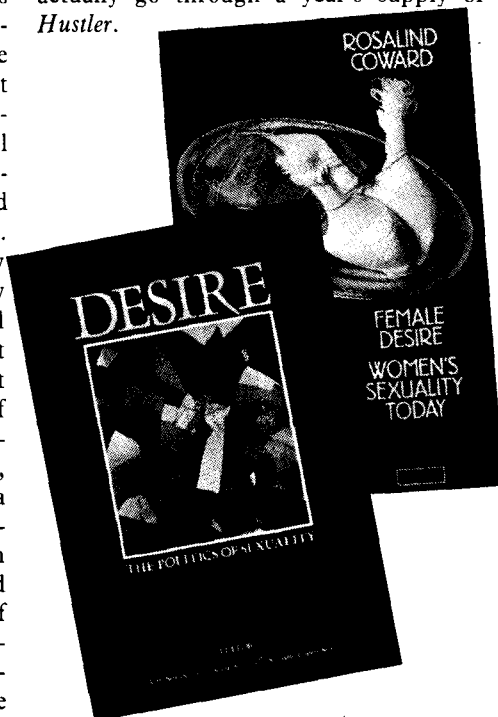
the range of allowable pleasures shrinks? Or should we view the prioritisation of pleasure itself with suspicion, as part of the historical phenomenon which has made individual sexual fulfilment equivalent to a quest for truth, the ultimate reality? Surely the acknowledgement that sexual desire and fantasy have roots that are not susceptible to frontal attack does not mean that we are released from the obligation of making political choices and judgements about our sexual practice?

Desire: The Politics of Sexuality, an American anthology, addresses itself to these questions, among many others. An impressive collection of essays, fiction and poetry, it is both scholarly and passionate in tone. In examining the history of sexual radicalism, the essays unearth continuities and paradoxes: between nineteenth-century campaigns against the double standard and male vice, and the current attack on sexual commercialism; how sexual revolutions and 'movements of "sexual freedom"' have so often ended by constricting homosexuality, female sexuality, and one might argue, sexual excitement itself.

The anthology addresses sexuality through history, anthropology, literary criticism and fictional forms, and by and large is written within a socialist feminist perspective. The exception (I almost felt it was a 'specimen text') was the inclusion of Adrienne Rich's celebrated essay *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, in which she postulates the existence of a continuum of woman-identified experience that constitutes the core of lesbianism and the focus of resistance against enforced heterosexuality. This generalisation of female eroticism, to all kinds of relationships between women, separates lesbianism from the particular, and hence from all other forms of sexual expression. Elsewhere in the book this position is attacked, and in general 'cultural feminism' (a development, much more marked in the US, of a feminism which sees its goal as the development of a female counterculture, enshrining natural women's virtues) is seen as a futile attempt to create a feminist world outside of heterosexual and patriarchal 'false consciousness'.

There appears to me to be a conflation here between a sometimes complacent 'cultural feminism' and the angry despair of some radical feminist writing about male violence and pornography. While the latter may in the end imply the same solutions by virtue of not offering any others, my feeling is that such a critique

can become a way of theoretically attacking the work on pornography and violence of Andrea Dworkin, Kathy Barry and others, while failing to deal with the empirical material that they are discussing. Many of these books are apocalyptic in tone *because* they are uncovering an existing reality — one which doesn't lend itself to moderation. Both in this book, and in Ros Coward's, there is an attempt to generalise the pornographic, a tendency to seek its equivalent form for women — romantic fiction, cookery books — which detracts from its particularity, its relationship to power. While there is a proliferation of theoretical writing about pornography, this seems to go hand in hand with a marked reluctance to, for example, actually go through a year's supply of *Hustler*.



Rosalind Coward's book, *Female Desire: Women's Sexuality Today*, is a very different project, its object of study not feminist politics, but femininity itself. *Female Desire* works consistently within a psychoanalytic and semiotic framework, but it doesn't wear its theoretical heart on its sleeve. In deceptively simple style, Ros Coward examines the ways in which our desire is created, sustained and forever tickled, our dissatisfactions neutralised by their transformation into aspirations to ideals — ideal figures, homes, relationships, meals. Her arguments are persuasive, and her analyses acute, so much so that it took some thought to identify a nagging doubt that I had about the project. That is quite simply that there seems to be

a conflation in her argument between the position offered to us as women by any one of the discourses or systems of representation she analyses, and the actual position of women . . . 'In matters of popular culture, we are not what we eat', says Ann Snitow in her essay on romantic fiction in *Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*. Yet often, in Rosalind Coward's analysis, it seems that the discourse has actually created its reader — we *are* what we consume — while the origins of these discourses themselves, their complex determinants, often remain veiled.

Her use of psychoanalytic theory seems to be 'idealised' in that she uses ideas about female development and infantile sexuality in a way that does not allow for the specific circumstances of individual lives. This idealisation also curiously sanitises her account of psychoanalytic theory. For example, in her essay on relationships *What Is This Thing Between Us*, she discusses the metaphors used in talking about 'the big R' as metaphors from the masculine world of the economic (trust, loss, profit, emotional investment) and of war (surrendering, resisting). But she doesn't look at the latter in terms, quite simply, of the infantile, under whose spell we are all, boys and girls, embattling, struggling, furious, enraged. In failing to emphasise that aspect of infancy she denies female desire any active force — to seize, demand, grasp, seek to control.

Our desire has become the thing which holds us in stasis, rather than something which could make us want to reach out for change, while large numbers of women — black women, older women, lesbians, for whom the possibilities of recognition of, or desire for, these representations are certainly not synonymous — tend to slip into the general category of 'woman', whose very existence she is dissecting.

Hannah Kanter

JAVADY ALLEY

Manny Shirazi

Women's Press

WOMAN AT POINT ZERO

Nawal el Saadawi

Zed Books

THE REPUBLIC OF COUSINS

Germaine Tillion

Al Saqi Books

Javady Alley is Manny Shirazi's first novel, and one she has dreamt of writing since she was very young. Set in Iran in the early 50s when anti-Shah agitation was