

**JUDGING BY THE COVER:  
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF  
WOMEN AND READING**

**SUSAN ALICE FISCHER**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research project began with the aim of assessing the impact of contemporary British feminist book publishing upon female readers. While it is important for women to have access to 'positive images' of themselves, readership is dependent upon factors beyond textual representation.

The first part of this work challenges the text-bound assumptions about reading. The preoccupation with textual meaning which besets most forms of literary criticism, including the sociology of literature and feminist criticism, ignores the social construction of reading.

The second part examines the way the book trade orders literary relations. Most of the material for this section comes from interviews with women working in various sectors of the feminist book world. While feminist publishing has managed to enter the mainstream to a degree and has attempted to redefine the relations between readers, writers and literary institutions, its future is uncertain in view of the increasing concentration of ownership in the book trade.

The third part of this study draws on interviews with three groups of women discussing their reading. The group of schoolgirls were learning a *literacy of differentiation* which divided them along gender, class and ethnic lines. The group of women in Further

Education were resisting a *literacy of alienation* which presented literacy as a series of discrete skills. Because the literacy that the group of feminist readers was developing empowers the individual to remake links between the personal and the political, I call this *feminist literacy*. To thrive, feminist literacy needs to go beyond personal identification and continue to participate in a larger feminist cultural and political project.

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## **PART I: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **A. Introduction**

Contemporary British feminist book publishing was the starting point for this study. The original intention was to assess the 'effects' that the increased availability of feminist thought and culture in the printed form was having upon readers and to define that readership. Much had been written about the ways in which stereotypical images of girls and women have contributed to undermining us throughout the centuries; now that 'positive images' were being produced by and for women, surely this must bring about some change.

Years of training in 'literature' meant that my first impulse was to examine the texts being produced for a clue to the images of women they made available to female readers and any 'effects' that might be said to derive from them. While this now appears a patently misguided approach to questions of readership, it is equally evident that most studies claiming deleterious effects of sexist and other ideologically suspect books had themselves been based upon textual analysis.<sup>2</sup> Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984) indicated another - and much more direct - route. Radway suggested that if one wanted to know about the 'effects' of reading, it was worth asking the reader rather than assuming that she must be reading as literary critics had predetermined. This usually meant with the worst possible consequences, unless of course, the reading material was

'ideologically sound': then the reader's consciousness was being duly raised.

Radway's insight, coupled with the fact that very little has been written about feminist publishing and nothing about its readership, means that much of the material for this study comes from interviews carried out with women working in the feminist booktrade - publishers, editors, publicists, distributors, bookshop-keepers, librarians - in an attempt to find out how much they know about their readers and the patterns of book distribution. I had hoped to show that feminist publishing had broken down the traditional barriers of readership which, in Britain, are set up along geographical and class lines. This is not in fact demonstrable: the availability of books in print does not guarantee their accessibility. It is nonetheless clear that feminist publishing has helped to create a written feminist culture and that this has entered the mainstream to a degree.

The other main source of material for this study comes from readers themselves. In an attempt to understand the relationship between reading and gender, I interviewed three groups of girls and women about their reading. The first group was made up of girls from a comprehensive school in the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA). The women in the second group were taking an English for Work Preparation course at a College of Further Education, also in ILEA. Finally, the third group was made up of women who defined themselves as feminists and who read feminist books.

This study therefore moves away from textual analysis as a way into the sociology of literature. Much of the data has shown that if we are to study the sociological implications of book reading we must first know something about the discourses that surround literary activity and how they relate to the social context. Commonplaces abound in the discussion of books, informing everyday discourse and erudite pronouncements alike. A bevy of accepted notions circulates about who should read what and what will happen to them if they do not. Rather than take sides in this endless argument, I shall look at the ways we have of talking about books and reading and the assumptions behind such discourses in order to understand the part they play in the social construction of reading and literacy. Books are indeed judged by the cover and people by the covers of the books they read. This commonplace has particular resonance for the women whose voices form the basis of this study, for they are themselves often judged by the cover.

During the research process it became apparent that many unchallenged assumptions needed to be examined. These assumptions were not merely personal misconceptions, but form the basis of much work within the sociology of literature and feminist criticism. The basic assumption was that reading books is 'good for you', provided you read the right kinds of books. Other assumptions followed: that there is a right, and wrong, kind of book; that the right and wrong divide falls along ideological lines and not, as others might have it, along religious or 'moral' lines. According to this argument, reading feminist books is 'good for you' and reading sexist books is

'bad for you'. It follows that it is possible to define 'feminist' and 'sexist' books. Similar arguments can be developed along class and race lines as well. Behind these, lies the further assumption that there is a sizeable reading public upon whom books are producing discernible effects.

More generally, there was a series of assumptions about the uses people make of books, most notably that certain people could 'relate' to books that were somehow closer to their life experience. Thus women would relate to women's books, Black people to books by Black authors and so on.<sup>3</sup>

What needs to be questioned is why people talk of books in terms of personal experience in the first place and why types of books and types of people are so inextricably linked. So ingrained are some of these ways of talking about books that it can be difficult to imagine any other. But these modes of discourse are *learned*. I am not suggesting that all these assumptions are necessarily erroneous and should be substituted by something else, but that it is important to identify these discourses and begin to examine them. Listening to the ways people talk about books and reading and gender is useful not only to conclude that 'women relate to books by women', but to understand what discussions about books and personal experience say about the social construction of reading. What has been missing from discussions about books and reading is the dimension of power relations. Listening to the unstated assumptions behind the ways in which people talk about books means uncovering how books and reading

locate the people associated with them within a social and cultural hierarchy.

Focussing on such issues via the text becomes spurious. Endless arguments about the 'quality' of a given book or the ideology it supposedly contains and the possible 'effects' that it is going to have on someone's life do not address these questions. People are doubtless influenced by the world around them - and that includes books. But discussions about whether the reader can react to or only fall victim to bad ideology are enlightening only insofar as they show how we perceive certain people's ability to resist negative forces within society at a given time in history.<sup>4</sup> To be useful, such arguments need to be placed within a wider context which takes into account the availability of books, literacy and so on.

Recently, there has been much debate in British schools and society about the implications of reading certain kinds of books. Conservatives have been leading a moral crusade which has culminated in the passing of Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 which prohibits the 'promotion of homosexuality' by local councils. The genesis of Section 28 centred around a dispute between some Tory parents and councillors on one side and some teachers believing in 'positive images' for gays and lesbians, as well as for women and ethnic minorities, on the other. The offending object in question was a book, *Jenny Lives With Eric and Martin*, published by Gay Men's Press (Susanne Bosche 1983), which presents what the law has since defined 'a pretended family relationship' - i.e., gay parenting - as

a normal and happy situation. The assumption behind the Tory contingent was that such a book would turn children into homosexuals; as far as they were concerned, it was propaganda. The positive imagists claimed this was not the object; they merely wanted a positive representation of a situation which was, after all, part of the reality of some of their pupils.<sup>5</sup>

This case does more than epitomise the book-burning and bible-thumping tendencies which are finding fertile ground in Britain today. It illustrates the very crucial discourses that go on around the question of books and reading and about what it is appropriate for which people to read. The most recent instance of fundamentalist tendencies and censorship, the Rushdie affair, has had international dimensions. In Britain, bookshops have become the target of bombings in relation to the Rushdie affair. Collet's bookshop in Central London was bombed in 1989. But Reading Matters bookshop in North London also received bomb threats because of the radical literature it stocked in 1988. The seizure by Customs and Excise of imported books destined for Gay's The Word Bookshop in London and, more recently, for Edinburgh's gay bookshop West & Wilde are further instances of threats to freedom of the press.<sup>6</sup>

Much has been done to fight such bigotry. Yet, the call for anti-racist, anti-sexist and anti-heterosexist books in and out of school falls into the trap of engaging in the same terms of discourse that the establishment uses. Both sides produce normative discourses based on assumptions about what should and should not be read. Both

presume the reader belongs to the unpowerful in society: children, women, minority groups. The establishment worries that 'subversive' material is propaganda. Those producing and distributing such material believe that what the establishment makes available is also propaganda, and hope that their own will change the *status quo*. But reciprocal name-calling is less than constructive. Instead, a progressive analysis needs to challenge the terms of the argument and concentrate on the ways in which discourses on books - and related questions of literacy, language and national identity - are used by the establishment to maintain the *status quo*.<sup>7</sup> It means looking at the way literary institutions, such as the book trade and the academy, shape readership. Reactionary books *do* exist. It is important for the dispossessed to find confirmation of their existence in literary and as many other forms as possible. The creation of a culture of opposition is vital. The notion of quality is ideologically biased. There is nothing new in these affirmations. But instead of plugging them into a pre-established mode of discourse, we need to take the next theoretical step.

This means looking at the assumptions about books and reading that we have inherited and examining the ways they bolster and reproduce the existing relations of power in society. This means, among other things, tearing our eyes away from the text to look at the way books are used and to see how, in spite of all our obsession with the text, we mostly judge books by the cover. Books are charged with meaning before they are even opened and become 'texts'. Literary criticism has our eyes so firmly glued on what is inside the text and how it is

going to affect the reader positively or negatively, that we can no longer see all the other issues clammering for recognition: accessibility of books, the uses to which they are put, the relation between books and power, literacy, censorship and so on.

We are lost in the text. The rest of Part I illustrates some instances in recent theory pointing to ways out. It is not only education and criticism that are important in our view of books and reading. Part II examines how the book trade makes some books available and has its own preconceived notions about who reads and what they want to read. It focusses on the challenges feminist publishing has brought to the mainstream book trade and the attempts it has made to change the relations between producers and consumers of literary culture. Part III details and analyses the findings from the three case studies of readers and argues that their positioning according to race, class and gender in the various contexts in which their reading is located leads them to develop different literacies.<sup>6</sup>

## B. Theory

Most assumptions about books and reading boil down to a very basic one: that the text is a fixed entity and prime locus for studies concerning the 'literary'. Even when social and political questions are foremost, it is usually in the text that answers are sought. The text *reflects* social conditions or society itself *conditions* the production of the text. The sociology of literature thus rests upon the 'tautological premise of the *interdependence* between literature and society' (Corsini 1974, 22, trans. mine).<sup>9</sup> Feminist criticism, as a branch of the sociology of literature, studies the particular interdependence between literature and patriarchal society. While feminist criticism has been invaluable in bringing a gender dimension to the sociology of literature, it usually still operates within the same limiting framework: patriarchy *conditions* literature or literature *reflects* patriarchy.<sup>10</sup> Either way, the emphasis is on a closed circuit of internal relations leaving questions of the social construction of literature unasked. This chapter looks at some recent work which has begun to move away from a preoccupation with the text and to challenge these assumptions.

### 1. Lost in the Text

Jane Tompkins's essay, 'The Reader in History: The Changing Shape of Literary Response' (1980), illustrates how the social construction

of literature changes over time.' She points out, however, that the way literature has been considered since Romanticism has changed much less than the plethora of recent critical trends might suggest.

The concept of text as fixed entity and 'object of knowledge' (Tompkins 1980, 222) is itself an historical construct. This view emerges at a time when the social relations between author and audience shift from the Renaissance system of patronage (ibid., 208) to a system of commercial printing which breaks such ties:

Instead of taking place within the context of a social relationship, the production and consumption of literature go on independent of any social contact between author and reader. Literature becomes simultaneously both impersonal and privatized (ibid., 214).

Tompkins describes the widening hiatus between literary activity and public life in the nineteenth century which leads to a depoliticisation of the role of literature. The diminishing role of the artist in the political forum is apparently counteracted by hailing him as divinely inspired: 'the literary theorists of the nineteenth century turned the artist's progressive alienation from society into a positive principle' (ibid., 218-9). While the audience becomes 'a faceless, unpredictable public' (ibid., 217), literature comes to be seen as 'a freestanding activity whose products have autonomous aesthetic value' (ibid., 208).

As author and audience are cut off from one another and literature is severed from political life, literature's status is further

diminished by an encroaching positivist and scientific discourse declaring it subjective (ibid., 221):

Literature becomes synonymous with emotionalism, individualism, and the contemplative life; science and politics with the intellect, power over the material environment, the life of action (ibid., 218).

In a straw-grasping attempt to gain a foothold, 'a special ontological status' (ibid., 222) is claimed for literature, thus further shrinking its ground:

Once the literary work has been defined as an object of knowledge, as *meaning, not doing*, interpretation becomes the supreme critical act (ibid., 222, italics mine).

This reification of literature has led to a critical stance in which the text - as locus of meaning - becomes all important.<sup>12</sup> Such 'text-bound thinking' insists 'on the autonomy of the individual work of textual art':

Writing, it will be remembered, has been called 'autonomous discourse' by contrast with oral utterance, which is never autonomous but always embedded in non-verbal existence. The New Critics have assimilated the verbal art work to the visual object-world of texts rather than the oral-aural event-world. They have insisted that the poem or other literary work be regarded as an object, a 'verbal icon' (Ong 1982, 160).<sup>13</sup>

Although Ong is referring specifically to the way New Criticism views literature, such reification is common to various other trends of modern literary criticism: Formalism, Structuralism, feminist

criticism and psychoanalytic criticism all share an obsession with textual meaning:

The stance of the contemporary critic vis à vis the text is that of the exegete [...]. This stance in relation to the text is shared by schools of contemporary criticism that otherwise appear to be in mortal conflict. [...] they all share the assumption that texts are objects to be analyzed and deciphered (Tompkins 1980, 205-6).

Literature is decontextualised, removed from the political and social sphere and pushed into the realm of the personal. Just as the text becomes 'autonomous utterance',<sup>14</sup> so its reception is perceived to be individual. It

is aimed at the psychic life of individuals rather than at collective standards of judgment on public issues (ibid., 215).

This leads to the other basic assumption underlying much discussion of the interaction between texts and readers. A depoliticisation of the reader parallels that of the text. The reader is either idealised out of context or personalised out of context. This is also manifested by a:

corresponding development in the field of criticism [which] moves attention away from literature's social and moral effects and toward the psychology of reading, so that the concept of literary response, from having been primarily a social and political one, now becomes personal and psychological (ibid., 215).

Reader-response criticism typifies this. Although initially appearing to offer some respite from the conviction of the text's autonomy and fixity by allowing space for the reader's 'construction'

of the text, reader-response criticism remains within the internal parameters of individual text and individual response. Its primary concern is not with the social construction of the reader but with interpreting the reader interpreting the text.<sup>15</sup> The focus is still on 'meaning, not doing'. As Tompkins points out:

The belief that literature is above politics and does not act directly to bring about results has determined the way contemporary reader-centered critics define their task. Whereas in the Renaissance, literature's effects are often conceived in socio-political terms [...] modern reader-critics understand effects as entirely a matter of *individual* response. They may focus on the reader's cognitive processes as he moves from line to line, or on the motivational patterns that govern his interpretations of a work, or on the identity theme that mediates the work for him, but however the responses are characterized, and whatever their moral benefits are said to be, the consequences of reading are normally confined to the self considered in isolation (ibid., 210).

One might argue that this is not the case with forms of criticism which are primarily concerned with literature's relation to society: surely feminist criticism discusses female readers as a social group and not as individuals in isolation. But things are not so simple. Schweickart (1986) rightly notes that:

Reader-response criticism, as currently constituted, is utopian [...]. The different accounts of the reading experience that have been put forth overlook the issues of race, class, and sex, and give no hint of the conflicts, sufferings, and passions that attend these realities. The relative tranquility of the tone of these theories testifies to the privileged position of the theorists (p. 35).

According to Schweickart, 'reader-response criticism needs feminist criticism' (ibid., 36). But much more importantly, reader-response criticism - whether mainstream or feminist - needs readers, not only to reveal their 'conflicts, sufferings, and passions', but, more crucially, their access to books, education and literacy and the ways these position them in the world. Feminist reader-response criticism adds women back in without changing the underlying framework.<sup>16</sup> The emphasis is still on text and exegesis:

To put the matter theoretically, androcentric literature structures the reading experience differently depending on the gender of the reader (ibid., 41).

While women come to a text - as to other things - with a double-consciousness (Miller 1986), surely this is due to preconstructed differences. But feminist reader-response criticism places the onus of difference on the text when it is more likely to be found elsewhere: in society's relations of power.

Furthermore, feminist reader-response criticism, in locating meaning in the (patriarchal) text, places the (female) reader in the role of hapless victim. Thus Schweickart's question is: 'What do male texts *do* to her?' She responds:

control is conferred on the text: the woman reader is emasculated by the text. The feminist story fits well at this point in Iser's framework. Feminists insist that the androcentricity of the text and its damaging effects on women readers are not figments of their imagination (p. 49).

By reading such texts, 'the woman reader is the agent of her own im-mas-cu-lation' (ibid., 49). Mainstream reader-response criticism is 'preoccupied with issues of control and partition'. The female reader can, Schweickart argues, establish a different relationship with a feminist text which is based on 'the desire for relationship [...] and the desire for intimacy, up to and including a symbiotic merger with the other' (ibid., 55).

Such idealisation derives from no empirical evidence of women readers. The text is the spring-board for all else: a 'male' text 'controls' a female reader; a 'female' text encourages an egalitarian relationship. These generalisations court essentialism: not only is the text a fixed entity, but there is such a thing as a 'female' and 'male' text.<sup>17</sup>

Underlying this argument is the assumption that readers 'relate' to texts according to their own 'experience'. The position of feminist reader-response criticism can be summed up in the notion that female readers 'relate' to female or feminist texts more readily than to male texts. What concerns me here is not how true this proposition is, but that text and reader have once more been removed from the political sphere: through the category of personal experience, the emphasis has shifted to *individual* response to a decontextualised text. While it is true that one of feminism's most important insights has been the recognition of the link between the personal and the political, conflation of the two is

counterproductive. Once the category of personal 'experience' becomes all important, the collective and political impetus is lost.

Even if we were to accept unquestioningly the category of experience as the most important, what happens when race, class and other elements are added to the picture? Will, for instance, a Black woman 'relate' to a Black male text or a white female text? And in any case, is this not a reductive way to speak of her experience? But the premisses themselves are untenable. Although discussing reader-text relations in this way has the merit of raising questions to do with power and control, it does so within the paradigm of internal relations. Reader and text still exist in idealised isolation, posed as fixed entities: the irreducible text and the irreducible female. Such essentialism severs the reader from her context to such a degree that we cannot learn how she exists in her world and how the 'text' fits in with that world. We cannot hear the literary discourses that surround her and that she herself produces and which make her into the kind of reader she is.

Moreover, the female reader in this paradigm is the victim. If she persists in reading 'male' texts, she incurs the insult of masochism. Because she and the texts she reads are posed in isolation, there is little sense of any need she might have, as a member of a subordinate group, to appropriate the dominant discourse to her own ends. Feyerabend (1975), in his appeal for epistemological anarchy, argues for the importance of being able to use all methods and ideas. In expanding upon Lenin's words, he shows

how a knowledge of different epistemologies and ideologies is necessary for change:

First, that in order to fulfil its task, the revolutionary class [i.e. the class of those who want to change either a part of society such as science, or society as a whole] must be able to master *all* forms or aspects of social activity without exception [it must be able to understand, and to apply, not only one particular methodology, but any methodology, and any variation thereof it can imagine] [...]; second [it] must be ready to pass from one to another in the quickest and most unexpected manner (p. 18).<sup>18</sup>

A belief in the importance of making feminist books available underpins this study. But Schweickart's implication that women can 'relate' to women's books alone leaves little scope for women's appropriation of the hegemonic discourse. Subversion becomes an impossibility; apolitical separatism the 'only' option.

Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984) also objects to the way much criticism of 'mass' or 'popular' literature<sup>19</sup> deals with its alleged readers. Postulating the ideal reader as victim, incapable of any critical acumen leaves no room for resistance:

It is conceived on a simple physical or biological model as a confrontation between two distinct objects, the text and the reader. Because the text is fixed and already given when the reader encounters it, all he or she can do is to *swallow it whole, to incorporate its ideological content in unadulterated form* (p. 7, italics mine).

It is no accident that the putative readers of 'mass' literature - the working classes and, particularly, women - are believed to have such malleable minds. Hegemonic cultures have often circulated such

ideas to keep empowering sources of knowledge away from subordinate groups (see, e.g., Virginia Woolf 1979). Thus it is disturbing to find the same notions put about by these groups' allies. Discourses developed within feminism about the effects of reading sexist books as opposed to books with positive images also posit a passive picture of the reader:

Readers for the most part lead busy, participatory lives, not the passive, derivative existence envisioned by some 'experts' (Thurston 1987, 217).

Not only is the view that readers swallow everything they read insulting to their intelligence, but it is 'troubling because its conception of ideology and domination seems to preclude the possibility of any social change or resistance from the very start' (Radway 1984, 6).<sup>20</sup> It also tells us nothing about the context in which such books might be read and whether the ideology they supposedly contain would find fertile ground. In *The Romance Revolution*, Carol Thurston (1987) suggests that readers not only react against texts they consider offensive, but that they

provide plenty of evidence that they have no trouble recognising the difference between real life and fantasy; what they do not provide is any behavioral or articulated indication that idealized female stereotypes, new or old, condition consumers to seek satisfaction in fantasies rather than to work for social change (p. 110).<sup>21</sup>

Radway's work questions the fixity of the text and the assumptions held by critics about how people read. It is also important in challenging 'the romance-reader-as-silly-dope image' (Thurston 1987,

190). My own work is particularly indebted to Radway's because of the ethnographic approach to questions of women and reading and her recognition that

if literature is to be treated as a document in the study of a culture, it is first necessary to know something about who reads, why they do so, and how they go about it (Radway 1984, ix).

The main part of her study is dedicated to discovering just what a group of romance readers located somewhere in Middle America get out of the books they read with such conviction. Dot, her key informant, works in a bookstore and circulates a newsletter about romances to her customers. Most of the data come from Dot and a group of her clients who were interviewed about reading habits and attitudes to romances. Radway's book is refreshing: she moves away from textual analysis and bases her statements about readers on field-work. But ultimately, her questions come back to the text:

I have assumed that it is first necessary to identify those particular textual features or elements that the women understand to be the core of the romantic plot. As a result, I have attempted to elicit those essential ingredients from the women themselves and subsequently tried to determine how they understand the story they make from them (ibid., 11).

Radway takes the important step of questioning the assumptions of critics in order to privilege the voices of readers, but, perhaps because she is dealing with a specific genre, her concern is still with what is in the text. She examines the prejudices that attend romance-reading and the ways in which romance readers use their books, for example, to create a space for themselves away from the

demands placed upon them as women. But in the end, her work centres less upon how the assumptions held about romance readers help to bolster existing relations of power. Instead, she comes back to the question, which she herself finds unanswerable, of whether the reader controls the text - and thus subverts patriarchal power relations inside and outside the text - or is controlled by the text and influenced by its patriarchal ideology.

## 2. Breaking the Circle

Stepping outside the closed circuit of internal relations between reader and text to focus on the uses of the literary in a given context entails a shift from *meaning* to *doing*:

[...] we cannot discover it from the *inside*. We need an *external* standard of criticism, we need a set of alternative assumptions or, as these assumptions will be quite general, constituting as it were, an entire alternative world, we need a *dream-world in order to discover the features of the real world we think we inhabit* (and which may actually be just another dream-world). The first step in our criticism of familiar concepts and procedures, the first step in our criticism of 'facts', must therefore be an attempt *to break the circle* (Feyerabend 1975, 32, last italics mine).

In order to break away from the tyranny of the 'autonomous model' of literature, 'the ideological and therefore culturally embedded nature of [its] practices' must be recognised (Street 1984, 2-3). The production of discourses around books locates people at certain

points in a social and cultural hierarchy. It is not a question of an individual *relating to* a text, but rather of the ways literary institutions<sup>22</sup> *shape* different groups. Terry Lovell's *Consuming Fiction* (1987) offers useful theoretical background. Concerned with the novel's changing status in its shift from commodity to 'literature', she contextualises the reader and recognises the importance of gender and class in the social construction of the literary.<sup>23</sup> She does not focus on how men and women relate to 'male' and 'female' texts but steps outside that mode to look at the institutions themselves:

Men and women have different relationships to the major institutions of literary and ideological production (p. 5).

Lovell reminds us of the history of the novel and brings to her work dimensions of gender which other critics such as Watt (1957) failed to recognise. Early on, the novel 'was denounced not only for its lack of literary merit, but also for its alleged effects on morals' (Lovell 1987, 8). In relating the moralising discourses surrounding the rise of the novel, Lovell links them to women's predominant role in both 'the production and consumption of fiction' (ibid., 9). But the 'moral panics' (ibid., 8) regarding cultural consumption which were conjured up then are not peculiar to that time alone:

The fear invoked in the twentieth-century over film and television focused on their effects on children and young people. In the case of the novel, it was specifically young women who were held to be most at risk (ibid., 9).

Such moral panics and preoccupations about 'effects' are highly revelatory about dominant attitudes to subordinated groups such as women, children, minorities and the working class. These discourses are enabled by the association of a certain kind of book with a certain kind of reader. Books enhance or devalue those with whom they are associated - and vice-versa. Often books linked with women - such as the romance - are devalued and when women then read such books, it confirms their putative moral or intellectual inferiority. It is no surprise that the 'moral attack on the novel focused on women as readers' (ibid., 9).<sup>24</sup>

In tracing fiction's move from commodity to 'literature' and its subsequent subdivision into 'trash' and 'quality' fiction, Lovell shows how evaluative discourses enable differentiation along class - as well as gender - lines. The novel:

could play no major ideological role until it had proved its literary credentials in terms of criteria determined by a literary critical elite which placed itself outside, and at a critical distance from, the new regime (ibid., 29).

In order for it to become 'the dominant literary form in Britain', it had to

rise above its dubious origins in the literary market-place, above its function as 'mere entertainment' to claim a legitimate place as literature (ibid., 29).

Only some forms of fiction managed to cross the border into respectability:

Fiction was differentiated along class lines, with 'literary' fiction being associated with bourgeois respectability, and also with realism (ibid., 11).

The novel remains both things - 'entertainment' and 'culture' - for a reason. Once the reading public became more sizeable (ibid., 20, 50), differentiation could occur not only between readers and non-readers, but between types of readers.<sup>25</sup> Lovell elaborates on the ways in which books come to be used as status-conferring - or, status-detracting - commodities. She illustrates how

the circulating library made it possible to maximize reading without unwanted *embarrassment*, cost and inconvenience of permanent acquisition (ibid., 51, italics mine).

After all, one would not want to display the 'wrong' kind of book in one's library. When it did become respectable to house novels in one's personal library, the cover prices were kept artificially high to discourage a wide readership (ibid., 51). Libraries in the late eighteenth century were not highly accessible and charged subscription fees:

Such charges would have placed library subscriptions beyond the means of most working-class families. Novel-reading remained a middle-class pursuit even under the auspices of the libraries (ibid., 52).

(It is in these terms that the recent call under the Tory government for the re-introduction of library charges should be seen (Boseley 1988).<sup>26</sup>)

Lovell points to a constant tension<sup>27</sup> within the production of 'commoditized art':

If art and literature are defined in terms which look towards an educated and discerning elite who are seeking aesthetic pleasures rather than entertainment, then popularity becomes problematic. On the one hand capitalist commodity production entails profit maximization which might be assumed to depend on maximum exposure and popularity. On the other hand, if works of art and literature are *too* popular, *make* too much money, then their aesthetic credentials may be called into question (ibid., 78).

Empirical research into the British booktrade today illustrates this tension and demonstrates the attempt to cover both bases. Upmarket publishing houses produce 'quality' books at high prices. Trade publishers concentrate on a cheaper soft-back product packaged and marketed in such a way as to stress the homogeneity of the range and to develop a brand-name image. These books are pushed in the same way as the proverbial soap-powder reputedly so unlike the selling of books: the same formula in a new wrapper. The epitome of this was when *Sarum* (David Goodman 1987; Peter Hillmore 1987) was published in a choice of six different dust jackets so that consumers could choose the version most suiting their fancy (and perhaps in the hope that they might purchase more than one copy). Mass-produced paperbacks are produced more cheaply, come in large print-runs, have lower cover prices and are accompanied by little pretence to quality. Recently, the British booktrade has seen a number of takeovers and mergers (Anna Forster 1987a, 1987b). Some involve prestige hardback houses taking over trade paperback publishers. This offers the hardback publisher a highly cost-effective way of reissuing last

year's best-selling hardbacks as this year's paperbacks in much the same way as last year's *haute couture* becomes this year's knock-offs in the rag-trade. The elite get first crack and set the trend. By the time the product is available to the mass market, it is already old hat.<sup>28</sup> Such is the perceived difference between hard-backs and paperbacks that only the former have a good chance of being reviewed.<sup>29</sup>

There are two markets: one for the elite and one for the masses. The values that attach themselves to the differentiated books thus get attached to, and differentiate, their readers. Like the readers they are aimed at, upmarket hardbacks and, more recently, trade paperbacks claim the mark of 'individuality'. Like the readers they are aimed at, mass paperbacks are considered to be 'all the same'. People are thus judged by the covers of the books they read:

Marked differentiations such as those of A and B films, or stories in magazines in different price ranges, depend not so much on subject matter as on classifying, organizing, and labeling consumers. Something is provided for all so that none can escape; the distinctions are emphasized and extended. The public is catered for with a hierarchical range of mass-produced products of varying quality, thus advancing the rule of complete quantification. Everybody must behave (as if spontaneously) in accordance with his previously determined and indexed product turned out for his type (Horkheimer and Adorno 1973, 123).

The discourse set in motion by the literary institution is overwhelmingly one of differentiation.<sup>30</sup> It is in this light that the polarising discourses of moral effects, quality, ease and

accessibility can be understood. For example, one of the major arguments against forms of mass culture such as television and pulp fiction is that, unlike high literature, it is 'too easy' and that 'anyone' can understand it. How true this proposition is is less important than why ease and accessibility are perceived to be so terrible. The label 'too easy' enables a discourse of differentiation aimed at exclusion, discrediting consumer and producer alike. As C. B. Cox stated in his 1981 lecture at the Arts Council:

'If I can do it, it's not art.' In contrast, community art has devalued the word 'artist' and confused the distinction between professional and amateur (Cox 1981, 5).<sup>31</sup>

The point is not to argue the difference between ease and accessibility or between professional and amateur, but rather to understand why such distinction is necessary.<sup>32</sup>

This section has sought to highlight a number of assumptions and discourses surrounding literature and its relation to society. These discourses focus on discriminating between oppositional categories and are based on the premise of a fixed text and an idealised reader. It is no news that these discourses bolster the dominant culture. But these categories are also prevalent within feminism and on the left where the text is examined 'as a conduit for "dominant ideologies"' and the questions become: 'how sexist is it? how racist is it? how imperialist is it?' (James Donald no date a).<sup>33</sup> Rather than focussing on the relations of power in a system based upon

differentiation, such criticism has largely remained within the essentialist categories defined by the literary institution itself. Rather than recognising that 'Literature' exists only as

instituted through education, publishing, the press, the mass media, the Arts Council and other such institutions,

'progressive' criticism has attempted to measure

the 'progressiveness' or 'reactionariness' of a given text, genre, or movement [thus] *taking* for granted the categories and the relations between them as they are presented in that cultural apparatus (ibid., italics mine).

Such a sociology of literature

remains within the terms of aesthetic and ethical evaluation set up by the category of Literature [...] (ibid.).

To remain within these limits is to accept the *status quo* of literary relations and beg the question of why literature is confined to this polarising framework. Instead of concentrating on the value of specific *representations*, it is necessary to understand the overall *system of relations* which is rooted in differentiation.

The answers are not to be found within a sociology of literature which focusses on the 'ideology' in the text.<sup>34</sup> Williams (1977) rightly argues that Gramsci's concepts of dominant and subordinate hegemonies are more fruitful (Gramsci 1975). This obviates the polarity of contrasting ideology with 'true or scientific knowledge'

(Williams 1977, 55), and allows for the use of the concept of ideology as 'the general process of the production of meanings and ideas' (ibid., 55) to uncover 'relations of domination and subordination' (ibid., 110). Whereas ideology is seen to be fixed, 'hegemony is always a process. [...] It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own' (ibid., 112).

Thus rather than getting into another circuitous argument about the ideological presence in a given text,<sup>35</sup> it is more useful to try to establish what Foucault (1980, 118) calls 'effects of truth'.<sup>36</sup> Rather than remaining within the closed circuit of internal relations I have been describing, we can look at the effects of truth that are produced around literature and how they enable discourses of domination and subordination. This is not merely an abstraction. These discourses place groups of people at differing points on a social and cultural hierarchy. This in turn legitimises the literary discourses produced by the dominant groups. Not only are certain books and genres - and therefore, readers - differentiated, but so too are different forms of literacies. Only those who possess certain literacies are able to 'get on' in education, in the workforce and in the public sphere in general. We should be asking how this comes about and how it relates to gender, race and class, rather than worrying about whether the 'images' in a given text are going to have negative 'effects'. There are real 'effects' about, but they have much less to do with positive images than with

differentiating discourses surrounding literature and literacy which determine access to knowledge and power in everyday life.<sup>37</sup> As Foucault (1980) says in 'Truth and Power':

The notion of ideology appears to me to be difficult to make use of, for three reasons. The first is that, like it or not, it always stands in virtual opposition to something else which is supposed to count as truth. Now I believe that the problem does not consist in drawing the line between that in a discourse which falls under the category of scientificity or truth, and that which comes under some other category, but in seeing historically how effects of truth are produced within discourses which in themselves are neither true nor false. The second drawback is that the concept of ideology refers, I think necessarily, to something of the order of a subject. Thirdly, ideology stands in a secondary position relative to something which functions as its infrastructure, economic determinant, etc. (p. 118).

What I shall therefore attempt to do in this work is look at the 'effects of truth' produced around reading and gender and not argue about the extent to which they are 'true' or 'false', 'ideologically sound' or the product of 'false consciousness', but rather examine what they are saying about the positioning of women of different ethnic and class backgrounds through the notion of literature. This has meant looking at institutions which are in the business of producing such discourses and of making literary culture more or less accessible: the mainstream and feminist booktrade, education, criticism and so on. It has also meant listening to women of a variety of backgrounds talk about their perceptions of their relation to the literary institution. Most work in this area has been theoretical (see above), though *Rewriting English* (Batsleer et al

1985) began some practical work along these lines as did Elizabeth Long (1987) with her ethnographic work into reading groups and the evaluative hierarchies which inform discussions of books. Thus, what follows is not to be read as a hard and fast theory of literature, but rather one way of beginning to get at the 'effects of truth' surrounding literature and gender and away from the tyranny of the literary institution.<sup>38</sup>

Notes to Part I

1. For images-of-women criticism see, for example: Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch and Elizabeth Langland (eds.) (1983); Rachel M. Brownstein (1984); Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocínio P. Schweickart (eds.) (1986); Judith Fryer (1978); Kate Millett (1978); Elaine Showalter (1978); Elena Gianini Belotti (1975) makes a direct link between images of girls in children's books and the 'effects' that such books will have on girls; but this assumption is made implicitly in many places and was encountered in the empirical research as well. For a discussion of the implications of images-of-women criticism and other branches of feminist criticism, see Toril Moi (1985).

2. See previous note.

3. Gregory Woods (1982) points to the over-simplification of such statements:

Were we to accept [this premiss] many others might follow: for instance, that the English reader cannot fully understand American literature; or, that the modern reader cannot really hope to understand the Metaphysicals. Of Shakespeare's sonnets, 1 to 126 would have to be read by gay men and straight women; 127 to 154 by straight men and gay women. James Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain* would be for black men; *Giovanni's Room*, for gay men. Only men both black and gay could understand the whole oeuvre. Taken to its conclusion, this train of thought would leave each book with only one reader: its author (p. 7)

4. I am not, of course, suggesting that the vast literature on ideology is pointless. It is useful in revealing relations of power. See Part I, B.

5. On the background to 'positive images', the enactment of Section 28, its legal unworkability, and the ensuing self-censorship see: Duncan Campbell (1988); Hugh Canning (1988); Brian Deer (1988); Nicholas de Jongh (1988a); 'Education Not Ignorance' (1986); Gay Teachers' Group (1987); 'Grants body decision alarms the arts' (1988); Haringey Teachers' Association (1988); 'Hysterical Prejudice' (1987); Janis and Ann (1988); 'Lecturer told "you'll never work again" for talking about Section 28' (1988); 'Letter of the law' (1988); The Library Association (1988); 'Out of the closet, into the House' (1988); Sarah Roelofs (1988a, 1988b, 1988c, 1988d); David Rose (1988); Catherine Storr (1988); Polly Toynbee (1988); Christian Wolmar (1988).

6. On the bombing of Collett's bookshop, see 'Colletts hit by second firebomb' (1989); on the bomb threats to Haringey's community bookshop Reading Matters, see: Nicholas de Jongh (1988b); 'Haringey bookshop faces vicious onslaught from press-inspired bigots' (1988); Jacquie Hughes (1988); 'Reading Matters hits back with celebration' (1988). The *Information Pack* produced by the Defend Gay's the Word Campaign (1985) gives the background to the case between them and Customs and Excise; see also: 'Books seized' (1986); 'Gay's The Word Defeat' (1988); Paud Heggarty's article in Bob Baker and Neil Harvey (eds.) (1985); Andrew Lumsden (1986). On the alleged harassment of

the women's bookshop, Silver Moon in London, see: Jane Ferguson (1986). See also 'Customs & Excise seize consignment' (1989) for the West & Wilde bookshop case.

7.

Each time that in one way or another, the question of language comes to the fore, that signifies that a series of other problems is about to emerge, the formation and enlarging of the ruling class, the necessity to establish more intimate and sure relations between the ruling groups and the national popular masses, that is, the reorganisation of cultural hegemony (Antonio Gramsci, quoted in Henry A. Giroux (in Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo (1987), p. 1 ).

See James Donald (no date a, no date b) for a discussion of the questions of language and national identity.

8. Because of the interdisciplinary nature of this project, I have discussed the different methodologies used in the appropriate sections, rather than dedicate one chapter entirely to methodological discussion.

To make this thesis as readable as possible, I have relied on long footnotes for additional information which, placed in the text, would have distracted the reader from my main points.

9. Gianfranco Corsini (1982) develops this point:

The relationship between literature and society is therefore a tautology, a commonplace to which we are forced to refer and which we still endeavour to redefine today merely because someone in recent history maintained and suggested that *literature* contained such unique, specific, autonomous and

universal characteristics which could be *studied* and *interpreted* independently of its historical and social context and intrinsically and exclusively in function of its *aesthetic* value (p. 2, translation mine).

On the limited usefulness of the related concepts of reflection, mediation, typification and homology, see also Raymond Williams (1977, 95-107).

10. Joanna Russ (1984); Dale Spender (1982); Lynne Spender (1983); Virginia Woolf (1979) exemplify the first tendency, while images-of-women criticism (e.g., Kate Millett (1978); Elaine Showalter (1978)) typifies the second. As for critics dealing with the concepts of *écriture féminine* and the *corps féminin* in the text, their essentialist bent places them more within a biology of literature than in the sociology of literature, which is what concerns me here. For a fuller discussion of all these trends, see Toril Moi (1985) and Toril Moi (ed.) (1987).

11. My use of secondary historical data from Tompkins and Lovell (below) is to raise *theoretical* issues; an in-depth historical analysis is beyond the scope of this work.

12. Literature's removal from the public sphere also changes the form of its institutionalisation. Interpretation

cannot be performed by the man on the street. Since the literary work is formally and semantically unique ('special,' '*sui generis*'), it requires interpreters specially schooled in the intricacies of the poetic medium. The formalist

definition of the literary work, in sum, calls for the institutionalisation of literary study on a new basis (Tompkins 1980, 222).

Eagleton (1984) makes a similar point:

The academicization of criticism provided it with an institutional basis and professional structure; but by the same token it signalled its final sequestration from the public realm (p. 65).

This form of institutionalisation reinforces the reification of literature, as Said (1982) remarks:

The curricula of most literature departments in the university today are constructed almost entirely out of monuments, canonized into rigid dynastic formation, serviced and reserviced monotonously by a shrinking guild of humble servitors (p. 17).

13. In examining 'the orality-literacy-print shift' (p. 159), Ong (1982) discusses

a shift from a residually oral (rhetorical, contextual) mentality to a textual (non-contextual) mentality. But the textual mentality was relatively unreflective. For, although texts are autonomous by contrast with oral expression, ultimately no text can stand by itself independent of the extra-textual world. Every text builds on pretext (p. 162).

14. Against the concept of 'autonomous utterance', Vološínov (1973) maintains that

the speech act or, more accurately, its product - the utterance, cannot under any circumstances be considered an individual phenomenon in the precise meaning of the word and cannot be explained in terms of the individual psychological or

psychophysiological conditions of the speaker.  
*The utterance is a social phenomenon* (p. 82).

He quotes from Vossler in order to illustrate the perils of the concept of autonomous utterance:

Roughly speaking, the history of language, as it is given to us by historical grammar, is the same sort of thing as would be a history of clothing would be [sic], which does not take the concept of fashion or the taste of the time as its point of departure, but provides a chronologically and geographically arranged list of buttons, clasps, stockings, hats, and ribbons. In historical grammar, such buttons and ribbons would have names like weak or strong *e*, voiceless *t*, voiced *d*, and so on (ibid., 79)

(Volosinov is quoting from Vossler, 'Grammatika i istorija jazyka', *Logos I* (1910), p. 170.)

Volosinov's theory of language is useful for undercutting the notion of the autonomy of the text. He moves away from the Saussurian theory which privileges a study of *langue* (the abstract system of rules) over *parole* (speech act/utterance) and which polarises synchrony and diachrony. For Volosinov, the basic model for the study of language is dialogue: language is 'a continuous generative process implemented in the social-verbal interaction of speakers' (Matejka and Titunik 1973, 2). In rejecting the emphasis on the system of rules of 'abstract objectivism' and the emphasis on individuality of 'individualistic subjectivism' (Volosinov 1973, 82, 93), Volosinov focusses on the utterance as a social structure (Matejka 1973, 169). For a similar emphasis, see M. Bakhtin (1981).

15. Said (1982): 'reader-response critics tend to regard interpretation as an essentially private, interiorized happening, thereby inflating the role of solitary decoding at the expense of its just as important social context' (p. 8). Freund (1987) notes how in reader-response criticism there is no

accord regarding the subject under investigation; the concept 'audience' or 'reader' may be anything from an idealized construct to an actual historical idiosyncratic personage, including the author. Personifications - the mock reader (Gibson), the implied reader (Booth, Iser), the model reader (Eco), the super-reader (Riffaterre), the inscribed or encoded reader (Brooke-Rose), the narratee (Prince), the ideal reader (Culler), the literant (Holland), the actual reader (Jauss), the informed reader or the interpretive community (Fish) - proliferate (p. 7).

See also: Roland Barthes (1974); Umberto Eco (1981); Stanley Fish (1980); Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocínio P. Schweickart (eds.) (1986); Norman N. Holland (1975); Wolfgang Iser (1974); Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crossman (eds.) (1980).

16. Although feminist criticism has had the merit of adding a gender dimension to the study of literature, it has often remained within the same framework. Even when the canon has been challenged as biased in favour of men, the emphasis has been less on questioning why there is a perceived need for a canon in the first place and much more on either adding women into the canon or drawing up a separate female canon (e.g. Showalter 1978). Similarly, alternative publications, such as *City Limits* (London), now have their own

'Alternative Bestsellers' list after the fashion of the mainstream press. The terms change, but the overall discourses remain the same.

17. Many feminists would agree with this and would base the distinction on the biological sex of the text's author. I would not want to argue the contrary, but rather that this area of pursuit is yet again based on the notion of text as fixed entity. For a discussion of essentialist positions in feminist criticism and theory see Toril Moi (1985) and Lynne Segal (1987).

18. Feyerabend argues that it is not enough to replace one set of rules - or one methodology - with another, but that '*all methodologies, even the most obvious one, have their limits*' (p. 32). He maintains that variety of opinion is necessary for 'objective knowledge' and that only a method with variety can have a 'humanitarian outlook' (p. 46). He thus shows the necessity of questioning theories and facts which 'are much more intimately connected than is admitted by the autonomy principle'. He contends that it is necessary, at times, to play the game of the *status quo* to undercut its validity (p. 33).

19. Criticism often conflates 'popular' and 'mass' literature as the reader is assumed to be the same. Carlo Ginzburg (1980) distinguishes between them. The former is a 'culture *produced by the popular classes*' while the second is a 'culture *imposed on the popular classes*' (p. xv).

20. See Lynne Segal (1987) for a discussion of the essentialist trend in the feminism of Mary Daly, Dale Spender and others, which ultimately argues against the possibility for change.

21. See also Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth Century Miller* (1980) which relates the story of Menocchio, a miller, interrogated during the Inquisition and eventually burnt at the stake for his views. Ginzburg's study compares the contents of the books that Menocchio is known to have read with the opinions he expressed at his trials and found that Menocchio used the information culled from the books selectively: 'The gulf between the texts read by Menocchio and the way in which he understood them and reported them to the inquisitors indicates that his ideas cannot be reduced or traced back to any particular book' (p. xxii).

22. By institutions I mean, for example, education, criticism, the academy, the book trade, libraries (see Corsini 1974). See also Eagleton (1976a):

What is in question is not simply the process and consumption of literary texts, but the function of such production within the cultural ideological apparatus. That apparatus includes the specific institutions of literary production and distribution (publishing houses, bookshops, libraries and so on), but it also encompasses a range of 'secondary', supportive institutions whose function is more directly ideological, concerned with the definition and dissemination of literary 'standards' and assumptions. Among these are literary academies, societies and book-clubs, associations of literary producers, distributors and consumers, censoring bodies, and literary journals and reviews. In developed social

formations, the literary substructure of the cultural apparatus interacts more or less intensively with the ideological apparatus of 'communications'; but its real power lies in its articulation with the *educational* apparatus (p. 56).

23. 'The professional and "educated" reader, writer and critic is seen, generically, as bourgeois, metropolitan and male; the popular writer and reader as lower-class, provincial and female' (Janet Batsleer et al 1985, 18).

24. Feminist critical discourse also produces a moralising attack which focusses on women as readers: sexist books will have deleterious effects on their *women* readers. In some ways, this has meant attacking women themselves if they persist in reading the 'wrong' kinds of books - as has often been the case with romance readers.

25. Raymond Williams (1977) notes that 'it is relatively difficult to see "literature" as a concept' (p. 45) and traces a similar development:

Literature lost its earliest sense of reading ability and reading experience, and became an apparently objective category of printed works of a certain quality. [...] three complicating tendencies can then be distinguished: first, a shift from 'learning' to 'taste' or 'sensibility' as a criterion defining literary quality; second, an increasing specialization of literature to 'creative' or 'imaginative' works; third, a development of the concept of 'tradition' within national terms, resulting in the more effective definition of 'a national literature'. The sources of each of these tendencies can be discerned from the Renaissance, but it was in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that they came

through most powerfully, until they became, in the twentieth century, in effect received assumptions (p. 48).

26. On the prices of books and the development of public libraries, see: Richard D. Altick (1957) and R. K. Webb (1955). Q. D. Leavis (1965) gives information on the rise of the circulating library and the growth of the reading public. Her discussion also contains the types of concerns Lovell describes: she maintains that 'a taste for novel-reading as distinct from a taste for literature is not altogether desirable' (p. 132). Moreover, she argues that the development of the circulating library had the effect of furthering the former taste:

The readiness to read a good novel had become a craving for fiction of any kind, and a habit of reading poor novels not only destroys the ability to distinguish between literature and trash, it creates a positive taste for a certain kind of writing, if only because it does not demand the effort of a fresh response, as the uneducated ear listens with pleasure only to a tune it is familiar with ( *ibid.*, 136 - 7).

Q. D. Leavis views the high price of novels (before cheap 'yellow books' became available in the 1840s) as positive: 'What saved the lower middle-class for some time from a drug addiction to fiction was the simple fact of the exorbitant price of novels' (*ibid.*, 152).

27. Corsini (1974, 26-7) suggests that it is this *tension* that needs studying.

28. On the social construction of fashion and taste - not unlike that of the book trade - see Jean Baudrillard (1974); Pierre Bourdieu (1979); Georg Simmel (1971); Thorstein Veblen (1957); Elizabeth Wilson (1985) who argue that the purpose of fashion and taste is to distinguish groups of people from one another.

29. This has meant that some primarily paperback houses - including Virago and The Women's Press - now issue a small run of hardbacks simultaneously with the paperbacks to ensure review coverage. Women writers also get less review coverage than male writers (see Women in Publishing (1987)). Most recently, Virago and The Women's Press have begun to issue new fiction in hardback edition, with the option of then going into paperback.

30. A division between literature and mass fiction

can be understood [as] a concept with an important function in managing the diversity of fictional texts and modes of reading. It allows these to be incorporated within the hierarchy of values and differentiations that constitute both the institution of literature and national culture (Donald no date a).

31. Roger Mills (1985) and Paddy Maguire et al (1982) relate the difficulty that the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers (FWWCP) encountered in trying to get funding from the Literature Panel of the Arts Council because their work was considered to be 'of little, if any, solid literary merit' (Mills 1985, 4). In his 1981 lecture, C. B. Cox exemplified this line of reasoning, while the other lecturer, Raymond Williams, argued for an

inclusion of community arts. Robert Hutchison (1982) and Kwesi Owusu (1986, chapter 4) also discuss the 'selective tradition' of the Arts Council.

32. A discourse of differentiation necessitates obscuring the nuances that exist. Carol Thurston (1987) asks why critics 'assume that readers of paper-back romances have not read Austen, Brontë, and Lawrence?' (p. 113). The assumption of homogeneous readership is necessary to set discourses of differentiation in motion; without it, all the other assumptions would crumble.

33. The idea circulates that everything would be all right if only people would read the 'right' books. This derives from the basic assumption that 'reading is good for you'. Presumably this means that even if you belong to a subordinate group, but you read the right books, you can move up in the world. This is of course an individual 'solution' to a social problem.

34. As Vološinov (1973) points out:

If the specific nature of the semiotic-ideological material is ignored, the ideological phenomenon studied undergoes simplification. Either only its rationalistic aspect, its content side, is noted and explained (for example, the direct, referential sense of an artistic image, such as 'Rudin as superflous [sic] man'), and then that aspect is correlated with the basis (e.g., the gentry class degenerates; hence the 'superflous [sic] man' in literature); or, oppositely, only the outward, technical aspect of the ideological phenomenon is singled out (e.g., some technicality in building construction or in the chemistry of coloring materials), and then this aspect is

derived directly from the technological level of production.

Both these ways of deriving ideology from the basis miss the real essence of an ideological phenomenon (p. 18).

35. On the difficulties of making use of the concepts of ideology and propaganda, A.P. Foulkes (1983) points out that:

Hitler's assertion that art has nothing to do with propaganda does not contradict Orwell's statement that all art is propaganda, but is rather contained within it, for the propaganda-free art which Hitler envisaged was an art within which the values and beliefs of National Socialism would be dominant, invisible and totally natural (p. 6).

Similarly, Vološinov (1973) writes that:

The very same thing that makes the ideological sign vital and mutable is also, however, that which makes it a refracting and distorting medium. The ruling class strives to impart a supra-class, eternal character to the ideological sign, to extinguish or drive inward the struggle between social value judgments which occurs in it, to make the sign uniaxential.

In actual fact, each living ideological sign has two faces, like Janus. Any current curse word can become a word of praise, any current truth must inevitably sound to many other people as the greatest lie. This *inner dialectic quality* of the sign comes out fully in the open only in times of social crisis or revolutionary changes (p. 23).

36. The problem of contrasting ideology with truth is summed up by George Orwell: 'All propaganda is lies, even when one is telling the truth' (quoted in Foulkes 1983, 11 - 2). Foucault (1980) elaborates upon his preference for an emphasis on 'effects of truth' as opposed to ideology in 'Truth and Power':

'Truth' is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements.

'Truth' is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A 'régime' of truth.

This régime is not merely ideological or superstructural [...]

The essential political problem for the intellectual is not to criticise the ideological contents supposedly linked to science, or to ensure that his own scientific practice is accompanied by a correct ideology, but that of ascertaining the possibility of constituting a new politics of truth. The problem is not changing people's consciousnesses - or what's in their heads - but the political, economic, institutional régime of the production of truth (p. 133).

37. 'There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association' (Foucault 1980, 93).

38.

A sociology of reception would not be obliged to discriminate ceaselessly between so-called 'art' and so-called 'entertainment'. It would not only discover that all works of art are aimed at a precise audience which is historically and sociologically determined at the moment of their realisation [...] but especially that its modes of fruition are always predetermined in a given historical society, by the rigid canons of the Institution which presides (Corsini 1974, 31, translation mine).

## **PART II: FEMINIST PUBLISHING AND THE BOOK TRADE**

Women do have certain kinds of power, but what they rarely, rarely have is control. Control is what's important. Patriarchy, on the whole, is about control.  
- Ursula Owen, Managing Director at Virago (quoted in Troupp 1985, 23).

The book trade plays a fundamental role in ordering literary relations. Over the past 15 years, British feminist publishing has not only made women's writing more widely available, but has endeavoured to redefine the relations between readers, writers and literary institutions. The first part of this section describes how data on the book trade and feminist publishing were collected. The second looks at the implications of the increasing concentration of ownership in the book trade over the past few years. The third part examines the challenges feminist publishing has brought to the book trade.

### **A. Introduction**

#### **1. Sources**

This chapter draws upon a variety of sources. While many recognise the importance of contemporary British feminist book publishing, few long pieces have been written about it (Cadman, Chester and Pivot 1981 is probably the longest). Secondary sources

are therefore mostly in the form of shorter pieces in anthologies and in newspapers and magazines; longer works consulted concerned the mainstream book trade. It was necessary to monitor a range of periodicals during the course of the research: in the feminist press (*Spare Rib*, *Outwrite*, *The Women's Review*, *Feminist Review*, *The Women's Review of Books* (USA), *Everywoman*); the national 'quality' papers (*The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Observer*); in the gay and lesbian press (*The Pink Paper*); in the left press (*New Statesman*, *City Limits*); and publications from the feminist and mainstream book trade (*Wiplash* (Women in Publishing newsletter), *Wilpower* (Women in Libraries newsletter), *Feminist Library Newsletter*, *Lesbian Archive Newsletter*, *SYP Inprint* (Society of Young Publishers newsletter), *The Bookseller*). Catalogues and leaflets produced by publishers, distributors, bookshops, archives and others in the book trade and for specific events (such as book fairs, promotions and readings) were another basic source of information, as were feminist books themselves.

Because of the lack of in-depth writing on feminist publishing, much of my material comes from interviews and participant observation. I interviewed women working in the feminist, radical and mainstream book trade between the autumn of 1985 and that of 1988; most interviews took place in 1986 and 1987. Those interviewed worked as editors, publishers, publicists, distributors, bookshop-keepers and librarians. I interviewed women from the major feminist presses - Sheba, Onlywomen, The Women's Press, Black Womentalk, Virago and Pandora. I also spoke with two women from an academic

press with a strong Women's Studies list and with two women and one man from a left-wing publishing house which was just setting up a feminist list at that time. The distributors, publicists and bookshop-keepers whom I interviewed worked mainly with feminist and radical books; the librarians worked in different kinds of libraries, but all had a particular interest in feminist books. Interviews centred on the history of the organisation in question, the way it was set up and the reasons for producing and distributing feminist books. I also asked interviewees what they knew - or imagined - about their readers and how this was reflected in book publishing or buying policies.

While working on this study, I was also researcher for another project which began in 1987 at the Business School of the Polytechnic of North London. The project was carried out on behalf of the trade organisation, Women in Publishing (WiP), and investigated the relative positions of women and men in the British publishing industry.' A postal questionnaire was sent to numerous publishing houses to gather quantitative data on women's employment; but the bulk of the data was collected through qualitative interviews with female and male employees in academic and trade publishing companies of varying size. Involvement on this project gave me a view of the book trade as a whole and highlighted the links between employment practices, access, gender and book production (Frances Tomlinson and Susan Alice Fischer 1987, 1988; Frances Tomlinson and Fiona Colgan 1989). I also gained an inside knowledge of WiP, probably the most successful women's network in British industry today (cfr. Michele

Rene Gregory 1990). WiP's ability to span the feminist and mainstream sides of the industry has been its strength.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to formal interviewing on the different sides of the book trade, involvement in formal organisations, such as WiP, Women in Libraries (WIL) and Society of Young Publishers (SYP), and attendance at a course on Alternative Publishing,<sup>3</sup> I spent a considerable amount of time collecting data through participant observation. Approximately two weeks were spent with a radical distributor who allowed me to go through her books and examine the consignment reports for the feminist presses she handles. In this way, I was able to understand the importance of distribution in determining readership patterns.

I also attended many of the numerous events relating to feminist books, such as the Second International Feminist Book Fair (held in Oslo, Norway in June 1986) and the events put on for the Feminist Book Fortnight in Britain during the summers of 1986, 1987, 1988 and 1989. There were many other events: some coincided with International Women's Day each 8th of March. Others were one-off events, such as Sheba's fifth anniversary celebration held at the Drill Hall in Central London in December 1985 or The Women's Press's tenth anniversary programme at the Institute for Contemporary Arts (ICA) in 1988; these consisted of readings and discussion about the presses. There were also discussions, readings and signings at bookshops, libraries and cultural centres. I attended the Black and Third World Book Fairs in 1987, 1988 and 1989 and, before the Greater

London Council (GLC) was abolished in March 1986, the Book Space it supported at South Bank (e.g., an evening with older women writers, entitled 'Late Bloom'). The abolition of the GLC has meant fewer events of this kind.

By attending conferences, meetings, parties and other events, I not only saw book displays and heard publishers, librarians and authors talk about their books, but also spoke with members of the public who read feminist books. This gave me the opportunity to speak informally with those concerned with producing and reading books. Combining formal interviews with participant observation enabled me to be a part of the culture growing up around feminist books.

## 2. Making contacts in the book trade

Informal contact of this kind was important. The publishing industry has developed an aloof and secretive culture which sometimes makes it difficult to persuade people working in the trade to be interviewed. This was borne out by my own research, by research on the Women in Publishing project and by others attempting to do research in the trade.<sup>4</sup> Such reticence derives, at least in part, from the cultural power which publishing exudes and which has to do with class, race and sex: publishing is overwhelmingly white, male-dominated and middle-class.<sup>5</sup>

Because feminism and feminist publishing have stressed the importance of sharing access to knowledge, I expected to meet with little resistance in setting up interviews with women working in the feminist book trade. This assumption was perhaps naive. Early on, another researcher related the difficulties she had encountered in trying to interview feminist publishers. Her repeatedly unsuccessful attempts to set up interviews by letter and telephone had forced her to abandon her project.

My first interview was with a woman I had met at a conference. After giving me an extensive view of her own work, she introduced me to a colleague. That was a less felicitous encounter. When I first met her, this publisher appeared interested in my topic of readership and readily agreed to an interview. I got a very different reception when I returned for our appointment. As soon as the door opened, I was met by unmasked irritation and hostility. She said she was busy; I asked if I should return at a more convenient time. That would be no better; she would give me 'fifteen minutes, starting right now'. I managed to eek out half an hour of abuse. I was told what she would and would not discuss; this left me with my less important questions but, judging from the response I received, the more sensitive ones. She told me that 'people should just let feminists get on with their work' instead of wasting their time, and that if she gave me an interview she would have to give one to countless others. I wondered aloud if feminist research was of no value; she suggested I do my feminist research elsewhere.

After this episode, I steered clear of the feminist book trade for some time in order to concentrate on the other aspects of my project and to reconsider my approach to the book trade. Eventually I came to realise that my approach yielded good results with others, especially once I had become a more familiar face in the feminist book world. I continued to approach people at events and conferences and generally avoided writing to people in the belief that my letters would go unanswered: publishing is a culture in which personal contacts are vital.

I had only that one bad experience. The other women I interviewed were generous with time and information, a few astonishingly so. Nonetheless, I encountered some resistance. Two women agreed to interviews and then each called them off three times at the last minute; one did not even let me know the last time. I did not pursue them further as they were not central to my study. But even the women I eventually interviewed, and who proved to be extremely helpful, generally cancelled the appointment at least once.

The origins of this resistance are several. Most importantly, women working in the feminist book trade have limited resources and heavy work loads. For some, publishing is a second and unpaid job. But the book trade itself is an environment closed to outsiders and one in which inside information is closely guarded. This was confirmed by someone who had worked in publishing for many years. He related his attempts to exchange information with another publisher to their mutual benefit, but so ingrained was secrecy that the

publisher refused, to his own detriment. While feminism generally opposes hoarding knowledge and is about making it accessible, one wonders to what extent such attitudes have managed to change relations within the book trade.

A different source of resistance may have come from a strand of feminism which advocates that feminist research done within the confines of a male institution, such as the university, is a 'rip-off'. Although this was not a view expressed by the publisher who told me not to waste her time, I feel she would have acted differently had she not assumed that I was 'just a student'. Another did express this view: when I met her the first time, I said I was doing research 'for my PhD'. She said she would pretend she hadn't heard that last part. She did, however, agree to be interviewed.<sup>6</sup>

Defensiveness does exist within the feminist book trade. This is understandable: not only have the various publishers been attacked from without, but feminists have themselves been occasionally critical. For some time, it was fashionable to reproach Virago for its success and for being 'too mainstream'. Both Virago and The Women's Press have been criticised for not remaining financially independent and for not working as cooperatives. (Virago is once again independent, while The Women's Press is still part of the Namara Group, owned by Naim Attallah.) Some feminists believe independently run co-operatives - such as Sheba and Onlywomen - to be more politically sound. On the other hand, the more commercial

houses get many more books published. Difficulties also arise from the outside press: one woman asked me to sign a statement promising to show her anything I wrote for publication arising from her interview. She deplored the need to make this request, but she had been misquoted and misrepresented several times before. And the book trade itself has not always treated feminist publishers ethically: Onlywomen has twice found other companies in breach of their copyright. As a small concern, there was little they could do about it. Defensiveness is a realistic response in a world where small publishers are taken over or squeezed out in the fight for ever bigger multi-media multinational corporations.

#### B. The Gentleman's Profession

The book trade encompasses many functions. Editorial decides which books to publish and readies the manuscript for production, while designers select format, paper quality, type face, illustrations and book cover. The distributive sector includes sales and marketing, publicity, warehousing and wholesale and retail bookselling. Larger publishing and distribution firms house service sectors offering administrative, computing and clerical support. Companies vary enormously in size, from huge conglomerates controlling numerous smaller companies to tiny operations publishing a handful of books each year - or even less frequently.

British book publishing has changed noticeably over the past few years. A stagnant industry at the end of the seventies and in the early eighties,<sup>7</sup> the book trade began to turn around in 1982. It was then that the patterns which have since dominated began to emerge. In 1983, the aptly named Octopus went public (Penny Mountain 1988). Since then, publishing has seen a spate of takeovers and an injection of finance capital from the City. Publishing is shifting from what was still in many ways a cottage industry to one characterised by larger organisations holding other companies. This has entailed a shift in emphasis from the editorial to the marketing side.<sup>8</sup> In order to place feminist publishing within the wider context of the book trade, I shall look at the current trends in the book trade:

'The overriding theme,' says Baum [of *The Bookseller*], 'is concentration of ownership, on the bookselling as well as the publishing side' (Davie 1987).

#### 1. Publishing Conglomeration

Being part of a large publishing corporation can be advantageous. One larger publishing company has fewer running costs than two smaller ones. For example, when Virago gave up its independence in 1982 and joined forces with Chatto, Bodley Head and Cape (CVBC), it shared the costs of warehousing, repping and distribution with three other companies. Virago assured itself editorial independence by gaining a position on the board of the holding company for Carmen Callil, founder and chairwoman of Virago (Carmen Callil 1986;

'Minutes of the Women in Publishing Conference' 1985). It was partially by belonging to a large network that Virago was able to concentrate on building up its list to approximately 100 titles per year and from an annual turnover of over £500,000 when they joined CVBC to £1.9 million by the time they withdrew ('History of Virago' no date). When CVBC was taken over by Random House in 1987, Virago decided it was time to go independent again, although it still uses Random House UK's distributive network. Similarly, The Women's Press finds its association with the Namara Group useful to guarantee a bank overdraft. This proved particularly helpful for the film tie-in of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, when they had to print many more books than usual (Ros de Lanerolle 1986).

The takeover trend began in 1985, a year which saw the merger of Century and Hutchinson. During that year Octopus bought the Heinemann Group; Associated Book Publishers (ABP) - already an umbrella for numerous publishers - bought Routledge & Kegan Paul (RKP); Longman bought Pitman; and Penguin (itself now part of Pearson Longman) bought Hamish Hamilton, Sphere, Rainbird and Michael Joseph. Britain's eight largest publishers - Pearson Longman, Octopus, Collins, Reed, ABP, Macmillan, OUP and Hodder - accounted for more than half of the UK's publishing turnover at that time (Davie 1987). This trend continued in 1986 when Macmillan bought Sidgwick and Jackson; Hodder & Stoughton bought the American company Dormac for £1.8 million; Penguin bought the New American Library for £41 million; and British Printing Communications Corporation (BPCC) bought Orbis (ibid.; Bevan and Williams 1987). During that year

Octopus bought Hamlyn; Octopus/Macmillan bought Pan; ABP bought Croom Helm and Pitkin; while Allen and Bella Hyman merged (Penny Mountain 1988). New companies, such as the city-backed Bloomsbury, also emerged (ibid.; Anna Foster 1987a, 1987b). This activity intensified in 1987. Random House bought CVBC, the holding company to which Virago belonged, for approximately £17 million. Virago managed to buy itself out for somewhere between £750,000 and £800,000: a good bargain when its turnover was £1.9 million and at a time when some takeovers were for 12 times the annual turnover (Penny Mountain 1988; Jonathan Raban 1988a, 15).<sup>9</sup> International Thompson bought ABP for £210 million; Octopus bought Mitchell Beazley for £4.9 million and Methuen (formerly part of ABP); and Cassell bought Link House Books (Mountain 1988; Bevan and Williams 1987). Reed International scored the biggest coup in June when it bought out Paul Hamlyn's ubiquitous Octopus for a reported £535 million (ibid.).<sup>10</sup> Takeovers slowed after Black Monday in October (Mountain 1988). But 1989 opened with Murdoch's News International taking over Collins for £403 million (David Brierley and Margaret Park 1989; Lisa Buckingham 1989; Colin Campbell 1989a; 1989b; Colin Campbell and Richard Ford 1989; Tony May 1989; 'NI takes over Collins - far-sighted creativity, or just another ego trip?' 1989; Our City Staff 1989; Ed Vulliamy 1989; Barry Winkelman 1989). In March, Robert Maxwell's Macdonalds bought Sphere Books from Penguin for £13.75 million ('A deal at last' 1989, 1) and Century Hutchinson bought Ebury Press for an undisclosed amount ('Century snaps up Ebury Press' 1989). In April, Collins bought Thorsons ('Collins buy Thorsons' 1989; 'Collins buys Thorsons' 1989)

and in June, Random House bought Century Hutchinson ('Random House buys Century Hutchinson for £64m' 1989).

Turnover figures as well as buy-out prices show the growth of the industry in this period. This is apparent in companies of varying size. Paul Hamlyn's Octopus, which he started in 1971 (Bevan and Williams 1987), showed considerable growth with a turnover of approximately £22 million in 1980; by 1985, it had risen to £138 million; and in 1987 to £158 million (Mountain 1988). In 1986 - before its takeover of Octopus - Reed accounted for 54% of the year's trading profit of £188 million (Bevan and Williams 1987).'' Reed also owns the legal publisher, Butterworth's, and numerous other concerns besides books: magazines, data bases - its fastest growing sector - and satellite communication (Reed holds shares in British Satellite Broadcasting). Within these various media, titles and imprints are increasingly interchangeable:

books make magazine stories, which have items that make books. Books make data bases and could also make satellite programmes (Bevan and Williams 1987).

This allows companies to save substantial sums on rights and enables them to market one item in numerous forms. The simplest form is to re-issue a book by changing the cover from hardback to paperback. This enables the company to reach two very different markets: an elite market willing to spend money on high-priced hardbacks and a mass market that would buy lower-costing paperbacks. By owning several publishing houses - and better still, other forms

of media-producing companies - the more profitable any one venture can become. Recent trends show 'vertical integration' of companies:

A house with both a hardback list and a paperback imprint has a ready source for the latter from the former, a cheaper option than buying paperback rights at auction. The Penguin/Michael Joseph/Hamish Hamilton deal is part of this trend (Anna Foster 1987a, 42).

The deals between Macmillan and Pan and between Penguin and Viking are also part of this trend.

If the conglomerate owns other media producing concerns, one product can be stretched across the range. Unit costs become smaller and smaller, thus enabling the producer to offer the product at competitive prices and rake in larger profits. Greater concentration is an international process: not only is it following on trends already set in American publishing for some time (West and Wheat 1978), but the companies themselves are increasingly multinational. The financial advantages of this are obvious:

Publish a book in one country and in one format, and it is small beer unless it is a bestseller; publish it in several countries, languages and formats, and even unbestsellers can be very profitable indeed. The publisher who has world rights to a book [...] can field it through a network of his own colonial subsidiaries (especially when they include newspapers, for serial rights, and TV production companies, for mini-series) [...] (Jonathan Raban 1988a, 16).

Companies like Penguin, Random House, Simon & Schuster all have the advantage of being trans-atlantic; British firms are now also looking for European outposts (ibid.; see also 'Europe - a step away

for British booksellers?' 1988 and '1992 and all that' 1988). Even when one cannot cover all bases with one's own companies, the sale of subsidiary rights reduces unit costs and therefore make possible the publication of books which might otherwise be deemed economically unfeasible.<sup>12</sup> The annual Frankfurt book fair allows about 24,000 publishers (of which over 700 are British) to congregate for this purpose (Raban 1988b, 19).

## 2. Distribution and Readership

Like publishing, bookselling had not been doing well until the mid-eighties.<sup>13</sup> Growth in the sector coincided with that in publishing and has developed similar trends:

Between 1984 and the end of 1987, 98 new bookshops were opened in the UK. Hatchard's, owned by Collins, the publisher, went from two to 22 shops. WH Smith, the UK market leader with 20 per cent of book sales worth £1.4 billion altogether, extended the book department in its shops and, in 1986, created Sherratt & Hughes as a specialist bookselling chain, and set it on a path to expansion. Terry Maher at Pentos (owner of Dillons and Athena), which had run into losses at the beginning of the decade, sorted out the business, sold off its peripheral activities and invested in specialist retailing (Jardine 1988, 76).

Concentration has increased with chains, such as Pentos, Blackwells, Hatchards, Hammicks, Sherratt & Hughes and Waterstones, opening more and bigger shops (Simon Jenkins 1988; Mountain 1988), and W H Smith buying the Webster chain (Davie 1987) and, most

recently, Waterstones. Pentos had 45 shops by 1988 (Jenkins 1988). At the same time, speciality bookshops selling to a defined slice of the market have set a successful trend (e.g., shops specialising in women's books, crime, health, sports, science-fiction) and have encouraged speciality publishing (as well as being encouraged by it) (Mountain 1988). Overall, there has been a decline in small independent bookshops. This has not been accompanied by a decline in bookselling: the trade has been shifting to the larger chains (Jenkins 1988).

One of the successful new chains is run by Tim Waterstone who opened his first bookshop in 1982 in Charing Cross Road, London. By July 1988, he had 25 shops around the country (Jardine 1988, 76); at the end of the year the figure had risen to 31 shops and a turnover of £32 million, expected to double in 1989 (Janice Warman 1988). Waterstone's stayed opened late and on Sundays and endeavoured to create an environment conducive to browsing:

He identified what is now [...] accepted as a basic truth about the industry: that book-buying is a leisure activity, competing for time with the cinema and other amusements (ibid.).

As Waterstone himself has said:

The book-buying habit is a very fashionable thing. And why not? It is a product like any other. It's packaging information and entertainment (quoted in Janice Warman 1988).

The pace of expansion in bookselling has been speeding up since the beginning of 1988 (ibid.). Twenty per cent more shop space is being planned by the chains for 1989 (Jenkins 1988). Hammicks (owned by John Menzies) plans to grow from 16 to 100 bookshops by the end of this decade (Jardine 1988). Waterstone intends to triple his shops (Jenkins 1988). Bookselling, like publishing, is branching out: Hamlyn has developed links with Sir Terence Conran's Storehouse and with Marks and Spencer's to sell books in their stores (Bevan and Williams 1987). Marks and Spencer's and Sainsbury have been developing a line of children's books.

Distribution is the key to any publisher's survival and to readers getting the books they want. Publishers need to get their books moving through the pre-established distributive networks. But the way those networks exist often militates against getting many books to the people who want them. Books are marketed differently according to their perceived audience, thus creating a closed circuit of self-fulfilling prophecies. Just because a book is *available* in print does not *make* it *accessible* to the general public:

For every block-busting novel which sells a million-plus copies, there are thousands of books which sell less than 2,000 copies, even though they might well sell many more were they more widely available. *The key problem [...] is no longer cultural production but distribution.* [...] only 18% of all paperbacks are actually bought in bookshops. The rest (and very much the majority) are bought in the big chain stationery shops (such as W H Smiths and Menzies), in Woolworth, and in newsagents. In this context a distribution company such as Bookwise exerts enormous power over what books are available for people to read by the way it selects only 100 books each month for mass popular distribution to

the key outlets which dominate the retail book trade. It is significant too, and very worrying, that the most profitable publishers today (such as Ladybird, Butterworth's and Mills and Boon) are those with a highly standardised product to sell (Nick Garnham and Ken Worpole 1985, 51, *italics mine*).

This means that the book market - like so many others - does not represent market demand but is rather market creation:

The top ten best selling books listed in trade magazines and some newspapers at weekly intervals represent possibly not so much the books that people want to read as the books *they are able to buy*. The two are not the same. For what characterises 'popular literature' is as much price and distribution as the actual content of the books (Ken Worpole 1984, 92).

The importance of distribution in determining readership patterns and relations was borne out by my empirical research. The area contained roughly between London, Oxford and Cambridge is often called the 'golden triangle' because it is within that area that the majority of books is sold. In an attempt to find out how many feminist books were going where, I gained access to the sales figures of two small feminist presses. The distributor showed me consignment reports with a list of the bookshops and their locations. In this way, I was able to have a partial view of which books went to which shops. The overall pattern of distribution did not vary significantly from what other sources had told me of distribution patterns. Like other books, these remained mostly in London and the Southeast and in cities elsewhere. The main difference was the greater supply to radical bookshops; these books would also be absent from outlets dealing with centralised suppliers. But the figures

also showed just how low the numbers of copies were. This was a small radical distributor, dealing in books which often had print-runs of only 2,000. This line of research is sobering: it is very easy to generalise about the 'effects' that books must be having on the public and especially to attribute too much importance to the fact that feminist and radical books are entering the mainstream. Such enthusiasm needs to be tempered with the realisation that, in the book trade, the mainstream does not mean the majority of the people. Few people actually buy books.<sup>14</sup> And mainstream is at least a two-tiered notion: there are 'quality' books selling to a minority and mass paperbacks. Bookshop provision and book buying patterns across the country indicate class and geography as the most important variables:

In the most general terms it is reasonable to say that most large cities have several 'real' bookshops and if a city has a university it is virtually certain to have an academic bookshop either in or off the campus. Beyond this rather obvious and expected generalisation it is difficult to go (Mann 1982, 93).

The problem is not merely one of bookshop provision. Once there is a bookshop, it is still a question of which books it will stock. For example, W H Smith, the largest chain of bookshops in the country, has a great impact on which books get distributed and in what numbers - as did Bookwise which supplied newsagents, etc.<sup>15</sup> This affects not only which books get wide distribution, but also which books get published:

It is important for publishers to get their books liked, and therefore promoted by, the two largest distributors of paperbacks in Britain: W. H. Smith

and Bookwise. Smith's and John Menzies totally dominate book sales in the High Street and at railway stations, and can easily be responsible for well over half the sales of a popular paperback in Britain. Like the book clubs they are also able to negotiate very large discounts with publishers for the privilege of using their extensive chain of outlets. The other distribution network in Britain, which accounts for 'some 25 per cent of the total paperback sales in Britain', is Bookwise. This distribution firm - which selects only about a third of the titles published in paperback fiction each month - supplies 'supermarkets, chemist shops, newsagents, department stores and motorway service stations', and of the 100 or so titles selected each month picks just five titles to actively promote. A clear monopoly, Bookwise's monthly selection is crucial to publishers. 'If Bookwise don't like something, we would certainly reduce the print-run and possibly stand by for a loss' is the comment of one sales manager. Fontana's marketing director has stated that: 'We're naturally very aware of the attitudes of our two major customers. It may not be every day, but if we were thinking, say, of bidding £50,000 for a new book, we'd put in a couple of calls - one to Smiths, another to Bookwise - to see whether they thought it promotable.' So a large part of paperback fiction doesn't even get to the market place, let alone have a chance of displaying its wares. Distribution is one of the most powerful gatekeepers [...] (Worpole 1984, 24).

Rapid turnover is for many distributors a crucial element and one which will adversely affect minority - or new - interests. W H Smith keeps close tabs on which books move where and how fast and buys much of its stock centrally (see Alan Giles 1989 and 'W H Smith trims publishers representation' 1989). Sales reps can sell directly only to some of the larger shops, most of which are based in London and the Southeast. But for distribution into their other shops - the majority - books are bought by a central warehouse in Swindon and then scaled out to the shops they believe most likely to sell them.

It is rumoured in the trade that W H Smith may soon buy all its books in this fashion. Because they buy in such great quantities, they can receive more favourable terms than other non-chain shops. Because of this system, small places with only one chain bookshop or stationery store may never receive certain titles that would reach the bigger shops located in larger centres and which have more rapid turnover and serve a more diverse community. Bookshops are allowed to return books to publishers or wholesalers; some shops will return books very quickly if they are not moving fast enough and would be unlikely to reorder these or similar titles. This makes it more difficult for publishers specialising in 'minority' interests, unless they learn the rules of the game:

Marketing is increasingly ruthless. Chain bookshops like W.H. Smith's call all the shots as Mudie's did in the mid-nineteenth century: what doesn't sell fast goes straight back to the warehouse. It's a parallel, of course, to the savage effects on universities, public libraries and schools of the Thatcherite erosion of the country's cultural energies and variety. Awkward, unconventional or specialised tastes are crushed. An exception [...] are the women's presses. But that's the result of a brilliant marketing strategy. A radical ideology can only break through into the mass market if, like Virago, it answers a powerful existing need, and is packaged and promoted so as to avoid the stigma of dingy political earnestness (Hermione Lee 1987, 26).

Initially, the feminist presses had a difficult time getting distributed by the mainstream. It was only with the First International Feminist Book Fair and the subsequent Feminist Book Fortnight annual promotions that W H Smith and other chains took them on. Even now, only Virago and The Women's Press have entered the

mainstream distributive channels on a regular basis; they are distributed by Random House UK and Murdoch's Harper & Row, respectively. The others are dependent on radical distributors and sales to radical bookshops. The growth of chains has also tended to threaten smaller radical and community bookshops which sprang up in the 60s and 70s outside city centres (Greater London Enterprise Board no date a, 18; Worpole 1984, 107). This will in turn make life more difficult for the smaller publishers which need to rely on these outlets. The opening up of a new Waterstone's branch is seen as a serious threat to existing bookshops in the area:

The nervousness that Waterstone inspires in the trade is tangible. The opening of a new Waterstone's shop is a black day for nearby retailers. Ian Norrie of the High Hill Bookshop in Hampstead, shut down and sold the site when Waterstone's opened on the other side of the road. The Sherratt & Hughes branch in Bath closed when Waterstone's set up there (Jardine 1988, 78).

It will be interesting to see to what extent Waterstone's changes the patterns of distribution as it has sought a gap in the market between the W H Smith shops which have a limited and more uniform stock and the independent shops catering to wider and diverse tastes. As Waterstone himself has said:

The book retail market was totally fragmented. The middle and the bottom of the market was held by W H Smith, and the top end by a number of local independents, most of whom were undercapitalised and underambitious, and some of which were incredibly good (quoted in Warman 1988).

Waterstone decided to develop a national chain taking the good attributes of the independent bookshops. His shops carry a much more extensive stock than other shops, are located on prime sites and are staffed by graduates who can reliably answer customers' queries. In contrast with W H Smith, Waterstone is against centralised buying (ibid.). However, by January 1989, Waterstone's growth began slowing. By June, the company was looking for a new way to secure future development. It was at this point that W H Smith made an offer which brings the two companies together and gives W H Smith control. W H Smith merged its chain of speciality bookshops, Sherratt & Hughes (itself a result of the union between the Websters chain, which W H Smith bought from Octopus in 1985, and Bowes & Bowes) with Waterstone's shops, making a total of 78 shops, all of which will carry Waterstone's name. The Waterstone's group of bookshops will now overtake Pentos, previously the leading UK specialist bookseller. It is too early to assess the effect of this takeover on British bookselling. Waterstones plan on continuing their previous book-stocking policies (Ian Norrie 1989; 'If you can't beat them, buy them' 1989; 'Sherratt & Hughes could go if W H Smith buys Waterstones' 1989; 'Tim Waterstone - the man behind the millions' 1989; 'Waterstone, man with a mission' 1989; 'Waterstones - the first seven years' 1989; 'W H Smith buy Waterstone's' 1989).

Readership patterns are determined by a range of conditions in the book trade beyond the limitations of distributive networks. Leaving aside editorial policy on manuscript selection and commissioning, there are decisions taken after choosing a manuscript for publication

which also affect readership. Such factors include print runs (i.e., how many copies of a book are printed at a time), whether to do a hardback or a paperback, and if both, whether consecutively or simultaneously, and cover price. These decisions are based on the publishers' available capital and on the perceived audience for the book. But often perceptions on readership are based on self-fulfilling prophecies. If a publisher thinks a book has a small audience and therefore does a hardcover, a low print run and, consequently, sets a high cover price, then a small audience is virtually guaranteed.<sup>16</sup> If a larger audience were envisaged for exactly the same book, then a large run of a paperback edition would mean lower unit costs and ensure a wider audience. It may not be a bestseller and get pushed by the major distributors or wholesalers, but if properly targeted, it will sell more copies.

The publishing and distribution of feminist books are illustrative of how counter-productive preconceived notions of this sort can be. Alison Hennegan, editor of The Women's Press Bookclub, believed in 1985 that there was a 'demand' for feminist books 'that is not being met' (p. 28) and criticised publishing, printing and pricing policies of mainstream houses. Many mainstream publishers were, she felt, unaware that a specialist readership had grown up around feminist books. As editor of the Bookclub she then bought an average of 4,000 books each quarter for her catalogue:

These books represent the 18 or so recent titles which I hope will prove the most useful, entertaining, provocative and helpful to our 5,000-plus members, of both sexes, who want to know what is being written by, to and about women

who aren't afraid of the word 'feminist' (Hennegan 1985, 28).

The books are produced by over forty feminist, gay, socialist, Third World, mainstream, literary, academic and foreign publishers. Bookclub members come from all over the world. Yet both publishers and readers lose out because publishers' lack of faith in the readership for feminist books leads them to fix small print runs and high prices, thereby guaranteeing a small audience:

The range of publishers suggests how many different houses now recognize the existence of a feminist market. The roll-call of countries demonstrates vividly how determined members are to get the books they are hungry for. Publishers eager to serve, a readership demanding to be served: the makings of an ideal situation. Yet curiously it sometimes seems as though the very belief in a feminist market which presumably persuaded the publisher to undertake a particular book in the first place dwindles as production progresses. Even giant houses will fix tiny print runs [...] and then be astounded to find they've exhausted the entire edition in pre-publication sales. [...] (One academic publisher has, I estimate, just wasted six months of what should have been prime selling time: the demand's there, the books aren't.) Small print runs frequently force prices up, often into a bracket which many of the book's most interested potential buyers just can't afford. That's the point, it seems, at which many publishers decide that only a hardback edition makes financial sense. They are, in effect, opting for (dwindling) library sales and 'specialist' reader-buyers. Yet many feminist readers are also 'specialists', but not in the sense which means they expect to have to pay specialist prices [...]. Their 'specialism' is Women, and they are prepared to pursue their interest wherever it takes them, often into traditionally 'unpopular' publishing areas: into the literature [...] of other nations and centuries; into the history of disciplines and skills in which women may have been prominent, overlooked or disastrously absent (ibid., 28).

As Hennegan points out, a feminist readership exists whose 'enthusiasm, commitment, preparedness for hard work often matches those of the full-time professional scholar [but whose] resources do not' (ibid., 29). Hennegan argues that decisions to publish expensive hardback editions make bad business sense because the books' most likely readers will be unable to buy them:

I argue that a book dubbed 'minority' in one part of the trade might prove 'popular' in paperback format, differently marketed. I offer them a piece of learning which came particularly hard to me, believing as I still do [...] that real books don't bend: many of our members actually dislike hardback books. Hardback books say weight of learning, institutionally vouched for, to be cherished for a lifetime - or else.... Paperbacks, apparently, say friendly, accessible, discardable if disagreeable (ibid., 29).

The 'paperback revolution' was headed by the publication of Alan Lane's first Penguins in 1935 (Worpole 1984, 88; Boyd Tonkin 1985) and encountered much opposition in the book trade. Some argued that 'the success of Penguins "would ruin the book trade, and the publishing of serious literature" would go to pieces' (Worpole 1984, 88). What these critics did not reckon with was the fact that cheaper prices would mean more book buyers and that the 'price of a book is probably the most important determinant in its relation to the reading public' (ibid.). Furthermore,

the reading public was not a known, settled and fixed constituency of genteel readers of light novels in the suburbs on the one hand, and on the other a teeming mass public in the cities avid for sensationalist magazines, but was a highly fluid and catholic diversity of reading interests which could be constantly re-created in new patterns in response to imaginative publishing programmes (ibid., 89).

The feminist presses are in fact all paperback houses. (However, both Virago and The Women's Press have begun to issue some new fiction in hardback.)

Even now paperbacks do not enjoy as high status as hardbacks. Although the emergence of 'quality paperbacks' has changed this to some extent, it is still hardbacks which draw the major reviews, especially from the national dailies and Sunday papers (Women in Publishing 1987, 43).<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, it is mostly pulp fiction which gets 'hyped'. There is a gap in coverage of a wide range of books. The preference for hardbacks has led some paperback publishers, including Virago and The Women's Press, to issue a small run of hardbacks with the publication of the paperback; these are sent to reviewers (and some are sold to libraries). Reviews affect not only which books are bought by the individual, but by libraries as well.

Conditions in the book trade - as well as those in education, criticism and the market place in general - help to create patterns of readership. In this section, I have attempted to describe some of the current trends in the book trade. Increased concentration of ownership may be all very well for those in control, but it is less fruitful for many people involved in producing, distributing and reading books. Concentration has increased competition in both production and distribution. Companies have 'streamlined' operations. When companies join forces, certain functions become

redundant - and so do some of the workers. This was the case when ABP was bought out by International Thomson. Publishing conglomerates can produce their wares more cheaply and offer them at more competitive prices. The temptation is to remove editorial control from the subsidiaries and to produce ever more homogeneous products. Conglomerates can also lure well-known authors away from the smaller houses where they have made their names and which depend upon them for survival. The high prices paid for such authors and for hyping their books leave relatively little time and money to be expended on less profitable authors. Smaller publishers are also at a disadvantage as they cannot afford large advances to authors and because they are unable to risk larger print runs which would lower unit costs, thus making their books more accessible. Nor can they afford to give competitive discounts to booksellers that would lead to more extensive distribution.

Within distribution, the effects of concentration are similar. Large chains get better deals from publishers and can increase their profit margins. If the Net Book Agreement (NBA), which fixes the price of books, were to be abolished, the chains would be able to afford to offer books more cheaply to the public. While this may have some advantages, ultimately, it could very well push out smaller publishers and booksellers which cater to 'alternative' interests.<sup>19</sup> Authors will probably be the ones to suffer the discounted prices. The past several years have also seen the cutting of funds to radical and community publishing and distribution projects, which had been a priority of the GLC (Worpole 1984, 108).<sup>20</sup> As the chains take over

the book trade, the shops which these publishers rely on to sell their books become fewer.

As a reflection of greater ruthlessness, the ethos and relations within the book trade are also undergoing transformation. The old adage that you can't sell books like soap powder is rapidly proving untrue, as more and more publishers do precisely that. Growing concentration

has recast the human face and features of an industry that was, perhaps, always too cosy, too trustful, too gentlemanly for its own good. Long-standing relationships have been smashed, loyalties broken, enmities fixed (Raban 1988a, 16).

But nostalgia presents a false picture; there were problems in the book trade before. Yet the ways in which access is denied have been transformed and ways of counteracting this control need constantly to be reinvented. Greater concentration of the networks for publishing and other media means that the control of information is in the hands of fewer and fewer individuals and constitutes a serious threat to freedom of the press and access to information.<sup>20</sup> The feminist book trade has so far shown imagination both in entering the mainstream book trade and in making the production and consumption of the literary more accessible to women. But as control of the various media becomes more and more concentrated, the implications for women's ability to control and gain access to information are increasingly uncertain.

C. By, for and about women: the emergence of feminist publishing

Feminist publishing arose in response to the incompatibility between the needs of the Women's Movement and the structure of the book trade. A product of that movement, feminist publishing emerged in the 1970s as a way of making available a new body of knowledge by, for and about women and of piecing together a silent history. Through the Movement, women began to voice their experiences of being women in a patriarchal society in ways which linked the personal and the political. Women's Studies and feminist approaches to traditional disciplines arose in male bastions of learning and challenged the construction of knowledge and its nexus with power; new environments sprang up outside the mainstream and fostered the emergence of a feminist culture. Women-only spaces enabled women to gain the confidence and skills to discover and invent their own culture. The implications for written culture have been manifold.

The limited outlets for publishing feminist books and the initial lack of interest on the part of mainstream publishers in starting feminist lists convinced women of the need to develop and control their own presses. Feminist presses aimed at rendering the publishing process more accessible to women authors, publishers and readers. This section looks at the extent to which British feminist publishing has succeeded in this goal and the difficulties it faces for the future. As the mainstream and feminist book trade is concentrated in London, this part focusses on the situation in the capital.

London was an exciting place for feminist books when this project began at the end of 1985. A number of feminist presses - such as Virago, Sheba Feminist Publishers, Onlywomen, The Women's Press and Pandora - had been established for some time and a new press - Black Womantalk - was just starting. On the distributive side, the smaller publishers were aided by the existence of two radical distributors, Airlift and Turnaround, and two new feminist bookshops had recently opened in Central London, bringing the number to three in the capital. The Women's Press Bookclub helped women without a bookshop in their area to get feminist books, while the Feminist Library, the Lesbian Archive and other resource centres had amassed collections for lending and consultation. Most spectacularly, the First International Feminist Book Fair had been held in Covent Garden in June 1984, thus placing British feminist publishing in a context of feminist publishing worldwide.

Much has changed since then. Some sectors of the feminist book trade have expanded. An annual promotion, the Feminist Book Fortnight, has rapidly become recognised as the most successful promotion in the British book trade. Turnover figures for the larger feminist presses have been rising steadily, but the smaller presses are publishing fewer titles. Distribution has increased since the Fair in 1984 when W H Smith decided to stock feminist books; other chains have followed suit. And the women's trade organisation, Women in Publishing, has increased its membership and clout. But generally, changes have been for the worse. The impetus deriving from the Fair has gradually diminished, leaving an annual promotion

in its wake as the main focus on feminist books. The political climate has eroded progress in the feminist book world and threatened the very existence of certain elements within it. The demise of the GLC - abolished in March 1986 - quickly began taking its toll on women's concerns, removing 'the largest single source of funds for women ever established in Britain' (Linda Hunt 1986, 44; see also GLC Women's Committee no date and 1986; Greater London Council 1985). With it went the GLC Women's Committee which had made funding available to numerous women's projects.<sup>21</sup> Since that time, public funding has rapidly dried up. The London Borough Grants Scheme axed funding completely for the following women's groups for 1988/89: the Feminist Library, Asian Women's Resource Centre, Women's Airwaves, Women's Film, TV and Video Network, Women in Entertainment, Asian Women's Action Group, LESPOP (Lesbians and Policing Project). The Lesbian Archive was also under threat and Feminist Audio Books, which makes taped books available, has lost its funding. The London Irish Women's Centre, the Black Female Prisoners' Scheme and the Women Artists' Slide Library have had their grants reduced for this period. And A Woman's Place (AWP), London's women's centre and meeting place for numerous groups, lost its entire grant in 1987 (Melissa Benn 1988b). Other groups which had received grants in the past - such as Sheba Feminist Publishers, Onlywomen Press and Turnaround Books - are unable to rely upon this source of funding. The loss of resources available to women in London since the abolition of the GLC is incalculable. In its stead came homophobic legislation in the form of Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 forbidding 'the promotion of homosexuality' by local government

authorities; this has hindered funding to women's projects with any hint of lesbianism: as feminism takes on the issue of sexuality, this potentially affects most of them. Government policy on the so-called 'free market' has increased competition in the market place, encouraged conglomeration and threatened the survival of small alternative enterprises.

The changes in the book trade, the withdrawal of public funding and a more censorious attitude on the part of the State have forced feminist publishers to reassess the approaches they can take for the future. Different as many projects have been, feminist publishing - and related activities such as distribution and the creation of resource centres - have all shared one major goal: augmenting women's access to written culture. Production and distribution were to be made more widely available to women, thus enlarging the circle of those involved with writing and reading. The approaches to this common aim have differed substantially from group to group, often creating tensions between them. While all the projects started small and radical, as they have developed, some have found themselves having to make choices which altered the tension between commercial considerations and political goals. The co-operatives have placed as much importance on their independence and the way they work as on the books they publish. The more commercial feminist houses argue that their relationships with parent companies guarantee editorial independence and permit them to publish greater numbers of books. As Ros de Lanerolle from The Women's Press has said:

The options [...] are to be either small, independent and virtuous, or to get financial backing - and there aren't many women with that kind of money. With Naim [Attallah], we have a guaranteed overdraft, which means we don't have to worry about cash flow so much. It's enabled us to expand, to get better distribution and production (quoted in Helen Birch 1988b, 17).

But it is not so simple: although these organisations are all feminist publishers, they have become very different types of projects. Some have privileged the production of greater numbers of books in the belief that it is the availability of *books and their contents* which would make the greatest change; others have privileged approaches focussing on *changing the relations* between consumers and producers and in rooting themselves firmly in the community. Ideally, all are committed to change on both fronts, but the various publishers have found different balances within a book trade which makes them choose. Whatever the emphasis, the various groups all share some strategies in their commitment to greater accessibility of all resources for women.

The practices of the literary are associated with power and their production has been institutionalised by the academy and the market place; only those with access to the range of these institutions can fully avail themselves of their benefits. It is a self-validating and self-perpetuating apparatus which devalues the attempts of outsiders - women, the working class, ethnic minorities - to

appropriate it to their own ends. For this reason, women needed to create not only their own means of production, but also environments which would foster the growth of a common culture. The notion of 'finding a voice' that had been 'silenced' became crucial. Because women have been the objects of ridicule when attempting to express their own realities, creating 'supportive' environments was an important first step in creating a women's culture (Joanna Russ 1984; Lynne Spender 1983a; 1983b; Dale Spender 1983b). As Ursula Owen of Virago (1986) notes, feminist publishing was part of this project:

Virago came out of those times, the early years of the women's movement, which in part concerned itself with silences, the denial or marginalising of women's experiences in a male-dominated culture. Writing became one weapon to break the silence, to reveal and celebrate women's lives. It has been a complicated, far from finished, process: as Jane Miller says in *Women Writing About Men*, 'Women have had to return to their personal knowledge in order to explain what it is they recognise in other women's lives, and why that recognition is important'. We set Virago up as a publisher where women could take risks, trust their instincts, dare to be vulnerable - and be understood (p. 108).

The creation of women's writing groups is part of this process.

Women who had never written before encouraged each other in workshops:

On 23rd September 1982 thirty silent women came together for a first meeting of Michèle Roberts' writing course, entitled 'Finding a Voice', at the City Lit in Drury Lane, London. The prospectus described the course as:

a writing workshop for women who want to share the experience of writing or beginning to write with others, a workshop to build up confidence and trust through mutual support and constructive criticism.  
(*'Writing with Women'* 1984, 11).

And as differences between women have been acknowledged, following the initial and necessary focus on similarity, women have increasingly chosen to work in more clearly identified groups: as Black women, as lesbians, as working-class women, Jewish women, Irish women and various combinations thereof. The Asian Women Writers' Workshop published its first book in 1988 with The Women's Press. Their

workshop was the first of its kind for Asian women writers in Britain, and was meant to draw out any isolated woman who wanted to write but needed a supportive environment to achieve this. [...] Organising as a group gave us visibility, credibility and access to institutions, publishers, and other groups in the community. The workshop gave us the confidence to approach publishers, which as individuals we might never have done. It answered the vital question that haunted all of us: is my writing of any interest or use to anyone else? (*Asian Women Writers' Workshop* 1988, 1-2).

The presence of so many groups attests to their usefulness for women. Other groups, such as the Jewish Feminist Group, write together in the hopes of eventually publishing a collection of their work. The Common Thread working-class women's anthology group is

a group of working-class women aiming to publish a collection of working-class women's writing [...]. At the time of writing there are nine women in the collective. These include lesbians, lesbian mothers,

heterosexual women, Black and white women, Jewish women, and women with disabilities, aged between 20 and 70. Some of us are writers, and some of us are just committed to the idea of getting working-class women's writing into print (The Common Thread working-class women's anthology groups 1987, 187).

The Common Thread has recently published its first anthology (see June Burnett et al (eds.) 1989).

Some groups combine writing and publishing, such as Black Womanstalk and Onlywomen. The existence of writing groups has encouraged many women who would never have thought themselves capable of being writers because of the assumptions that society holds about who can write. This is especially important for working-class women and ethnic minority women as they come from groups in which even the men have been silenced.

#### 1. Feminist Publishers

Feminist publishing has both depended upon and encouraged the growth of women's writing. The best known feminist publishers in Britain today are Virago, The Women's Press, Sheba Feminist Publishers and Onlywomen. Black Womanstalk is a newer and less well-known publisher. Stramullion is a Scottish feminist publisher; Honno is based in Wales. There are other small projects such as the Wages for Housework Collective bringing the total to around 11 (Birsh 1988b). Numerous mainstream publishers have introduced feminist

lists: I spoke with editors from Pandora Press (then part of RKP, now under Unwin Hyman), Verso's Questions for Feminism list and Harvester's Women's Studies list. Methuen also publishes many feminist titles. Although the line between a list of a mainstream house and a separate publisher owned by another company is not clear cut, I shall not focus on the lists of mainstream houses. Rather, I shall concentrate on Virago, The Women's Press, Onlywomen, Sheba and Black Womantalk as they represent the best known feminist publishers based in London and because I interviewed representatives from all of them. They illustrate the range of projects that have emerged in feminist publishing: Virago and The Women's Press are commercial enterprises, while Sheba, Onlywomen and Black Womantalk are small co-operatives. Unlike some of the lists from the mainstream houses, the feminist publishers all have clear identities in terms of their politics and publishing projects.

a. Virago

Virago was first set up by Carmen Callil, an Australian woman, in 1972. Her co-directors were Marsha Rowe and Rosie Boycott who then went on to found the women's liberation magazine *Spare Rib* (Pringle 1988; 'History of Virago' no date; Polly Toynbee 1981). Virago was formed as a company on 19 June 1973 ('History of Virago' no date). Ursula Owen and Harriet Spicer, now joint Managing Directors, joined Callil early on (Pringle 1988). Initially Virago had a production and distribution agreement with Quartet (now owned by Naim Attallah who also owns The Women's Press) and was financed by a book publicity

company run by Callil and Spicer. In 1976, Virago became independent and was relaunched by Callil, Owen and Spicer with £1500 capital, a bank overdraft guaranteed by Bob Gavron of the St Ives Group of printing companies and Paul Hamlyn and loans from the Rowntree Trust ('History of Virago'; Sally Beauman 1981; Cadman et al 1981, 30). By the second year it was profitable, having published 11 books and reaching a £30,000 turnover ('History of Virago' no date; Emma Dally 1985; Pringle 1988). Virago developed very quickly and had to decide how it would continue to grow. Callil explains:

At a certain stage we were faced with three choices. We could borrow money from the bank, but that would have been crippling and would not have given us the services or kind of investment we needed. We could sell parts of the company to interested outsiders, which would have given them control of the company. Or we could do what we did, which was to sell the whole company to a group in a deal which had written into it safeguards orchestrated by ourselves (Callil 1986, 851).

Thus, in February 1982, Virago joined the Chatto, Bodley Head and Jonathan Cape group, which became CVBC ('History of Virago' no date; Pringle 1988; Callil 1986). As part of CVBC, it was able to stabilise the servicing of its books: it doubled its rep force, had a bigger export market, a computerised sales department and a royalties department (Troup 1985, 22):

The Chatto, Cape & Bodley Head group was made up of three companies which share services such as sales, accounts and warehousing, remaining entirely separate in every other way. The three are owned by a holding company and the people on the holding company board are those who work in and run the three companies. Virago joined as an equal fourth member. So while the board members of Cape,

Bodley Head and Chatto own Virago, Virago also owns Chatto, Cape and Bodley Head. Virago has a parent but is also part of that parent, an interesting form of management I would recommend to others (Callil 1986, 851).

Virago has grown considerably since its beginnings, in terms of its staff, its list and its turnover. In 1977, it published 11 books (Emma Dally 1985; (Pringle 1988; Troupp 1985; Penny Vincenzi 1981 put the figure at 10)); a year later it published 23 (Pringle 1988); and in 1981, it published 45 (Beauman 1981; Vincenzi 1981) and was publishing 80 a year by 1984 (Dally 1985; Callil 1986). By 1986 they had accumulated a backlist of 350 titles, while the August 1988 to March 1989 stocklist shows over 600 titles. The 15th Birthday catalogue published in 1988 stated that Virago has grown in staff from 3 to 20 (excluding the services it still shares) and from publishing 11 titles a year to 95. Turnover figures are also impressive. In 1977, turnover was £30,000; by 1982, it had reached half a million pounds and jumped to £1 million in 1984 ('History of Virago' no date) and to £1.8 million in 1986 (Mountain 1988). Turnover for 1988 was approximately £2 million (Pringle 1988; Rhoda Koenig 1988, 190; Janet Watts 1988, 36; Birch 1988b, 16).

In 1987, CVBC was taken over by Random House. At that time, Virago decided it was time to make a break and bought itself out for about £750,000 and is now independent (Koenig 1988, 225; Mountain 1988; Raban 1988a). Virago raised finance capital from the City; a male board member came with the deal. It moved from its previous

site near Trafalgar Square to a large warehouse in Mandela Street in Camden Town (North London). Virago also sold its bookshop in Covent Garden in order to concentrate its resources on publishing. Harriet Spicer explained at a ViP meeting that if

Virago had stayed with Random House, its books might have remained the same (as with Pandora), but the workforce would be eroded [...] ('Feminism and Business Ethics' Meeting 13 May' (1988, 4)).

Feminist commitment was vital at all levels. Virago continues to use CBC (Random House UK)'s services for distribution.

Virago has managed to project a strong image from the start and to keep a high profile in the press. The design of the books has helped enormously. Virago uses the trade paperback format, believing this to be the way to reach the widest audience, although a hardback edition of about 1,000 is simultaneously issued for review copies and library sales ('History of Virago' no date). The upmarket green paperbacks with the logo of a bitten green apple in a triangle and matching publicity material have made Virago books instantly recognisable (though recently they have made changes in design). Many people select books by the cover, assuming that if they liked one book in a series, they will probably like another:

What we have to help us, which general publishing does not have, is a brand image, loyal customers who trust us (Callil 1986, 851).

Virago produces different series within its list: **New Non-Fiction** (covering social and political issues, psychoanalysis, literature, history and sexuality), **New Fiction** (from women of a variety of backgrounds), **Poetry**, **Non-Fiction Classics**, **Modern Classics**, **Pioneers**, **Travellers**, **Upstarts** (for young readers), **Students' Virago** and **The Education Series**. One of their strengths has been their classics list which was started in 1978. They have published Scottish, Irish, Victorian, 18th century and Harlem Renaissance titles in their classics series. The first book they published was *Life as We Have Known It* by Cooperative Working Women (first published in 1931, with an introduction by Virginia Woolf) (Vincenzi 1981). Retrieving women's writing from the past has been good business. Reprints have higher profit margins than new titles, saving on typesetting and royalties. This has been a very popular part of Virago's list and has increased resources for new titles. Over a third of their yearly output is now original books ('History of Virago' no date).

From the start, Virago aimed at a broad readership. They are feminist publishers in that they publish books issuing from contemporary feminist debate and books that are part of the work of recovering women's history. Ruth Petrie described Virago's list as

an incredibly catholic one and that's been one of the intentions of Virago [...] since the very early days so [...] there is not [...] a reader, because the readers who will obviously be picking up Robin Archer, *A Star is Torn*, are not the same readers of Christina Stead's *I'm Dying Laughing* or Djuna Barnes or Bea Campbell's *Wigan Pier* [...]. It's easier to define the readers Virago

doesn't have in a sense. Well, I'd suspect they were probably readers who would have some notion in their mind of what Virago was and didn't want to have anything to do with that. They would tend to shy away from us even though they might see a book which in itself might be of interest to them. [...] It would be branded as kind of hysterical feminism [...] (interview).

Not all their books are feminist; many of the classics are what Petrie called 'an exercise in retrieval'. In an interview with Cathy Troupp (1985), Ursula Owen focussed on this:

I don't think 'dredging up' is what it's about: this woman's [sic] movement, of which we are a part, starting in the 1970s, was very preoccupied with women's past and keen to show that women are continually having to reestablish their rebellion, so to speak. One of the aims of our reprints series was to show that feminism was not invented in the seventies. [...] We also wanted to show what women have been writing about in novels over a long period, whether they are considered in the 'great tradition' or not. Some of our Virago Modern Classics are great novels [...]. Some of them are not, but we are not interested in the 'great tradition' as the British have always taught it in the universities. We are interested in the range of what women wrote about, and the way in which it illuminates women's lives (p. 23).

Virago has recently broadened its range of readers further by introducing a series for teenagers called Upstarts. They had thought of doing such a list for some years but had not previously had the space on their list:

the reason for it has been clear to us for years - it's the kind of catch-them-young, you know, that it was all very well to be publishing books for adults, but really if one was going to change lives [...] we really wanted to start with young readers. And so

we decided to start with teenage readers and over the years we want to move down, rather than starting with very young readers and moving up. And what's been important in our thinking about the list is that we want to do fiction and non-fiction - not just fiction. And, you know, there are lots of things that we feel could be dealt with in non-fiction which simply don't seem to be from a girls' perspective (Petrie, interview).

In order to develop this list, Virago set up an advisory group of young girls, librarians and teachers. Young women have written for the list: Virago advertised in the girls' magazine *Just 17* and elsewhere, requesting stories by girls about their lives. About 40 of the more than 100 entries were selected for publication in *Bitter Sweet Dreams*. Gill Frith, writing for the *New Socialist* in 1987, found that

what's new and important about feminist teenfic is its desire to show [...] that the crises of female adolescence aren't just 'personal', individual problems with individual solutions, but part of a wider political landscape (p. 35).

Moreover, the books

confront the issues that teenfic romance leaves out: sexual violence, racism, unemployment, the day-to-day complexities and working-class life (but not, so far, lesbianism [...]) (ibid., 35).

(Nancy Garden's *Annie On My Mind*, published by Virago in 1988, does, however, deal with feelings of love between two girls (see also Jan Dalley 1987; Rosemary Stones 1987).)

Upstarts is part of Virago's interest in getting more books onto the school curriculum. They now have an educational rep and are co-publishing school editions of some of their titles with Hutchinson Educational (Students' Virago). Virago has managed to get into the mainstream distribution routes through which libraries and schools order books. Books for Students, a distribution outlet based in Leamington Spa which specialises in educational and library distribution, stocks all of Virago's titles. (This is not the case with smaller publishers, such as Sheba.) Even so, the combination of existing courses of studies which many are reluctant to change, the impending restrictions in the curriculum and the phenomenal cutbacks in educational spending make this a difficult area to break into.

In the spring of 1989, Virago launched an academic list called The Education Series, edited by Jane Miller and published in association with the University of London Institute of Education. Virago is interested in developing other parts of their list: more psychoanalytic books, more writing from Black women in Britain and from the Third World. Recent developments have included crime fiction and a greater number of art books.

Virago describes its list as socialist feminist. Some have criticised Virago for being 'less feminist' than other presses, but Petrie feels that this is because it is a 'more catholic' list with greater breadth than the lists of other publishers who are therefore more immediately identifiable in their forms of feminism. Yet, in spite of its broad nature, Virago has an identifiable image:

having talked about the very disparate nature of our list, I still think there's something which is manageable to think of as Virago (Petrie, interview).

The clear image comes not only from the colour of the book covers but also through its origins in the Women's Movement. As with the other feminist publishers, women who see themselves as feminists are likely to identify with feminist projects and feel a commitment to them. The fact that Virago is present at and hosts feminist events means that this connection is keener. Feminist publishers, writers and readers are a part of the network which has developed through feminism. Petrie felt they received more feedback than other publishers

because of Virago's history - you know, I think a lot of people have very close association with Virago actually. I mean if you publish books that people are very attracted to or if you re-issue books that were their favourite books, I think it makes people feel as though they have a real involvement [...] I think it is also partially because Virago has had a very [...] high profile in the press [...] people either don't know what Virago is at all or they have a very clear notion, you know, that it is a feminist publishing house, that's small still, that's staffed entirely by women and so on, and that gives you a sense that - if you say Hamish Hamilton to the general reader, or Pan, it doesn't conjure up something that makes you feel reader-friendly (interview).

Being 'reader-friendly' has been one of Virago's goals. As Ursula Owen put it:

Our main aim is to reach a wider audience. (quoted in Troupp 1985, 22).

Or as Callil has written:

Virago was founded with two main aims. One was ideological, the other a marketing belief. The idea for a feminist house grew out of the feminist movement which was reborn in this country at the end of the '60s. Virago was set up to publish books which were part of the movement, but its marketing aim was quite specific: we aimed to reach a general audience of women and men who had not heard of, or who disliked or even detested, the idea of feminism. It was not enough for us to publish for ourselves (Callil 1986, 850-1).

Because making books available has been Virago's main goal, this has meant using 'capitalist commercial techniques' (Troupp 1985, 22) which have been the object of much criticism of Virago. Virago is not a co-operative and, although it boasts a friendly working environment, employees have separate job functions and positions. Virago's commercial success has also worried some people. Ursula Owen justifies this choice:

But we didn't just fall into it; we had a positive plan. We wanted to get our books to the unconverted, as well as to the converted. The only way to do that is to get into the high street, and the only way to get into the high street is to use what's available. That was our plan - a planned compromise with capitalism, if you like (Troupp 1985, 22).

This has allowed Virago to reach different audiences:

In publishing, it's extremely difficult to find out exactly who buys which books. I

think we have a number of different audiences. Our list ranges from schoolbooks to fiction, from health books to quite academic feminist literature, social history and politics. Beatrix Campbell's book (Wigan Pier Revisited [...]) has undoubtedly been read by a lot of men as well as women, especially on the Left. I think the poetry, the fiction and the Virago Modern Classics are read by women of all ages, and not only by feminists, but also by a more traditional audience. I don't think they would all be high-brow. I think many of them would also be quite 'middle-brow', if that's a useful division.

The important thing is that we have remained feminist, and people know we're feminist, yet there are some books which are bought by women who wouldn't want to call themselves feminists because they're afraid of the word, but who think the same thoughts, as you or I would think. It was one of the main intentions of Virago to reach these women. In a country like Britain, where feminism is such a dirty word, it's important to show the unconverted that feminism is not frightening (Urula Owen quoted in Cathy Troupp 1985, 22).

Virago has had to change over the years, but is still concerned with socialist feminism:

The link between socialism and feminism hasn't been lost at all, but the women's movement, as a movement, is focusing on things other than it was in the early and mid-seventies, when Virago started up. In fact, the women's movement now is most importantly focusing on racism. We are developing that side of our list too [...]  
(Ursula Owen, quoted in Troupp 1985, 23).

b. The Women's Press

The Women's Press began publishing in 1978 (catalogue February - July 1988). Founded in 1977 by Stephanie Dowrick, its financial backing comes from Naim Attallah whose Namara Group owns the press. (The group also owns Quartet and The Literary Review (Mary Hemming 1988).) When Stephanie Dowrick left the press in 1981, Ros de Lanerolle took over as Managing Director. Like Virago, the press is staffed by women only and is not run on co-operative lines (Cadman et al 1981, 35, 37).

The Women's Press has seen remarkable growth from its five titles in 1978 to 60 titles per year, a backlist of over 250 titles and an annual turnover of £1 million and a staff of 14 in 1988 (Birch 1988a, 17; Angela Neustatter 1988; Janet Watts 1988, 36). The first five titles were early reprints: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Alice Munroe's *Lives of Girls and Women*, Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowes* and Jane Austen's *Love and Freindship* [sic] (Neustatter 1988). Although the press is part of the Namara Group, de Lanerolle stresses that it has complete editorial independence. The list has grown in a variety of directions since its beginnings. Although it still features reprints, the focus is on more contemporary titles. The Women's Press has published some of the key texts of feminist debate: their motto is 'Live Authors, Live Issues'. The press has issued some socialist feminist books - notably Angela Davis's *Women, Race and*

*Class* - but theoretical texts have most importantly been by radical feminist writers such as Andrea Dworkin, Shulamith Firestone, Mary Daly and Dale Spender. The non-fiction list is wide-ranging and includes books on motherhood, peace and ecology, therapy and health, autobiography, sexuality, work, pornography, spirituality and religion, ageing, relationships, and international women's issues. The Arts list is a smaller one comprising poetry, cartoon books and books on the figurative arts and on crafts.

About half the titles in the non-fiction are 'original publications from The Women's Press'; the others are reprints or translations. Over a quarter of the fiction titles are original. There are about 40 fiction and 20 non-fiction titles by Black and Third World Women of which over a third are original publications. Representation of Black and Third World women writers has expanded. In response to criticism of feminist presses' lack of support of books by Black women based in Britain, the press has begun to publish more original books and rely less heavily on reprints from abroad.<sup>22</sup> The press issues an extra catalogue of titles by Black and Third World women. Just over half the Arts and Poetry section (17 titles) are originals and the Livewire books number 12 with about half being originals (catalogue January - June 1989). The Women's Press includes a few series: publication of the practical handbook series began in 1983; 'the world's first feminist science fiction series' started in 1985; the press has been developing a crime list since 1984 and launched the Livewire series for teenage readers in 1987 (catalogue February - July 1988).

Like Virago, The Women's Press has developed a 'brand image'. The black and white striped spines of their books are instantly recognisable as is their logo: an iron. Like Virago, The Women's Press has developed matching spinners, point-of-sale displays, dumpbins and posters with which to promote their books; The Women's Press also publish postcards and a diary. The image projected by The Women's Press is different from that of Virago: many think of it as a radical feminist press with a more contemporary leaning.

Early on the Press stated its goals in these terms:

We aim to publish work which reflects the goals of the Women's Liberation Movement, which is accessible in language and price, which looks good enough to compliment both the writer and the reader. We see our work as publishers as part of a circle of women talking, writing, reading, engaging in many activities, passing ideas to each other, some of which ... take shape in book form (quoted in Cadman et al, 1981, 35).

The press offered women a safe environment for their writing:

The point of the Women's Press seemed to be to give women courage to write, to get into print some of the anarchic, playful, inventive things we knew they were saying. It seemed very much a part of being a feminist publishing house that we should be there to provide a safe place for women to offer their writing, that we should offer encouragement, support and constructive criticism to those who sent in their manuscripts (quoted in Neustatter 1988).

The press has undergone some changes since its beginnings. In her interview with Neustatter and in conversation at the Institute of

Contemporary Arts (ICA) (for the press's 10th anniversary programme), de Lanerolle felt that one of the major changes was that they were no longer limited by what were defined as feminist issues:

In the beginning we were very careful about defining women's issues but now we feel all issues are women's and we publish books on a range of subjects you could find in any list, but by women. An example is Rosalie Bertell's *No Immediate Danger* about low-level radiation, and soon we will publish a book about homelessness (quoted in Neustatter 1988).

As editor of the *Livewires* series, Carole Spedding also felt that there had been a change in feminist publishing. *Livewires* was launched in April 1987 and is a departure from the 'preaching' which is associated with anti-sexist books for young readers: although feminist publishing has shifted from proselytising to encouraging debate since the early eighties, the media still project that dated image. Like *Virago's Upstarts*, *Livewires* draws on advice from students, teachers and librarians. The aim is to produce a predominantly British list in order to balance the prevalence of American imports for teenagers. The list offers an outlet to young women writers. For example, *Push Me, Pull Me* was written by a twenty-one-year-old woman and the *Livewire* series includes a collection of plays by women between the ages of 16 and 26, entitled *Dead Proud*. In an attempt to offer books for girls of different age groups, the books are aimed at different reading levels and deal with different life experiences; they have to be careful about the treatment of sex, particularly because it is adults who buy most books for teenagers.

The Women's Press has gained prominence as the British publisher of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*; indeed, the press introduced Walker's work in Britain. *The Color Purple*

was established as our best selling novel, long before the news leaked out that it was to be made into a movie (Ros de Lanerolle 1986, 28).

The chance of re-issuing the book as a film tie-in initially appeared to be a mixed blessing:

Pleased as we were at the prospect of the film, we were also appalled. How were we, a small feminist publisher, to discharge our responsibility to our author, which was of course to see that those books were out there, in cinema foyers and airport bookstands as well as in bookshops throughout the land, during the run of the film? We had no experience of film tie-ins, and their accompanying dump-bins and wholesaling and advertising (ibid., 28).

They had to decide whether to do the tie-in themselves or sell the rights to a mass paperback house. The Namara Group's guarantee of their bank overdraft enabled them to do it. The film tie-in allowed them to promote all Walker's titles as a package, got them mass distribution and enabled them to raise the profile of the rest of the list. This was the first time a feminist publisher had taken on such a project and the trade was resistant to the idea of a paperback bestseller from a publisher who was outside mass market publishing. Nevertheless, the book has done very well. The return rate was only 4% a month after the film and 5,000 copies of the title were still selling each month in November 1988 (Mary Hemmings 1988). The tie-in

has increased turnover and allowed them to increase output and take risks.

c. Onlywomen Press

Onlywomen Press began its life in 1974 when several radical feminist lesbians set up the group, then known as the Women's Press. Three of them got grants to go to a technical college for two years to learn to print in order to 'control the processes involved'. While they were there, they published six poetry books, a calendar and a series of posters as the Women's Press. In 1977, the group was responsible for setting up the first British conference on women in printing and publishing. It was at this point that they were forced to change their name to Onlywomen Press

because a commercial publisher had taken our name, registering it officially where we had not. We chose ONLYWOMEN PRESS to keep a name close to our original one, making a clear connection with the ground-breaking work we had already done (Onlywomen Press catalogues).

In 1978, they set up as printers as well as publishers. Until the middle of 1984, when they gave up printing, they used the printing to finance the publishing side of their work (Cadman et al, 1981, 59 and Onlywomen Press catalogues). When I spoke to Lilian Mohin at Onlywomen in 1987, three women were working at the press: Mohin is the only founder member still there. At the beginning there were equal numbers of paid and voluntary workers; at the time of the

interview, the workers consulted a management committee of about 6 or 7 members (of which only a few are active).

Onlywomen Press is a collective; the women work with no hierarchy and share all job functions. For them, the way they work is a part of their politics as feminists and as important as the books they publish:

Being part of the Women's Liberation Movement has meant to us not only recognising our oppression, but resolving to overthrow it and, therefore, to withdraw support for any of its systems that we could by establishing our own (quoted in Cadman et al 1981, 33).

Not only do they try to control as much of the process as possible, but they have been involved in many activities which would not usually concern publishers, including writing and printing:

We felt strongly that it was impossible to be writers in the way that patriarchal society demanded... We did not want anyone else to have control over the rest of the processes. So that means being involved in all the shit work, all the technical work, becoming involved in the craft. That meant each of us learning how to print and so on. We wanted to do it out of our feminist principles, really getting hold of that craft, making it ours, which also means doing it well. We don't think it's bourgeois to print well, even beautifully. We only thought later that it would be a good thing for women to be doing a job that is traditionally defined as male (quoted in Cadman et al, 61).

Most of the women initially involved with the press were themselves writers; some still are. The writers group they belonged to lasted

seven years. They have been involved in activities which generate writing from the radical feminist lesbian community and have organised conferences and debates which are often continued in the books they publish. Grant aid from Greater London Arts, London Borough Grants Scheme and the London Borough of Camden has helped them financially and enabled them to put on events in London such as readings and discussions. In 1986, the press launched its own journal, *Gossip*, which debates lesbian feminist ethics. Their early work in producing pamphlets was part of producing debates. Pamphlets have the advantage of circulating ideas at an early stage, before they can be put together in book form. Onlywomen finds them important:

Partly because of the size, they seem less formidable to read and carry. But also I think from the point of view of the way women are writing which, because of the kind of life many of us lead, and the way we think of ourselves as writers, ideas come out in very small bits... they do not fit into the existent, traditional format (quoted in Cadman et al, 1981, 43).

Pamphlets were also important as a way of preserving the history of the women's movement:

Women's Liberation history is being destroyed by not taking ourselves seriously and not seeing ourselves as part of history. It's important that we not only make a record of what we've done, but disseminate these things as we go along (ibid.).

The bulk of the list is not however made up of pamphlets. Pamphlets are hard to place with booksellers who need to be able to

stack books on shelves with the spines showing. Their list contained 23 titles in 1987 (excluding *Gossip*); they publish about four titles a year, however they would prefer to publish what they want, when they want, but grants often demand a steady output. Their autumn 1988 catalogue shows a more limited backlist than previous years and announces only one new title. However, for the first time, it also offers five books from other independent publishers to their mail order customers. Their print runs are of 5,000, but they go into reprints; their journal has a small circulation and they produce 2,000 copies of it.

When I interviewed her, Mohin said she believed that there had been a slight shift in what they were publishing and their reasons for publishing since the early days. At the beginning, there had been a tendency to think that they were producing books that were 'good for' people to read. She now believed that kind of approach was a falsehood and was producing what she wanted. For example, their book *Love Your Enemy* had produced an important debate between heterosexual feminism and political lesbianism: such debates are still useful, but she is now less interested in making books or anthologies out of them. The press has decided to take a stronger stance. This has meant spelling out who they are. The logo on the books was changed from 1984, their tenth anniversary; it now says they are lesbian feminist publishers on all the covers. This is what they have always been, but now they make a point of making it clear.

Onlywomen Press sees its role as being very different from that of the commercial feminist presses, Virago and The Women's Press. Although Mohin recognised that these presses published some important feminist books, she would not define them as feminist presses, but rather as mainstream presses; that is, they were people who had 'straight money' and called themselves feminist, which she felt was middle ground. They were basically publishers, not politically active like the co-operatives. She has been active in a number of ways: by founding the Lesbian Archive in the mid-eighties because of her conviction of the connection between history and politics and through the Jewish Lesbian group, now defunct. She is involved with the Passionate Diners Group, a discussion group which meets over dinner to discuss lesbian radical feminism. An important part of the activity of Onlywomen and the other collectives is organising readings within the women's community. The writers group that Onlywomen had belonged to did the first feminist poetry reading in London. Other groups came out of that reading. Their *One Foot on the Mountain* poetry collection created much excitement (and has gone through several printings). There was genuine participation, rather than merely an audience at an event. Readings they did of *Work of a Common Woman* had the same effect. There is also a lesbian reading once a month at Wesley House in London. Mohin saw similar enthusiasm surrounding writing by Black women, especially with Black Woman talk.

Onlywomen has a much lower profile than the commercial feminist publishers. Letting people know they exist is not easy; they do not have a lot of money for publicity. Readings and events are therefore

very important: for example at the Edinburgh Book Festival, at Arts Centres and Women's Centres. Onlywomen Press books are distributed in the UK by Airlift books, a small radical distributor based in London, and by Bookpeople in North America. Some of their books are in school libraries: they used part of their grant to hire a sales rep who had contact with school librarians. Their sales to library suppliers are increasing as they spend time following them up. They are ambivalent in their desire to get their books into education. Mohin felt that school told people what to think of the world, but that as it was obligatory, she was interested in encouraging debate with their books, but not in shoving ideas down children's throats. On the other hand, she felt that academia was incompatible with feminist politics as it upheld society as it was. She had no objection to academics using Onlywomen's books, but Onlywomen had no intention of producing academic books. Reform was not her primary concern: anti-sexist education in schools had its uses but she was interested in something much more radical.

For Onlywomen, publishing is about changing the world and developing a feminist aesthetic and sensibility. It is a discussion with the reader. This discussion is aimed at everybody, but because the books are about lesbians, they tend to be directed at a particular audience, partially because the books assume a shared culture.

#### d. Sheba Feminist Publishers

Sheba Feminist Publishers is a collective which has undergone much transformation since the beginning and has now emerged as a racially mixed collective which privileges the writing of Black women, working-class women, lesbians and new writers. Originally formed in January 1980 by seven feminists, Sheba then stated its aims as follows:

Sheba is a feminist publishing co-operative run by a group of women from within the Women's Liberation Movement. We were brought together by a shared need: to see both more and a greater variety of publications committed to feminism in bookshops and libraries everywhere (quoted in Cadman et al 1981, 37)

According to one of the founders, Carole Spedding, they saw the need for a predominantly contemporary British list as Virago had embarked upon a project of recovering earlier English material and The Women's Press was mostly making American feminism available. Sheba was also interested in producing children's books. A number of writers have worked on the collective: Maud Sulter, the first Black woman to work there, Pratibha Parmar and Gillian Allnut. The number of collective members has recently dropped to four women - two Black and two white (Mercer, McKenzie, O'Sullivan and Robertson 1988). In 1987, I spoke with Menika van der Poorten who left shortly after.

Sheba began as a political project, not as a business. Van der Poorten joined in 1985 after a lot of changes in the collective and at a time when they were trying to raise the profile of Sheba. They changed the logo from a sitting cat to a pouncing cat as a symbol of a more assertive attitude, moved to their new and larger premises in Bradbury Street, in Hackney (East London), and committed themselves to being a racially mixed collective, with at least half the members being Black. They also decided to prioritise writing by Black women:

in the last couple of years we've definitely made a priority to publish books by Black women, or lesbian women, books for children. [...] And as far as I know we're the only publishing co-op or independent publishers that are [...] racially mixed. [...] in terms of numbers of people here, we would like in future as well as now, to have either equal numbers of Black and white women or more Black women than white women so that it's not a situation where you're kind of like a token - you're actually a real part of the business. And I think it's also an aim to allow Black women to acquire skills which are very difficult to acquire in the straight publishing world or even in the feminist publishing world [...]. I mean it isn't just the publishing angle but also that we think it's important that they have access to publishing [...] (van der Poorten, interview).

The group publishes books not only by Black women, as Pratibha Parmar explains:

Quite a lot of white women felt that because we were saying we were prioritising black women's writings they automatically assumed that meant we would not accept anything from white women and that was totally wrong (quoted in Loach 1986, 18).

Privileging writing by new writers who would have difficulty in getting published elsewhere is one of their aims. Their best known author is Audre Lorde whose books they publish in Britain. Unlike the larger feminist presses, they do not rely heavily on reprints: two thirds of the list is made up of original titles. Concentrating on original titles does not however facilitate financial matters:

There's a slight double bind in this - especially now more than before because of financial constraints. [We want] new writers but we also have to get writers who are known as well to sell the books because new writers don't sell books (van der Poorten, interview).

Money is a major constraint on small operations like Sheba. Although they received grants in the past from Greater London Enterprise Board (who gave them a loan of £16,000 in 1983 to help with printing, distribution and advertising and creating five part-time jobs) (Greater London Enterprise Board no date, 13-4), they need to develop more business awareness if they are to survive:

We experienced briefly but significantly the benign period of the Greater London Council under the leadership of Ken Livingstone. Though it was abolished with what seemed like a wave of the hand by Margaret Thatcher in 1986, during its last 'Red Ken' years, the GLC funded an amazing number of feminist, left, Black, lesbian and gay, etc. projects. We were one of those funded projects. It's hard to unpack the complexities of benign funding: there are many contradictions. On the one hand, it allowed Sheba to expand its part-time staff and acquire much needed equipment. On the other hand, we partially relied on that money, even as we seriously talked about the necessity to make ourselves independent. Without funding we might well

not be what we are today. In any case, right now, with no procrastination, we must sharpen our business wits and at the same time, maintain our political integrity (Mercer et al 1988).

Sheba's authors come from a variety of sources: some send a manuscript through the door and other books develop as a project around a theme; like most of the feminist presses they occasionally advertise for specific types of work. One of their aims is to spend considerable time with authors in the process of writing and to involve the writer in the editorial stage:

Sheba Feminist Publishers not only bring out women's books but it also helps authors in the actual process of writing. At the moment this press is trying to encourage black women in particular both to write and to publish (Breen 1985, 28).

Or as Pratibha Parmar put it:

We want to work the way we do, both with our authors and amongst ourselves. We try to take care of our authors, nursing them through what for a first-time writer, can be a nerve-racking experience. We also try and pool our own knowledge - we're involved in many more aspects of the production of our books than practically any other publisher (quoted in Diana Simmonds 1985, 14).

One of the problems a small publisher has is that once the authors become known, they move on to bigger presses: Suniti Namjoshi has moved to The Women's Press, Moy McCrory has published her second book with Methuen. Taking the risk with a new author

is one of the biggest difficulties for us, that, you know, you take the risk, naturally they want a better deal financially so they go to a bigger publisher who have bigger distribution. And I think maybe we should be having an option, you know, we should really have some kind of clause [...] I think we need to protect our own interests. Since then there's been [...] a proliferation of women's publishing houses plus people like Methuen or whatever who have quite a strong women's list and so the competition is [...] - I can't actually imagine us competing with Methuen - well competition's pretty hefty (van der Poorten, interview).

In spite of the competition, Sheba still thinks there are some basic gaps they can fill:

there are now a lot of women's books - although I still don't feel there's very much stuff by lesbians from this country - it's mostly American reprints, very few things from Black women in this country - by Black I mean African and Asian and so on. [...] I think a lot of Black women have very mixed feelings about some of the things that have come out or the way they're being plugged [...] I'm thinking of this one particular book by this Black woman. I mean, in some ways, it's a very strong book. It's about this woman who has an arranged marriage in India and meets her husband and he's really violent to her and I think those stories should be told but that was [...] the first book that particular publisher published by an Asian woman and the way the blurb describes the experience of all Asian women - this kind of stereotypical - there's more of a diversity [...] I think maybe now they're broadening out a bit (ibid.).

Sheba tries to do about five or six books a year and had an annual turnover of £33,000 in 1987 (Birch 1988a, 17). The small number of books published is due to financial constraints (for instance, they

have to pay their printers in advance) and lack of working hours: although they used to rely more heavily on voluntary labour, they now try to pay themselves part-time salaries, but all have to work at other jobs. But the manuscripts that come in are another limitation as they do not always find what they are looking for.

Sheba's books, like *Onlywomen's* and *Black Womantalk*, have a different distribution pattern from the larger women's presses and the mainstream houses. All three are distributed by Airlift and their books are to be found mainly in the radical and women's bookshops and to a much lesser extent in the high street shops. Sheba does sell books to W H Smith's central warehouse in Swindon, but finds that many of them are returned. Some of the books have appeared on university courses, such as Barbara Burford's *The Threshing Floor*, and some individual school and libraries in the Southeast order books from them. The limits on distribution mean that Sheba is not necessarily reaching the women they would like to with the books, such as Black women because

I think it's still seen very much as a white publishers and also feminism is seen as a white thing - that's part of it - and feminism is quite alienating to a lot of people, our potential readers whether they're white or Black, women we want to reach - I mean, it's fine preaching to the converted [...] not that we're preaching [...]. We'd want to get our books to Sisterwrite and so on, but we'd much rather get them to W H Smiths - it would reach a wider audience (ibid.).

They know that they reach women inside the feminist networks, but are not sure of who else reads their books:

Well, outside of the women that we get to anyway, with networks or whatever, I don't really know. [...] we have a picture in that those are the women we reach - we're not sure if we reach anyone else - although I think we do. Like, for instance, *A Dangerous Knowing* has been in schools and a lot of women have come across it for one reason one way or another [...] And I think *Through the Break* got to a lot of people (ibid.).

They would like to broaden their readership to include

women who would not normally read feminist books [...] I mean who would read it if it was there, but who might be put off by the word feminist or, even if not put off, wouldn't think to pick something up because they would not see it as being for them somehow [...]. The other thing is that we want to do quite a lot more children's books, more educational sort of things and I think that we'd like to get our books into educational establishments and libraries, etc. because that [...] gives you a wide exposure. And I'm not really sure we reach those women. [...] I suppose people who read *Cosmopolitan* and *Women's Own*, you know I mean I know lots of people who read *Cosmopolitan* - the spectrum varies from people who read *Cosmopolitan* to radical dykes (ibid.).

Limited resources mean that they aim publicity at the women's community. Part of the problem for smaller feminist publishers is that the mainstream booksellers see Virago and The Women's Press as the feminist publishers and assume that by stocking them, they handle their fair share of feminist books.

e. Black Womantalk

Black Womantalk was 'set up in 1983 by a group of unemployed Black women of African and Asian descent who felt strongly about creating the space and the means for our voices to be heard' (ed. Black Womantalk 1987, 7). So far the collective has published only one book, an anthology entitled *Black Women Talk Poetry*, which came out in 1987.

The collective has changed over the years. Originally made up of eight women, the only original member still on the collective is Olivette Cole Wilson; the other two members are Da Choong and Gabriela Pearse. They have no premises and use a box number at Sisterwrite, the feminist bookshop in Islington, as their contact address. There is no paid worker; the three members have jobs and carry on the publishing project on top of their other commitments. They are involved in all stages of the publishing process from editing and design to organising readings. It is the latter that takes up most of their time:

We're a publishing group, but we're not just that. We're committed to encouraging and bringing forward Black women writers. So we don't just publish books. We do workshops and we do other things [...]. We organise different events [...] not just to publish people that are wanting to be published, but actually encouraging more women to write. So that's a slightly different emphasis [...]  
(Pearse, interview).

Black Woman talk emerged in response to a growing desire to get more Black British women published:

When I was growing up, I went to the library, there weren't any books by Black women. [...] We just want more books - we're not in any way competition with the other feminist publishers because the more the better. The more that children and people can go into libraries and find work that represents them, that has some connection with who they are in a very particular sense as well as in a universal sense. [...] We want to fill the gap in which it's great to have that variety of books, but if with that variety you never see yourself, then that is a huge empty - there's a vacuum in that. There's a whole thing that that does to your identity, to your self-confidence, to everything like that and to put our experiences down on paper, to value them, to record them is very important [...] We would have appreciated more of those kind of books when we were growing up. So we'd like that Black women feel represented and associate themselves with that. But apart from that, whoever would love to read them and enjoys them and gets a lot from that, that's great (Pearse, interview).

Although the other feminist publishers are now publishing more books by Black British writers, the collective began at a time when such writing was not being taken on by other feminist presses. Many Black women have criticised the larger feminist presses for concentrating on reprints from successful Black American women writers rather than taking on the writing from women in Britain:

More recently, it appears that there is a growing awareness amongst some of the established mainstream and feminist publishers of the need to make Black voices heard. Unfortunately, their enthusiasm to publish works by Black women, particularly from America, seems to stem from their recognition that such books have a lucrative

market, rather than any genuine commitment to making publishing accessible to Black women writers in Britain. Afro-American women seem to be the vogue for feminist publishers such as the Women's Press. Such publishers are not only reluctant to hear the voices of Black women in Britain but there is little concern about including Black women in the publishing industry in a way which gives them any decision-making powers at all level (Valerie Amos et al 1984, 100).<sup>22</sup>

Black Womantalk have a broad editorial policy:

In terms of editorial policy, I think we do have something, but it's not something we've actually consciously worked on. But if you read our first book, I mean it's clearly not one perspective, but one broad perspective that is least likely to be taken up by mainstream publishers - and I suppose lesbianism is one of those issues [...]. I felt there were a lot of controversial issues things that hadn't been talked about before - abortion, mixed race, belonging and also, I think, that might be considered taboo to talk about too publicly. We're trying to stretch the boundaries of public debate (Pearse, interview).

Taking on less common issues is also important because of the way white publishers - feminist or otherwise - have tended to categorise Black writing and fit it into limiting moulds of what is considered to be 'Black themes'.<sup>23</sup> Black Womantalk is important in trying to widen the horizon:

And I know that some of the poems we accepted other publishers that were doing an anthology at the same time - other feminist publishers - rejected because they felt they didn't want to rock the boat - they were a bit sensitive or whatever and I think that, as Audre Lorde

says, silence doesn't protect you. So I don't believe in only projecting one [image] - you know, like as Black people we've got to project this you know, unified, that there isn't any dissension between us. So we've published [a poem] that talks about relationships between Asian women and Afro-Caribbean women and the tensions between them - so we're not afraid to publish things. [...] And also the themes for the sections - the first thing that anyone said was 'don't you think there are more serious Black themes that you could have chosen?' [...] I mean as Black people we do have to look at racism and look at all those headline kind of things, but it doesn't mean that we go through all those kind of issues (ibid.).

Those issues emerge anyway.

When Black Woman talk began looking for material for their first book, they advertised in community and women's publications, but received little response. It became clear to them that they would have to go into the community and encourage women to take their writing seriously:

A lot of people do write without taking themselves seriously or considering that their work is actually worth publishing. I mean, I think one of the roles we play is to encourage them to take themselves seriously as well as to help them take their work seriously and to go forward with it (Choong, interview).

For their first book, they organised open readings and workshops and persuaded women to part with their poems:

we gathered up a lot of the material for our first book by holding readings and we did do general publicity to ask people to send

poems, when, in fact, that wasn't particularly successful, given that we know that a lot of Black women may be writing but actually didn't consider themselves writers to be able to send in - but we actually hold a lot of readings where we ask people to bring their poetry and we encourage them to read and that - getting the feedback from the reading as well [...] made them start to think that maybe they could send their stuff - and that's how it happened really (ibid.).

They finished selecting the poems in January 1986 (Black Woman talk (eds.) 1987, 8). They now organise readings and workshops as their primary activity. This is also their principle way of generating material for their next project which was to be a book on obsessions (though they eventually decided to accept material on any theme). They make contacts through community centres. In this way they hope to

reach wider than a usual sort of reading public in that we try to go beyond in terms of, say, our writing workshops, we try to advertise very widely - to libraries, any sort of grass-roots community and we try to go to areas where we feel within London that hasn't had that much of a focus on [...] writing or readings, in order to generate more interest in those areas (Choong, interview).

This is important because certain areas of London have made such activities available, whereas others have not:

For example, there are certain boroughs in London [in] which [...] there's always something going on and there's always a set group of women who have already been part of that network, while in other sort of boroughs there's actually nothing going on, [especially in] South London. Hackney and Islington have a lot of these workshops, they run courses. I mean we've run two workshops

in South London just recently. By going not in the usual sort of routes, we've managed to get women interested and eventually come to workshops and, of course, all this snowballs as well (ibid.).

In this way they try to reach

any Black women writers who are not part of any network, we also try to reach - in terms of reading public - in the way we advertise our readings - to reach those women who are also not part of the network who come to readings. So we're trying to extend the boundaries constantly. And we see that as part of our work really (ibid.).

Airlift distributes their book and the collective sells copies at readings. They also use other opportunities to get the book out: when one member of the collective went to Jamaica, she left some books there. As they are unable to make it to many book fairs, Sheba often puts the book on their stand. They have been surprised to get

response from obscure places - what I consider obscure places - you know, way out - just saying that they've never had anything like that before. That in itself says quite a lot (Cole Wilson, interview).

Most of the feedback they receive is at the events they put on. The most common thing they hear is 'When's the next book coming out?' - or more precisely

'When's the next book of poetry coming out?' Some people have since been inspired to write stuff and want to know when the next book of poetry comes out. We didn't plan to do another poetry book - not at this point anyway. That's one thing and - you know - what else can they get. I think for some people it's started an appetite, you know,

they want to find out what else there is  
(ibid.).

For Black Womanstalk, the relationship between reading and writing is extremely interconnected. Such a project is very different from mainstream publishing: rather than severing the relationship between readers and writers, Black Womanstalk blurs the distinction. While this is part of all feminist publishing projects, it is the community based projects that are most successful in this respect:

We recently had a reading in South London [...] that was a reading in relation to publicising our first book - where, in fact, the discussion that came out of that reading was that a lot of women in the audience were asking the readers how they'd started writing and what had been their experience of publishing etc., and it's almost like the two processes feed one another. So it's like it gives some encouragement to other women who might not have thought of themselves as writers after having heard the reading, taking it more seriously. Because of our first book having a majority of first time published writers, I mean for them, it's also a kind of continuing growing and sharing it with their audiences. So it's that kind of effect really (Choong, interview).

They have not decided what project they will do after their collection on obsessions, but

I would like to see 10 books we had out, that reached all the different sections of the community - but we can't at the moment (Cole Wislon, interview).

They would welcome greater co-operation and skill-sharing between feminist publishers as a way of enlarging their resources.

## 2. Promotion and Distribution

The feminist book trade grew out of the belief that books can change the world. Reaching a wide audience was of the utmost importance. Starting feminist publishing houses and getting books into print was only half the battle: promotion and distribution have in some ways proved even more arduous tasks. This is in spite of the fact that feminist publishers found themselves in the unusual position of having a pre-constituted audience for their books:

When we started in 1973, we already knew there was an audience, because we came out of the women's movement. And in a sense, we were created by that audience - we're a result of history (Ursula Owen, quoted in Helen Birch 1988, 17).

Nonetheless, because of the way mainstream distribution controls the market and regulates the flow of books, it has been difficult to reach and extend that audience.

Just as mainstream publishers were reluctant to take on feminist books because they did not see the market until the feminist publishers became successful, so wholesalers and retailers resisted them. Publicity was also hard to come by: the press rarely reviewed the books and the limited budgets of feminist publishers precluded major publicity campaigns or window displays. The mainstream book trade's lack of imagination in perceiving a market for feminist books is a persistent problem and one which affects all 'minority'

interests. Alternative publishers take all the risks only to find the mainstream cashing in when the 'trend' becomes popular.

In order to survive, the feminist book trade developed strategies from feminism and from the mainstream booktrade. For example, a major factor in the success of Virago and The Women's Press has been the design of their books and accompanying publicity material (see Anna Foster 1987a, 45). Publishers like Penguin and Mills & Boon had already proved that books are indeed sold by their covers and that developing a recognisable 'brand image' can be extremely useful. The Women's Press and Virago have not only created bold and uniform looks for their entire lists, but carefully choose the covers of each book. Those of the Virago Modern Classics are evocative of a nostalgic past; the new books use a more contemporary design. Different shades of green designate the various lists. Virago appeals to a variety of readerships not only through the contents of the books but through their design. The smaller publishers have been less successful in this respect. They do not publish enough books to produce an instantly recognisable image and, in the case of Sheba, they initially opted for variety, rather than uniformity, in size and look. Both Sheba and Onlywomen have changed their logos. According to their distributor, attention to packaging is vital. While Virago and The Women's Press are generally known to the reading public, fewer people have even heard of Sheba, Onlywomen or Black Woman talk. Pandora finds itself in a situation of not having a clear image either in terms of its packaging or in terms of the composition of

its list; though, more recently, they have developed a bolder and more uniform look for their crime series.

All feminist publishers have used feminist networks to promote their books by participating in or organising events. As mentioned in the previous section, the smaller publishers regularly organise readings, discussion groups and writing workshops as a way of enlarging the circle of readers for their books and as part of their work in changing the relations between readers, writers and publishers by making the publishing process more accessible and blurring the distinction between these roles.

The larger publishers have also organised and participated in such events, though it might be argued that theirs are less about skill-sharing and breaking down boundaries than about publicity and feminist celebrities.<sup>24</sup> The Women's Press organised a national celebration for its 10th anniversary in 1988. Both it and Virago (in celebration of its 15th anniversary that year) had competitions offering their books as prizes. International Women's Day Celebrations have often included readings and discussions around feminist writing, such as that put on at Wesley House in 1986 by Virago and Sheba. Such events have been also been organised at public libraries and elsewhere, but have been rarer in recent years.

Feminist and community bookshops regularly hold readings, signings and discussion groups, though according to Britain's first feminist bookshop, Sisterwrite, this network could be developed further:

Asked if the feminist publishers use the shop enough, the Sisterwrite collective responds with resounding *no's*. They feel there's not as much co-operation between feminist booksellers and publishers as there could be. What can Sisterwrite offer such publishers that non-specialist shops can't? 'We offer more contact with their customers,' says Florence Hamilton. 'They're totally isolated from the women actually buying their books.' Sylvia Parker agrees, adding, 'I'm sure a lot of their writers would like contact with the women who read their stuff. Instead of always going to one of the bigger shops.' (Rose Collis 1988).

Initially, feminist publishers met with little success in their endeavours to get their books into high street shops and relied on radical and community bookshops which had sprung up around the country in the sixties and early seventies and on the feminist bookshops and lesbian and gay bookshops which followed in the late seventies and early eighties:

The feminist presses were starting to really get going; it was a natural progression to have a women's bookshop (Diane Biondo of Sisterwrite, quoted in Rose Collis 1988).

Feminist bookshops have played a key role. They were not only the pioneers in stocking feminist books and then in offering a wider range of feminist titles than even well-stocked general bookshops, but in making services and information available to the women's community. For example, Sisterwrite in Islington (North London) has housed numerous subsidiary activities since it was founded as the first feminist bookshop in England in 1978.<sup>25</sup> The building on Upper Street is on two levels. The ground floor is reserved for women's

books and periodicals. The landing holds noticeboards advertising anything from flatshares to consciousness-raising (CR) groups. The upstairs was at one time used for a women-only café called Sisterbite, but in January 1984, Islington Council denied the café a license 'following complaints from local residents about the noise. The cafe was on a busy main road and closed at 5.30 pm anyway' (Eric Presland 1989). (The upstairs is now a crafts shop.) Silver Moon, the feminist bookshop in Central London on Charing Cross Road also wanted to provide a meeting place in the form of a women-only café but was also denied a license on the nonsensical grounds that they only had toilets for women. Nonetheless, these bookshops still manage to function as community bookshops where women come to buy feminist books as well as to make contacts and find out what is happening in the women's community.

Sisterwrite has seen a variety of activities over the years. As Lynn Alderson said on the opening of the shop:

It was a complete mixture of commercial and political goals. We were very clear from the beginning that it had to work on a commercial level or it couldn't exist. But I thought it was important to do because I very much wanted there to be more of a public face for the women's movement. I was also quite clear about making it a proper service. It shouldn't be like a lot of alternative bookshops that were a total mess, with books heaped everywhere and nobody paying any attention to the customers (in Rose Collis 1988).

Another of their aims was to improve access to international women's books (Sara Cookson 1988). The Women's Resource and Research Centre (VRRRC) - now the Feminist Library - was housed there early on, after moving from its original home in Upper Gower Street. (Since then, it has moved to Clerkenwell, Victoria Embankment and, most recently, to Westminster Bridge Road). Authors like Anna Livia held their first readings there and from 1980-82 Onlywomen Press held its Scribblers' Suppers discussions there monthly. The shop also offers a postbox service to feminist groups. Accomodating such activities has been a priority from the start:

In their business plan, the founders wrote 'we see the project as a service rather than a commercial business'. I think if there's some magical way that Sisterwrite can hold on to being a service and a successful business, that's something we can offer that the High St bookshop can't. A place for women to meet, a noticeboard and, particularly, the readings and other events (Diane Biondo of Sisterwrite, quoted in Collis 1988).

In some ways feminist bookshops have not changed; they still function as meeting places. Sisterwrite is still a co-operative which puts all the money it makes back into the business, but there have been two important changes. The collective is no longer almost all white and middle-class, but is multi-racial 'and this is reflected in the women who use the shop' (Diane Biondo 1988). The second change concerns financial matters:

for the shop to survive economically in this decade and the next, it cannot be run primarily as a services centre for women. It must think commercially, because it is faced with a challenge that did not exist ten years ago, that is,

competition from mainstream bookshops who now realize - albeit a bit slow - that there's a market in women's books. Ironically, thanks to women's bookshops and publishers, men can now make money from feminism. But that's just one way of looking at it (ibid.).

The problem is not only that the profits of feminist books are slipping out of women's hands but that as the more capitalised mainstream shops stock major feminist titles, feminist bookshops lose some of their custom. It is important that feminist bookshops continue to operate not only because of the role they play as women's service centres, but because they stock many of the titles that the other shops will not touch:

It is surprisingly difficult to get feminist titles into the shops unless you are Virago or The Women's Press, which means that they can be ghettoised in the alternative bookshops (Jenny Ashworth of Airlift Distribution, in 'Minutes from the conference: Bookselling Workshop of WIP Conference' 1986).

Again, this means that as mainstream shops take on the more visible and acceptable side of feminist publishing, those books on the cutting edge of feminism are pushed further to the margins. Combined with concentration in the publishing and distributive trades, this makes the future accessibility of such information uncertain.

A partial response to this problem arose in the form of the Virago Bookshop which existed from 10 December 1984 to 17 July 1987 at 34, Southampton Street, off Covent Garden (Bennion and Simpson 1985; leaflet from Virago Bookshop 1987). This was planned as just the

first of a chain of Virago bookshops which would have been a middle road between the general high street bookshops on the one hand and the women's community bookshops of the other. It had a wider stock of feminist titles than a general high street bookshop and held readings, but did not offer the services of a community bookshop. It was aimed at a more mainstream audience which might have been put off by the radical presentation of community bookshops. Like the rest of the Virago enterprise, the shop was an original approach to marketing. It was painted Virago green to match the books and, as one of my interviewees pointed out, looked just like a Body Shop with its lacquered fittings and wooden floors, except for the fact that it sold books instead of soaps. It was well-suited to the ambience of Covent Garden. Had Virago been able to develop a chain of shops, it would have helped women to gain greater control of the distributive network and help guarantee the survival of the smaller publishers. (Instead, the shop closed when Virago needed the capital to buy itself out of the Random House takeover of CVBC.)

Silver Moon is located on Charing Cross Road along with numerous other bookshops. It does not exist in a community setting, yet it attracts women from the women's community in Britain and from abroad and it gets the general trade which the area affords. Jane Cholmeley and Sue Butterworth started the bookshop because they were interested in the distribution of knowledge and saw the need for another women's bookshop in London, as close to the centre as possible (it opened a few months before the Virago shop, on 31 May 1984). Like Sisterwrite, Silver Moon sees part of its work as that of providing

information to the women's community. They got the property and a package capital start-up grant from the GLC which they used to improve the property and to buy the first stock. These grants were given at a time when the GLC knew it was doomed, so they tried to give money to projects they knew would last.<sup>26</sup>

Finding alternative routes to distribution has led all the feminist publishers and many shops to offer a mail order service. To this end, Sisterwrite, Silver Moon and Gay's The Word (the lesbian and gay community bookshop in London) all produce a review or booklist on a regular basis. The Women's Press Bookclub developed out of The Women's Press and offers a quarterly selection of books from its own list and from that of other publishers at a discount. There was one early attempt to set up a solely feminist distribution company: Feminist Books was based in Leeds and also published books (Cadman et al 1981, 89; Lee Comer 1988, 87-8). Otherwise feminist publishers have relied on mainstream distribution, in the case of Virago and The Women's Press,<sup>27</sup> or on the radical distribution network. PDC (Publications Distribution Co-op) was set up in the early eighties and re-emerged in April 1984 as Turnaround. Turnaround is a mixed collective, based in North London. It originally distributed in the South, while Scottish & Northern, set up in the seventies, distributed in the North. When the latter group was disbanded, Turnaround took over. Turnaround distributes magazines as well as books. Airlift is the other major radical distributor based in London. It is not a collective. Set up in 1981 by Beth Grossman and her partner, it deals mainly with importing

radical, feminist and alternative books from the USA. Airlift represents such American publishers as Crossing Press and Naiad Press in Britain; they do a brisk trade in mind/body/spirit books. They are also the distributors for Sheba, Black Woman talk and Onlywomen Press. These two companies represent very different types of set-ups. Turnaround is a co-operative, and job functions are shared; the workers meet daily for meetings. They received funding from GLEB early on. Airlift is more 'business-like': it is not a co-operative, though it has a relaxed work environment in which ideas are discussed and decisions are taken as a group. Airlift did not seek public funding: they felt this could give them a false sense of security. Although these distributors manage to get their books to some high street shops, they are reliant on the network of radical booksellers for most of their titles. They sell copies of their various titles to some of the individual chain shops which are allowed to buy individually, but find it difficult to get into the big warehouses, like W H Smith's Swindon warehouse which buys titles centrally and then scales books out to the majority of their shops.

Other organisations focus on making books available in different ways: groups like the Feminist Library have been involved in setting up centres where women could come to use or borrow books. The Feminist Library started life as the Women's Research and Resource Centre (WRRRC) in about 1975. Set up by feminist academics at a time when women's studies was beginning, it started its life in 'a damp basement in Gower Street, London' (Cadman et al 1981, 94) and was housed for a time in Sisterwrite. One of the first groups to receive

funding from the GLC Women's Committee, the WRRRC moved to Hungerford House on Victoria Embankment in 1981. They also received funding from the Ford Foundation to complete a second catalogue on women's studies in Britain; the first was compiled by O. Hartnett and M. Rendell and edited by Z. Fairbairns 1978. The WRRRC collective eventually split on the question of whether its primary function was that of a research centre for academics or a lending library concentrating on rendering its resources more widely available. Eventually, they choose the latter route and the WRRRC became the Feminist Library:

We just felt that it was important to have a feminist library because it's very difficult to get these books in other libraries, although they've got a lot better [...] and we felt a library is something that is accessible to all women. Obviously not all women do research or are interested in women's studies, but a lot of women would be interested in borrowing books that were by and about women. So basically, it was two things. One was actually to collect that work - say, like the journals which wouldn't usually be collected by another library where information isn't readily available to women. It's also important historically to have that information and to keep it and also just to provide women with feminist books that they could take out on loan. You know that kind of thing - they should have access to them (Tina Jenkins, worker at the Feminist Library, interview).

Making books available is their most important task and the subject of ongoing discussion:

Unfortunately, I think it's mainly women who are already interested in feminism to some extent that use us. But in some ways it's inevitable - we're not a grass-roots organisation - we're in the middle of London - we're not even based in a community (ibid.).

The main constraint is money:

We'd like a much bigger space which would mean that we could do all sorts of things that we can't do now, maybe have discussion meetings, show videos, that kind of thing, much more audio-visual resources. And more money I think would mean that we could make the library accessible in all sorts of ways. Maybe we could have a mini-bus and go round places; we could do a project - a subject index to our journals which are under-used and there's loads of them and it's hard to get to them [...] we could have a computer and put the catalogue on computer. So we feel really held back by that. It's boring for us as well; we get bogged down in the day to day admin and there's no money and there's not enough resources to expand. And it's bad because we're not accessible - so it would be good if we could get some sort of premises that were bigger and also were on a ground floor or had a lift. And also I think it would be good actually if - I mean, as it is now we can't afford to buy everything that we'd want. We get quite a lot of free books as review copies - and then we have to decide what we're going to buy because we can't buy everything (ibid.).

The Feminist Library is a major casualty in the loss of public funding to women's projects since the end of the GLC. The London Boroughs Grant Unit, which took over funding of the library, withdrew its £39,000 grant from the library in 1988. This left only one full-time worker, Tina Jenkins, initially; subsequently, the library was reduced to relying on volunteer workers and forced to move. The decision to withdraw the grant stood with the Liberals as the vote was split between Tories, who voted against continuing funding, and Labour, who voted to carry on funding. This was 'despite an excellent report from the Grants Officer' and the fact that the library had grown to house over 6,000 books, approximately 800 sets

of periodicals from Britain and abroad, had 1,500 members and was used by an average of 30 people daily:

They feel that it's not up to them to fund a library. It's like Arts projects, their attitude is that they are not necessary. They change their minds on the criteria but I think they have a hit list, and some groups have to go ('Axe falls on Feminist Library' 1988; see also 'Library re-opens' 1988).<sup>29</sup>

It is not surprising that the Feminist Library and Feminist Audio Books (FAB) for blind, partially sighted and other women having difficulty with the printed word, have lost their grants. This is part of a larger policy not only of cutting funding on women's projects, but of generally limiting access to information. The recent proposals for library charges when using certain information facilities is just one instance (Boseley 1988).

These different distribution projects have met with varying degrees of success, but feminists have paid less attention to distribution than to production:

Unfortunately, the question of distribution, and availability more generally, is frequently ignored or regarded as a secondary issue. Perhaps it is because distribution is seen as the less 'glamorous' side of publication. Perhaps also it has something to do with the fact that distribution in our society means, is identical with, *selling*. There is a certain distaste on the part of radicals in Britain to indulge in this form of activity. There are two factors that contribute to this reluctance. One is the moral ambivalence towards and theoretical confusion about the role of money - should socialists or feminists sully their fingers with this most capitalist and patriarchal of objects? Secondly, there's a certain middle-class snobbery towards commerce of any sort. It's better to be a (high-

status) producer of ideas than a (low-status) purveyor of someone else's (Cadman et al 1981, 88).

These attitudes, which are peculiar to Britain, have got in the way of building up any major alternative distribution network.

However, during the more competitive eighties, this moralistic attitude has changed. That 'thinking big' has become somewhat - though certainly not entirely - acceptable was evidenced by the staging of the First International Feminist Book Fair in London in June 1984 in Covent Garden. This was probably the single most important event in British feminist book publishing because it began to open up mainstream publishing and distributive routes to feminist books. And although some might argue that it and the Feminist Book Fortnights which developed from the Fair are commercial events which have lost their political impact, these events have been important in getting more feminist books to more shops, libraries and people and in focussing attention on feminist books each year for a fortnight. The Fair has had repercussions in feminist publishing worldwide and is now a biennial event held in different places around the world: in Oslo in June 1986, in Montreal in June 1988 and in Spain in 1990.

The impetus for the First International Feminist Book Fair came from the experience of women participating in the various book fairs already in existence, e.g., at Frankfurt and Bologna, at the Radical Black and Third World Book Fair and the Socialist Book Fair, both held in London. Women involved in these fairs realised that while

feminist publishers were bringing out more and more titles and print runs were steadily rising, feminist books were still hard to come by. Wholesalers and retailers maintained that feminist books just didn't sell. The First International Feminist Book Fair lay that myth to rest for good (Fischer 1987).

The Book Fair was set up as both a professional trade event and non-commercial fair with a series of events relating to books and politics where women could meet one another and share skills. The organisers wanted to contribute to international politics by inviting writers and publishers from all over the world. They thus took on an enormous job of international fund raising. Unesco, SIDA and Norad have been amongst the funders of the first and subsequent fairs because of their interest in women and literacy. The British Council and the GLC Women's Committee also gave financial assistance.

The idea for the Fair began with Carole Spedding and Ros de Lanerolle of The Women's Press and developed quickly: it took about 18 months from the idea to the Fair. The Book Fair Group began by putting feelers through an international network of contacts in the radical book trade and through cultural exchanges and the British Council around the world. They distributed 500 leaflets at the 1983 Frankfurt Book Fair to get publishers interested. The GLC Women's Committee provided wages for two workers, Gail Chester<sup>29</sup> and Helen Burgess, for the last six months. The GLC Arts and Recreation paid for rent and mailing expenses. The role of the GLC was fundamental:

Spedding was uncertain of the possibility of staging such an event without it.

The Fair was held in Covent Garden's Jubilee Hall in June 1984. It housed 110 stands representing publishers from 37 countries. Editors spent a lot of time at the Fair trying to figure out what they should be publishing in two years' time. But the Fair was also a public event designed to sell books. It opened to the public for 21 hours and during that time took in £35,000 worth of retail sales. People queued for five or six hours to get in. Seventeen countries sent their television crews to cover the event. The Fair coincided with the launch of Channel Four which bought the rights to a film of it. Cinema of Women produced a one-and-a-half hour programme which was aired at prime time and featured such writers as Toni Cade Bambara and Nawal el Saadawi who spoke at one of the seminars at Kensington Town Hall. There were 'two main goals' of the Fair:

The first was to put feminism, feminist writers, books and publishers squarely and firmly in the mainstream market place, onto the educational curriculum and on library shelves. The other aim was to move the spotlight of attention from Europe and North America, to search out and draw in feminists from around the world, particularly from the developing countries (Feminist Book Fair Group 1984, 5).

The organisers of the Fair say they set out to ensure public involvement in order to break down the barriers between capitalist industry and readers (Fischer 1987). Spedding said there was a major difference between book fairs in the West and those held, for example, in Harare and New Dehli. At the former, consumers are

confronted with the finished product: books that have been produced without any direct input on their part; whereas at the latter fairs, the public are directly involved in putting forth their needs. The Book Fair Group set up one hundred and twenty events, all of which were sold out. The events grew out of two of the Fair's major political concerns: skills-sharing and the demystification of writing and publishing. Writers were to be taken off the pedestal and put on the stands where the public could meet them face to face.

The Fair laid the foundations for a vital international network of women writers, publishers, booksellers and readers.<sup>30</sup> In Britain, the outcomes of the First International Book Fair were many. One of the most important of these has been the creation of an annual book promotion, the Feminist Book Fortnight. The Fortnight promotion began as an off-shoot of the first Fair. The Fair itself was held in London and therefore risked being of benefit only to those women who lived in the capital. However, as plans for the Fair developed and as

more women from Britain and Ireland and from around the world sent in suggestions, offers of help and notice of their plans to attend the Fair, it became obvious that we should expand the idea to include a week of events, symposiums, debates and workshops. In London alone there will be 52 associated events held. A map of the world was obtained and little red dots, indicating the areas where women were responding to the pulses sent out from the Book Fair group, began to proliferate. Then in more than 40 towns around the country women began to organise themselves into local Book Fair groups, planning events with many of the overseas visitors, and the chain stores began to take note. Very early on, W.H. Smith agreed to organise a nationwide promotion and other

wholesalers, shops and dozens of publishers followed suit (Feminist Book Fair Group 1984, 5).

The Fortnight thus began life as Feminist Book Week, the week following the 1984 Fair. That year, there were 150 such events in 24 towns - some in Ireland and Scotland and in all the major towns. Local bookshops organised the events and held them in the shops or a hall. The Regional Arts Associations helped with the funding. Some of the towns in which the event were held were quite small.

Each June since then, the Fortnight has consisted of events held all over the country. The Feminist Book Fortnight Group produces a catalogue of feminist titles published during the previous 12 months by feminist and other publishers and selects 20 titles for special promotion.<sup>31</sup> Spedding, who heads the Fortnight Group, facilitates the events, but does not organise them directly. She puts the organisers in touch with publishing houses and gives them tips on publicity. Three weeks before the Fortnight, catalogues and display material are sent out to the list of participating retailers. Most of the activity in the trade is in the Southeast, but the Feminist Book Fortnight reaches many places beyond there.

The Fortnight is now self-sustaining. The Fortnight Group is made up of all the feminist publishing houses and Sisterwrite and Silver Moon; some women from large mainstream publishers are also involved. It is budgeted to carry the administration and is paid for by publishers and retailers. W H Smith and Menzies support the Fortnight. W H Smith gave it full support from the start. These

outlets were approached on commercial, rather than political, grounds; the Fair and Fortnight were presented as media events with star authors and as promotions they would be foolish to miss. W H Smith does point of sale displays and an extra print run of the catalogue.<sup>32</sup>

The Fortnight aims at a general audience by presenting feminist books as part of the mainstream, rather than as peripheral. Before the Fair, it was difficult to sell these books to mainstream distributors. The Fortnight has grown rapidly. The fifth, held in 1988, involved over 500 bookshops, 355 public libraries, 82 educational bodies and offered 97 events in 23 towns (Spedding 1988, 26); the catalogue included 305 titles from 90 publishers (Watts 1988). In 1989, the Feminist Book Fortnight Group produced 80,000 catalogues listing about 320 books. Sherratt & Hughes produced a further 10,000 copies at its own expense. Support also came from Books for Students and over 500 libraries made special displays ('Feminist Book Fortnight' 1989). As far as the book trade is concerned, the most positive outcome of the Fair has been that of breaking into the mainstream distribution networks. The success of the Fair forced mainstream publishers to take note; now almost all publishers have a feminist or women's studies list or, at least, attempt to gear publicity to that readership.

Because of the Fair and subsequent Fortnights, the readership for feminist books has broadened. The precise extent to which the Fortnight helps sales is, however, not clear. Airlift reported that

due to the fortnight they sold a thousand copies of Sheba's *True to Life* - one of the twenty selected titles - in one month. Although it is generally agreed that the Fortnight helps to raise the profile of feminist books and that this is good for both publishing and distribution, there are contrasting voices. Some radical booksellers fear that the Fortnight will take away their business. They argue that they stock feminist and radical books all year long, but during the Fortnight those books are available in the mainstream shops:

Some radical booksellers, while wishing to support the Feminist Book Fortnight for political reasons, report a drop or no increase in sales of feminist titles during the promotion. If feminist titles are easy to get hold of, why make a special trek to the nearest radical bookshop? There are signs that many radical booksellers are experiencing a squeeze. Like small independent publishing houses, many radical bookshops survive on tight budgets and find it difficult to cope with cashflow problems. Many are run as co-ops providing a public service rather than being driven by the profit motive (Grace Evans 1986, 23).<sup>33</sup>

Others are convinced that the Fortnight enlarges the readership of feminist books and that 'converts' will ultimately have to seek out the radical bookshops if they want a vast selection of titles.

While most would recognise the commercial success of the Book Fair and Fortnights, there is some dispute about the extent to which they have achieved their political goals. One of the main political debates to emerge from the first Fair concerned access for disabled women because the venue was inaccessible. The other major political

issue to emerge centred on Black women. Although the organisers were careful to include Black women writers in the programme, Audre Lorde was critical of the lack of involvement of the Black women's community:

the fact remains: the International Feminist Bookfair was a monstrosity of racism, and this racism coated, distorted, and deflected much of what was good and creative, almost visionary, about having such a fair. Now, if anything is to be learned from that whole experience it should be so that the next International Women's Bookfair does not repeat these errors. And there *must* be another Feminist Book Fair. But, we don't get there from here by ignoring the mud we have to plod through. If the white women's movement does not learn from its errors it will die by them. Now, how international was it? I was impressed with the number of Black women invited - Faith Bandler from Australia, Flora Nwapa from Nigeria, and other African women, as well as women from the United States of America. But it seemed to me that token women had been invited to be showcased, and this always sends off a bell in my brain, even when I myself am one of those women. That awareness did not solidify until I stood up for my first reading to a packed house and saw almost no Black faces, and that was the kiss-off! What was going on? I didn't know, but I knew something was up, and the rest, more or less, is history. I was very angry (quoted in Parmar and Kay 1988, 123).

Lorde was concerned that local Black women had not been involved in the Fair. When she voiced this concern to the organisers, she found what she felt to be an unconstructive defensiveness:

I realize that the women who organized the International Feminist Bookfair truly believed that by inviting foreign Black women they were absolving themselves of any fault in the way they dealt with Black women. But we should all be able to learn from our errors. They totally objectified Black women by not choosing to deal with the Black women in their own communities [...] When I questioned the social situation at the Bookfair, those women talked double-talk to

me. They seemed terrified of Black women, or at least determined not to deal with us (ibid., 124-5).

There are therefore very different stories to tell about the outcome of the Book Fair. On the one hand, it can be dealt with as a trade event and in that sense it was extremely successful. On the other hand, in terms of its politics, there were real conflicts which were not resolved by the time the Second Fair came along. The question of access needs to be addressed not only with reference to the mainstream and getting women into it, but also from within the feminist book trade. One of the outcomes of the Fair was that, for whatever reasons, feminist publishers have begun to publish more books by Black writers based in Britain and elsewhere. However, one suspects that the increased number of books by Black women recently published was *in part* due to a bad conscience rather than a more profound understanding of the hegemony white Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture exerts: how can one otherwise explain the total absence of the publication of books emerging from contemporary British Jewish feminist debate<sup>34</sup> and the small number of books from Irish women. Other biases are also present, most notably class, ability and age bias. Feminist publishing needs constantly to re-evaluate the extent of its accessibility to *all* women in terms of the writers it publishes, the readers it aims at and the women it hires and places in positions of power. And it must constantly re-examine the relations that exist between women in these various roles.

Feminist publishing has changed considerably since it began over fifteen years ago, as has the rest of the book trade. It was then much easier for feminist publishers to be 'politically pure' and survive in a more affluent and less concentrated economy. The existence of a Labour-controlled GLC with a burgeoning interest in positive action for women and minorities encouraged the funding of projects for these groups, particularly in individual Labour-controlled councils such as Hackney, Islington, Camden and Haringey. Because of feminism's commitment to changing the relations between producers and consumers of knowledge, there has been a constant tension between feminist publishing and the rest of the book trade. The fragmented nature of the publishing industry which is divided into mass and elite markets militates against extending the reading public and perpetuates self-fulfilling prophecies about what people will read. As feminist publishing has developed and the demand for it has grown, it has had to decide on its priorities: it could either attempt to enter the mainstream and its distributive network or stay small, close to the community and rely primarily on alternative distribution. Both choices are legitimate; both are necessary; both are fraught with difficulties. Choice is necessitated by the way the book trade is set up in the first place and because developments within radical distribution have not been sufficient to bring about major changes in distribution patterns. If distribution has not been the strongest link in the feminist book enterprise - indeed feminists have largely ignored the possibility of developing their own distributive networks - promotion and publicity have all but made up for it. Using the network developed through the Women's Movement,

publicists have excelled at developing and maintaining links within the feminist community. Holding book events - from writers' workshops to readings and Book Fairs - has been vital. But success has its price: the larger feminist publishers are perhaps less in touch with the grass-roots than they once were.

Feminist publishers have entered the mainstream to varying degrees. The mainstream bookselling chains now regularly stock the output of the commercial feminist presses (especially the fiction titles) and participate in the promotion of feminist books during the Feminist Book Fortnight each June. Many mainstream publishers now publish feminist or women's studies lists, but while these publishers recognise that feminist books sell, they are largely unfamiliar with the networks through which they could promote these books.

Some feminists criticise the 'bandwagoning' which has been in evidence since the First International Feminist Book Fair:

As more and more publishers cash in on the consumer durability of feminism (often with the backing of multinational conglomerates), the specialist feminist presses face several dilemmas. Can they compete against the huge publicity machines, massive distribution networks and the established relationships these publishers have with the bookshop chains? How can they hope to hold onto their more commercially successful authors when the larger houses can tempt them away with bigger advances? And, as the mainstream muscles in, will the pioneers become defunct? (Birch 1988b, 16).

These questions merit consideration. There are those who believe that separate feminist houses have made their point and, now that mainstream houses publish feminist books, have become obsolete:

Perhaps it is time for women's publishing houses like the admirable Pandora to be disbanded. They have fought a brave battle which was to retrieve the writing of a previous generation of females and to provide a showcase for new female authors who might not otherwise have found a publisher. The battle has been fought and won (Penny Perrick 1988).

On the contrary, the battle has just begun. The battle was never solely about books and their contents. It was also about changing the relations between producers and consumers of knowledge and making the literary realm more accessible to women. The battle was not just about guaranteeing editorial control and changing women's relation with the literary through the text, but about control *tout court*. While an ultimate goal might be, for some, a reintegration of women's concerns on a par with men's, this is not achieved by a balanced list alone, but through control of large sections of the industry by feminists. Perrick's example is unfortunate: Pandora exemplifies the limitations of focussing on editorial control. It is the least independent of the feminist houses and is more of a list than a separate publisher. Born as an imprint of Routledge & Kegan Paul (RKP), itself under the umbrella organisation Associated Book Publishers (ABP), Pandora was sold to Unwin Hyman when International Thomson bought out ABP in 1987. Philippa Brewster, editor of the list, made the following comments:

Pandora is retaining its feminist edge, but within the context of a general publishing house. [...] [Pandora] was asked to change its course quite dramatically [when Unwin Hyman took over] [...] We now have an independence that we've never had before ('Pandora moves into the mainstream' 1988; see also: 'Publishing news' 1988).

The ambivalence of Brewster's statement suggests limited control. Discussions about the commercial feminist publishers and the co-operatives often centre on questions of independence. Publishers like The Women's Press and Pandora are often asked whether their owners limit their editorial control. When I first approached one of these presses, I was met with the erroneous assumption that I was solely concerned with this issue: editorial control is a far too simplistic way of looking at the predicaments of feminist publishing. It is quite likely that, within the limits of their budgets (which are, in any case, greater than those of small independents), these editors have the editorial control to which they lay claim. The question is much larger: how are women to gain *more than editorial control*? It is foolish to assume, as Perrick does, that, because thousands of feminist books have been published since the advent of feminist publishing, feminist publishing houses are no longer necessary.<sup>95</sup> Such blinkered thinking derives in part from the way the literary establishment considers books as disembodied texts, rather than as part of socially embedded processes: it is thus possible to assume that all that matters is that certain texts get published. Without feminist control, it would be necessary to rely on mainstream houses, having no permanent commitment to feminism, to publish radical books that they either do not like or for which they

think there is no market because they are not in touch with the grass-roots feminism from which such books emerge. They would not know how to market and promote the books and would soon conclude that the 'trend' for feminist books was over. Women cannot depend on the benign paternalism which licenses 'editorial independence' any more than they can depend on funding from a benign State. Feminist publishing houses, far from being redundant, are only a first step in women's bid to control at least a portion of the media. Co-operatives and commercial feminist publishers in Britain and abroad need to stop arguing about who is getting more books out or who is more ideologically sound and strengthen the links they already have in order to enable all of them to gain greater control. That this is possible has been demonstrated by the national and international networks formed for the International Feminist Book Fairs. Only by pooling the extremely limited resources that women own can they begin to develop some control. This is particularly vital at a time when the book trade - and all media - are becoming more and more concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. Women and minority groups need to form national and international alliances, consortia and distribution chains in order to hold on to the chance not only of changing the power relations concerning the access to information, but of being one of the voices in the game of defining the issues. If 'ours is an age of competitive languages' (Fuentes 1989, 29), we must ensure ourselves the ability to compete.

## Notes to Part II

1. The Business School of the Polytechnic of North London and Women in Publishing received a grant from the Economic and Social Research Council's Open Door Scheme to carry out a six-month pilot study. The Polytechnic funded the project for a further year. Frances Tomlinson at the Business School heads the project and meets regularly with the WiP survey committee.

2. Women in Publishing has become so successful that some mainstream companies now pay employees' membership fees and pay for them to go on the training courses WiP runs.

3. This course was offered by the Fulham and West Kensington College of Further Education (London) and ran from January to March 1986. Liz Curtis was course tutor.

4. In the Women in Publishing survey, this resistance was less obvious, but still present in spite of the very strong network of contacts which WiP offered us. The personnel director in one company initially granted us permission to interview employees, but ultimately did not allow us to proceed with the interviews because it was a touchy time: the company was in the middle of a takeover. Other companies permitted us to carry out the interviews but it was always necessary to proceed through official channels. Management limited the numbers of employees we could see and drew up names of those to be interviewed. We only got that far because we had

contacts and the companies in question declared themselves sympathetic to the project. Lynne Spender (1983) also found resistance when she tried interviewing publishers.

5. Publishing is often seen to be a good industry for women to work in (and perhaps compared to others it is). A few women have reached the top (e.g., Carmen Callil at Virago and Chatto, Paula Kahn at Longman, Liz Calder at Bloomsbury) and women dominate numerically. However, in terms of real power, publishing is overwhelmingly male-dominated (Tomlinson and Fischer 1987 1988; Frances Tomlinson and Fiona Colgan 1989; see also Sue Carpenter 1985).

It is also a very white industry. GAP (Greater Access to Publishing) is a multi-racial group of women and was launched in November 1987. GAP has informal ties with Women in Publishing and draws its membership from a wide range of publishing companies. Their stated aims are to: 'a) act as a campaigning and information group within the industry; b) alert careers officers to the possibilities of jobs in publishing; c) create a register of African, Caribbean and Asian people experienced in different aspects of publishing'. Their meetings with careers officers gave them a very clear idea of the image of publishing: 'Many Black and Asian women had not even thought of publishing as a career, assuming it to be a white industry'. GAP is convinced that it is vital for Black people to be part of publishing in order to have a truly representative literature: 'Most publishers' genuine desire for a multicultural list doesn't, however, seem to have extended to a multicultural staff.

And yet the presence of African, Caribbean and Asian personnel would go a long way towards encouraging even more potentially successful Black authors, and particularly British Black authors' (from an information sheet about GAP). See Margaret Busby and Lennie Goodings (1988).

6. Another woman voiced her reservations openly. After I made an appointment with her, she rang me back to tell me how she felt about the arrangement. She was not unwilling to share her information, but she was tired of giving her time freely and receiving nothing in return. She made little money and felt she needed to ask me to compensate her. She asked for a fee negotiable according to my economic situation and to be acknowledged. I recount this because I think it may be indicative of the resistance some others may have felt. Women are accustomed to giving on demand and often feel incapable of saying no, partially because of the feminist ethic of sharing knowledge.

7. 1979 was a particularly bad year with Collins making 500 redundancies and Penguin cutting 17% of its staff (Penny Mountain 1988).

8. There are implications of this shift on gender. The Women in Publishing survey showed that women tended to dominate in editorial, while men dominated on the sales and marketing side. This may mean that just as women are beginning to make inroads into higher positions in editorial, the career structure of the industry is

shifting. While traditionally the route to board positions was through editorial, there appears to be a shift to recruiting on the marketing side, leaving the routes to power once more less accessible to women (Tomlinson and Fischer 1987, 1988; Tomlinson and Colgan 1989).

It is not new that women's careers are obstructed by discrimination of all kinds and that this is common to all industries. Yet each industry has its own culture which allows for varying configurations of sexism. Looking at what the industry produces highlights the differences between industries and shows the relation between hard products - here the books - and soft products - the employees (the terms are Michele Rene Gregory's (1990)). Books and power intersect in our society. We hold certain assumptions about books and the people we associate with them which have to do with varying degrees of prestige and power. Books associated with the less powerful in society hold less prestige. Research into publishing suggests that the types of books a company produces gives it a particular company ethos and opens it to a particular type of employee. Two companies I was involved in interviewing had very different cultures. One concentrated on up-market educational publishing and attracted a more educated staff than did the other. Because many employees came from teaching, they were more open to ideas of anti-sexism and anti-racism which play a part in educational thinking and which are present in some of their books. They more readily considered translating this into equal opportunities policies. It was a company where women progressed in greater

numbers. The other company produced mainly pulp fiction, but also published a prestigious classics list. In this house, access to power could be judged not only by title and salary but by looking at the relative prestige of the various lists being produced. The editors in charge of the non-fiction, children's, educational aids and pulp fiction lists were all women. But a man headed the prestige fiction list and in an interview he described his search for a woman to head the pulp fiction list because he specifically thought of it as a female list. As this list made a lot of money for the company, one might expect the editor in charge to be seen as powerful. However, when it came to what one employee called the 'blue-chip authors' (i.e., the bestsellers), control was restored to the male publishing director.

The prestige surrounding publishing means that it is practically closed to working class people and Black people. White middle-class women enter but receive a raw deal. It is an industry where it is acceptable to be a secretary with a degree because one is dealing with books and thus with the culture and distinction they confer. This may be part of the reason that people in it - especially women - are so willing to put up with poor salaries compared to other industries - a situation many in the academic profession might be able to relate to.

9. 'Octopus went to Reed for 30 times earnings; ABP went to Thomson for 51 times; Macmillan New York to Maxwell for 36 times; Addison Wesley to Longman for 29, and the loss-making Harper & Row to News

[International] for 50. News has got Collins for 17.8 times estimated 1988 earnings' ('NI takes over Collins - far-sighted creativity, or just another ego trip?' 1988, 79).

10. Other movement recorded includes Penguin buying Dalton; Hamlyn buying Secker & Warburg; Weidenfeld buying Dent; Collins buying Granada (Raban 1988a, 15; see also Janice Warman 1988).

11. Large as these sums are, they need to be put into perspective. Publishing is not a huge industry. UK publishing's overall turnover for 1987 was a reported £1 billion in home sales, £0.6 billion in export sales. Although these figures are big, they are small compared with really large British companies, e.g., British Telecom (c. £9.4 billion) or Marks and Spencer's (£4.5 billion). What is remarkable is the increasingly high level of concentration in the publishing industry. The turnover for the Reed companies in the period was £750 million (Mountain 1988).

12. For example, literary books. But then part of the economic unfeasibility is created by assumptions about what will sell. On self-fulfilling prophecies of this nature, see Alison Hennegan's observations quoted below.

13. 'Bookselling was then [in 1981] in the doldrums. Throughout the 1970s it had done relatively well, but recession in 1980-81, coupled with price rises, had clobbered it' (Jardine 1988, 76).

14. Britain spends less on books than most other Western nations (Jordan Data Quest 1976, 29). Good library provision seems to be a major factor in this (ibid., 19; Sutherland 1978; Worpole 1984; Mann 1982). Greater availability and accessibility of books would make a difference as the Bradford Book Flood showed (Mann 1982). Not surprisingly, greater expenditure on books is found amongst the 'higher social grades' (Jordan Dataquest 1976, 29). The concentration is such that 'probably 80% of the books sold in Britain are bought by 20% of the population' (ibid., 28). Peter Mann (1979) gives an overview of the patterns of readership in Britain:

In general it is probably true to say that about a third of the adult population do not read books at all and getting on for half are non-readers or very light readers. Women read more than men, the young read more than the old and the higher social classes read more than the lower social classes [...]. In the 1977 Euromonitor survey 31 per cent of women and 36 per cent of men said they never read books at all. On the other hand 36 per cent of women and 32 per cent of men claimed that they read books several times a week [...] (p. 5).

The 1980 Euromonitor survey into book reading and borrowing habits in the UK found that

55 per cent of a national sample of 2,000 men and women over the age of 16 said that at the time the survey was being done and they were being interviewed that they were not 'reading a book currently' (Mann 1982, 125).

More recent studies, however, have suggested a rise in book sales, except in schools and libraries which have been subject to cut-backs. According to Ian Taylor of the Publishers Association, unit sales of

general books have risen 80% between 1981 and 1986 (Rhodes, Warden and Taylor 1989). Waterstone claims that the growth of stockholding bookshops has brought the amount spent on books in Britain up to £28 *per capita*; this is almost as much as the Americans spend on books and despite lower disposable incomes. He also quotes a Sunday Times survey from 1988 which showed that 83% of the population spend some time each month reading books (Waterstone 1989).

Book reading is clearly gendered. Most women read romance; most men read thrillers or mysteries (Mann 1979, 6, 25-7; Mann 1982, 150). Age is another important variant (Mann 1982, 21). I agree with Mann's assessment (1982) of readership surveys such as Euromonitor as leaving the most interesting questions unanswered because they ask

about *books* rather than *people* and their reading habits, what mixes of books do people read; do, for example, women who read romances or history in fiction *also* read biography, or are they just single-genre fiction readers only? The unanswered questions which these national readership statistics provoke are many and fascinating. As soon as we have some information in the study of the media of communication in book form about who reads what the obvious next question to ask is 'what do they read it *for*?' (p. 151).

15. Bookwise has changed hands during the last few years and has recently closed. In 1984, it was purchased by Octopus Books, along with the Websters Group for a total of £22 million. In 1986, hit by computer problems, Bookwise lost business. A new Managing Director, Phil Jarrold, was brought in from the food business. The following year, W H Smith and Octopus made a deal whereby W H Smith's Bookextra

and Bookwise merged to become Bookwise Extra with W H Smith retaining 25% of the new organisation. W H Smith sold its share back to Octopus three months before Octopus tried to sell Bookwise Extra to the Dublin based Overseas Publications in May 1989 for about £2 - £3 million. Derek Hughes of Overseas Publications believed that the business could be turned around by treating books as 'a bit special'; a common criticism of the company had been that it tried to sell books like groceries. By June, it was reported that Bookwise Extra would close as Octopus' negotiations with Overseas Publications were called to a halt. The closure is expected to have a serious impact in UK paperback publishers and some of the business it generated is expected to be permanently lost. It is especially feared that outlets such as supermarkets will stop stocking books (except for their own brands) as it would be too inconvenient for them to deal with individual sales reps ('Bookwise sold' 1989; 'Octopus kills off Bookwise Extra' 1989).

16. The political motivation of high cover price is historically documented and can be used as a form of censorship. Ken Worpole (1984) shows how it was the low cover price and hence accessibility to the 'wrong' kind of reader - notably women and the working classes - that have been at the basis of outcry against certain books. He quotes R. K. Webb's account of the perils of prosecution to the publishers of Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man*:

As the price fell, the liability of radical publications to prosecution became greater. The attorney-general stated that he did not prosecute the first part of 'The Rights of Man' because, reprehensible though it was, the circumstances of

its publication would confine it to the judicious reader who could refute it as he went along. But, when the second part appeared, and when 'in all shapes, in all sizes, with an industry incredible, it was either totally or partially thrust into the hands of all persons in this country, of subjects of every description; when... even children's sweetmeats were wrapped up with parts of this...', he had no choice but to prosecute. Sir John Scott told Thomas Cooper that he might publish his *Reply to Burke's Invective* freely in octavo form, *but as soon as it was published cheaply, a libel action would be taken* (R K Webb 1957, 40; also quoted in Worpole 1984, 84 - 5; italics Worpole's and mine).

Worpole also describes how the government of the time enacted legislation to 'price radical politics out of popular reach by various kinds of stamp duties.' In 1877, Annie Besant was arrested for re-publishing Knowlton's *Fruits of Philosophy* in the struggle to inform people about contraception. Again the major grievance was price and accessibility rather than actual contents as the book was already in print, though not at a price affordable by working class women. The 1960 case against Penguin Books for publishing *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was also 'essentially about whether this book should appear in cheap paperback form, available to all. In that trial it was a case of not so much whether the book was serious literature as whether it was suitable reading for the servants, who could now afford to buy it' (Worpole 1984, 84; see also Richard D. Altick 1957).

17. Radical periodicals often refuse to review expensive books as a matter of politics (Hennegan 1985, 29). Certainly, the feminist presses try to keep their prices low.

18. The side one takes on whether to keep or abolish the NBA usually depends on whether one's loyalties lie with the independent publishers and bookshops or with the conglomerates and chains.

Alison Rimmer of Heffers (Cambridge)

spoke against abolishing the Net Book Agreement as this would mean death to small bookshops and small publishers - large shops can get large discounts from publishers but are not necessarily the ones who care about good specialist literature ('Minutes from the Conference: Bookselling Workshop of WIP Conference' 1986, 4).

In her article in *Management Today*, Anna Foster (1987a) illustrates some of the hesitation in the trade to do away with the NBA:

Everyone in the trade obviously and desperately wants the market to grow. The Net Book Agreement, which means that booksellers have to sell books at the publisher's set price, prevents all competition on price. Some publishers now feel that the time has come to remove that odd restraint. In this strange business, where profits and quality of product are in so uncertain a relationship, there is still room for the John Calders, Faber and Fabers and Penguins to co-exist. There is considerable respect for competitors, even affection, in what is still, for all the conglomeration, something of a cottage industry (p. 45).

On the other hand, Maher - of Pentos - is vociferous in his opposition to the Agreement:

'The NBA', Maher maintains, 'keeps inefficient booksellers in business' and does not allow the big chains to use their clout. John Hyans, president of the Booksellers Association, defends the NBA, drawing a picture of a giant-trodden land rather like the US, where only major cities support bookshops with a wide-ranging stock, and everywhere else the chains sell a limited range of

current fast-movers, cheap. If small bookshops lose the fast-selling, high-margin bestsellers to the chains, he says, many towns will lose their bookshops, good books will be driven out by bestsellers and the nation will be impoverished intellectually (Jardine 1988, 78).

At the beginning of 1989, Terry Maher of Pentos announced plans to defy the NBA, thus stirring up considerable discussion on the issue. Pentos announced plans to offer discounts of approximately 20% on most of its 30 bestselling hardbacks and to make special offers. The other chains are expected to follow suit. It is however interesting that Tim Waterstone has come out in favour of maintaining the NBA. He points to the United States in warning of the literary wasteland that the abolition of fixed book prices will bring:

The abolition of retail price maintenance (RPM) for books has destroyed the whole texture of the US book retailing scene. Discount and remainder stores are in every mall and in most main streets. Sales are brisk (US consumers spend £33.00 per annum on their books) but choice is extremely narrow, and anything from the literary backlist is unobtainable (Waterstone 1989).

In spite of its much larger market, the US publishes only about the same number of new titles as Britain each year (45,000 to 55,000) (Rayment 1989; Waterstone 1989). Waterstone also points out that the abolition of an RPM in France was so disastrous to what had been an extremely strong book market that it was reinstated and reinforced within a year (Waterstone 1989).

Publishers are also unhappy with Maher's proposed defiance of the NBA and plan to counter with legal action. Clive Bradley of the Publishers Association stated:

The NBA makes books more readily available in a greater range, at lower overall prices. It encourage[s] booksellers to keep the slower-selling books in stock (quoted in Bailey 1989a).

Phillip Attenborough, chair at Hodder & Stoughton, agreed on the negative effects that the abolition of the NBA would bring:

Many bookshops in smaller communities will close. Quality and experimentation will go. There will simply be more pulp published (quoted in *ibid.*).

Terry Maher asked the Office of Fair Trading to refer the NBA to the courts, 'on the grounds that conditions in the publishing trade have changed radically since it was last reviewed'. Mr David Shaw, the Tory MP for Dover, is called for an end to the NBA by introducing a Ten-Minute Rule Bill in the Commons on 21 February 1989 (Martin Bailey 1989c). In May, it was announced that the Director-General of Fair Trading, Sir Gordon Barrie was 'to hold a wider inquiry into the current effects of the Net Book Agreement' ('OFT cheers Maher' 1989, 1). By August, Barrie had decided not to refer the NBA to the Restrictive Practices Court ('Reprieve for NBA' 1989).

See also: Martin Bailey (1989b); Sheila Geddes and Goodman (1989); Nick Kimberley (1989); Terry Maher (1989); David Martin and John Markham (1989); Peter Owen and A J McGeogh (1989); 'Pentos rattles

its cage, again' (1989); 'The Price of Books' (1989); 'Shopping Books' (1989); Michael Sissons (1989); Sunday Times Reporter (1989).

19. The Arts Council is not much use for literature projects either as it believes the book trade exists for its support. In particular, the Arts Council is not sympathetic to community writing projects as they have been deemed 'of little, if any, solid literary merit' and because of the belief that 'the real writer will always emerge without coaxing' (quoted in Roger Mills 1985, 44). (See Pat I, note 31.)

20. This issue has been more recognised for the other media, as Nicholas Garnham (1984) notes:

What material reaches that [TV] set, how it is produced and distributed, under whose control and to what ends, have from the start been seen as an important political question, a proper matter for social concern (p. 1).

There are those who feel that conglomeration offers no major threat beyond 'author-poaching'. Michael Davie (1987) states that

Nobody can point to any evidence that the conglomerates have damaged the interests of readers, or authors, or the cause of literature.

The putative lack of evidence is due to the absence of studies on - and perhaps interest in - what readers and authors want from the book trade. Certainly Michael Sissons, Managing Director of the authors' agents, A D Peters, thought that the publishing sector was a

'disaster area' and called for a halt to the outrageous prices paid at rights auctions by publishers:

There is, he feels an ever-widening gap 'between what authors *hope* will happen to their books and what publishers *know* will happen to them' [and] The 'rising curve' of prices being paid for both publishing houses and individual titles, is mirrored in the relative decline in authors' earnings (Clare Hirst 1987, 5).

This is in spite of the fact that the Writers' Guild and the Society of Authors have been pushing publishers to sign the Minimum Terms Agreement (Fay Weldon 1987).

Although even Davie recognises the worries of smaller independent publishers, he seems to think that the climate of takeovers is temporary. He points to 'another fear'

that a Murdoch effect will occur, with the large firms, one eye on the stock exchange, dominating the market with mediocrity, and squeezing the few remaining literary publishers, who already, like Chatto & Windus and Cape, find profits hard to come by (Davie 1987).

Of course, Davie was writing in May 1987, two months before Reed International's massive takeover of Octopus. By January 1989, it was clear that the 'Murdoch effect' was here to stay with Murdoch's News International in the process of taking over the William Collins publishing group for £403 million (Collins owns the bookshop chain, Hatchards and jointly owned Harper & Row in the US with Murdoch). At the time of writing, it was not yet clear what News International

planned to do with the Hatchards chain, but Pentos, Waterstones and W H Smith could be potential bidders, should Murdoch choose to dispose of the bookselling side of the business (David Brierley and Margaret Park 1989; Lisa Buckingham 1989; Colin Campbell 1989a, 1989b; Colin Campbell and Richard Ford 1989; 'Hatchards' future in the balance' 1989; Tony May 1989; 'NI takes over Collins - far-sighted creativity, or just another ego trip?' 1989; Our City Staff 1989; Ed Vulliamy 1989; Barry Winkleman 1989).

What is at issue here is not so much how conglomeration will affect the quality of production - though many feel this to be of great concern - but even more who owns it, controls it and to what ends. And as publishing finds itself increasingly in the grasp of conglomerates owning other media - from television stations and newspapers to satellites and data bases - it widens the already noticeable gap between consumers and producers of knowledge and information. Brian Gould, Labour's spokesman for Trade and Industry, has argued that Murdoch's 'increasingly dominant position in the British and international media industries' should be referred to the Monopolies Commission. The Trade and Industry Secretary, Lord Young, declined ('NI takes over Collins - far-sighted creativity or just another ego trip?' 1989, 79-80; see also 'Slipping out of Hurd control' 1989).

21. The GLC Women's Committee had a staff of 66, a budget of £16 million, funded almost 600 groups and created over 600 jobs. Among

the projects the GLC funded were: the First International Feminist Book Fair; Silver Moon, the feminist bookshop, with the Arts and Recreation Committee; Michele Roberts' women's writing course at Wesley House; Microsystem, the computing organisation which has been used by The Women's Press, WiP and other women's organisations; Cinema of Women; Format (women photographers); Women's Film, TV and Video Network; events for International Women's Day; National Childcare Campaign; Safe Women's Transport and Stockwell Lift Service; London Rape Crisis (Valerie Wise 1986).

22. One of the more important critiques of feminist publishing in Britain today has come from Black women who point to the paucity of writings by them in the feminist press and also question the choice of what Black writing does get published. As Laretta Ngcoco (1988) says:

Published writings by Blackwomen in Britain are still relatively few and far between (p. viii).

Until recently, there seemed to be little awareness on the part of feminist publishers that race was on the agenda. This omission in part seems due to little contact with the Black women's communities. What was published by Black women tended to be reprints from Black American writers:

The temptation for British publishers, of course, is that the American 'product' is already market tested before it arrives here. Thus it is so much simpler, and more profitable, to give your publishing house the right amount of ethno-cred gloss by publishing the American stars. The

growing Black readership not being taken into account, the main market here is seen as the white liberal one - and both the readers and the publishers can read the American books and shake their heads and say: 'But, of course, it's different here' (Barbara Burford 1986, 25).

Both The Women's Press and Virago did very well by reprinting Alice Walker and Maya Angelou respectively, but it was only more recently that they began taking on Black British writers. Although a much smaller set-up and one with more limited resources, Sheba has a commitment to working as a racially mixed collective and to publishing more writing by Black British women. This was not always the case as they started out as a white collective; but they have since published Barbara Burford's *The Threshing Floor* and an anthology of Black and Third World women's writing, *Charting the Journey* (S. Grewal et al 1988).

Part of the problem is that there are not 'enough Blackwomen actually working and involved in the full publishing, editorial and critical process' (Burford 1987, 38) and also that 'the publishers of these books did not see Black people as the primary readers, and they were aimed at a white liberal academic readership' (ibid., 39).

See also: Pat Agana (1986); Jenny McKenzie (1988); Maud Sulter (1984).

23. Barbara Burford finds the expectations about Black women writers very limiting:

Firstly the publishers. They tell me what they think the market requires. At the moment from Black women writers it seems to require what Dorothea Smartt in a review in the *New Statesman* calls '... the pathologizing of the Blackwoman's condition', or, as Grace Nichols puts it in her wonderful poem: '... a little black pain undressed' (Burford 1987, 37).

24. On the political implications of an unnamed, but nonetheless identifiable, feminist celebrity playing the *prima donna* and getting paid more than women can afford for an appearance to promote her book, see Sigrid Nielsen (1988).

25. Sisterwrite was set up in 1978 by Lynn Alderson, Kay Stirling and Mary Coghill who knew each other from the Women's Movement. They had raised £10,000 and received a grant from the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) to produce their first catalogue. The political climate was then such that the bookshop was welcomed from a variety of quarters:

Reactions were overwhelmingly positive and encouraging. Letters of support poured in from women's groups and individuals all over the country. Five members of parliament sent best wishes (Diane Biondo 1988).

It was also the year that The Women's Press and the Feminist Review were started (*ibid.*). The shop reached a turnover of £100,000 in the first three years (Rose Collis 1988; Sara Cookson 1988).

26. Silver Moon originally operated on a job rotation basis, but it soon became clear that this was strangling the business. Silver Moon

is a company limited by guarantee; any money they make goes back into the business. Sue Butterworth and Jane Cholmeley run the business and the others work for them.

Silver Moon initially aimed at the 'converted' and felt that the location would help attract other customers. Their clientele is now made up of a wide variety of people of which 60-70% are women. They have quite a few regular customers and do a brisk trade with tourists. Few of their customers are Black, which they felt was partially due to the location. Most of the customers are in their thirties; they see some in their forties and fifties, but few older than that. Class is variable.

They were initially very cautious in selecting the books, especially about taking the more expensive academic and art books of which they now take more. They buy fiction and poetry by women which at least borders on feminism; they would not, for example, stock writers like Cookson who write in a genre that would not fit in. Initially they stocked some fiction and poetry by men, but it did not sell: people did not understand what it was doing there. They do stock some non-fiction by men, for example health books, if positive in the treatment of women, but would take one by a woman over a man whenever possible (on the stocking policy of Sisterwrite, see Diane Biondo, Florence Hamilton and Debbie Licorish 1988). Over the years, different sections of the shop have expanded, particularly the Black and lesbian sections; the latter is one of the best-selling sections both by mail order and in the shop. A bookshop of this kind can keep

close tabs on the types of books that are popular at different times. When they opened in 1984, there was a lot of interest in Greenham Common and the women's peace movement; now there are fewer books on peace and the greater interest in religion and spirituality within feminism generally is reflected in the books they sell.

Mail order is mostly from overseas customers. The mailing list was made up of 2,500 names in mid-1988. They publish the *Silver Moon Quarterly* especially for mail order customers. They also supply schools and libraries in London and elsewhere. Their annual turnover was around a quarter of a million by 1988, which is good for such a small shop.

27. PDC distributed *Sheba* and *Onlywomen*; early on *The Women's Press* was distributed by Macdonald & Evans, while Virago had early agreements with Quartet and with Routledge & Kegan Paul (Cadman et al 1981, 89).

28. Similarly, the London Borough Grants Scheme threatened to cut off funding to the Lesbian Archive and Information Centre in 1988. The Archive was set up in 1984 with a grant from the GLC to pay for two workers and cover running costs (Lesbian Archive leaflet; see also Vada Hunt 1987). Meantime, the situation has worsened because of internal disputes between the 'management committee' and the workers. If the dispute is not settled, they will lose their grant ('Attempts at Archive settlement' 1989).

Feminist Audio Books (FAB) was set up in 1983 and is a mixed collective of blind, sighted and able-bodied women. Their aim is to record feminist, lesbian and other women-oriented books onto cassettes for blind, partly-sighted and other women having trouble with the printed word. All the readers and all the authors of the books are women. They also furnish the Feminist Archive with a copy of the cassettes. The GLC funded FAB from November 1985 to March 1986 and the collective took on paid workers. The London Boroughs Grants Unit funded FAB for a further year. Since then they have had no funding beyond donations and subscriptions (Katy Squire and Alison Behr 1988).

29. Gail Chester runs Ultra Violet Enterprises which is a publicity agency for feminist and other radical books and which offers a range of services to writers, small publishers and others. Ultra Violet has started a feminist publishing imprint with Prism Press in Bridport, Dorset and published its first two books in 1988.

30. The Second International Feminist Book Fair was held in Oslo in June 1986. Approximately 150 publishing houses from more than 30 countries were at the Fair and almost 100 writers from all over the world participated. Among the funding agencies were the United Nations International Decade of Women, NORAD (Norwegian Agency for Aid to Development), the Norwegian Publishers' Association and SIDA (Swedish Agency for Aid to Development) (Feminist Book Fair Group (comp.) 1986).

Spedding, and many others, felt that there was a difference between the London Fair and the Oslo Fair. This was due in part to the fact that Norway is a more privileged society than Britain. In London, there was a harder political tone and more confrontation, which was both challenging and constructive. The Oslo Fair was more of a trade event than about developing politics:

Some editors and booksellers I spoke to felt that, in a professional sense, the Oslo Fair was more successful, since the contacts made at the London Fair were being built upon, and there were more rights sold and more business being done among publishers. But the sale of books to the public was definitely down (Lisa Tuttle 1986a, 5).

Some felt that the two sides of the Fair did not come easily together:

But who and what was the fair for? In the publishing world bookfairs are about business. Feminist ones have attempted to set a different tradition. Going on the experience of the last two international feminist bookfairs it seems that the mix of book business and feminist politics sit uneasily together. On leaving Oslo several women cynically reflected on whether feminist publishing in itself is not enough to attract women in large numbers unless the carrot of cultural events and political debate accompanies it. In Oslo this was still not enough. The bookfair never seemed to come alive. Conflicts were certainly present but debates around them remained curiously passive (Pratibha Parmar and Sue O'Sullivan 1986, 18).

One of the main conflicts came from the way in which the sessions dedicated to lesbians and Third World women overlapped:

One, largely suppressed, internal row had to do with the lesbian writers' programme. The organisers decided that all major festival events

must be open to the public, so women-only events could only be offered as an alternative to the main programme. Many women were distressed that the 'Celebration of Lesbian Writing' was scheduled in opposition to talks by women writers from Africa, Pakistan and Palestine, feeling that it represented a false dichotomy between race and lesbianism. Yet the explosions threatened in private were defused in public - not resolved, only set aside.

There's something sinister about such insistence on niceness, as if we fear sisterhood won't survive the first disagreement (Lisa Tuttle 1986b, 7).

It was apparent to many that the issues raised at the London Fair were not resolved by the time of the Oslo Fair. There was still a defensiveness in the way some white women dealt with racism (on the issue of race at the London Fair, see Lorde's comments, quoted in text below). The conspicuous absence of some women led others to speculate:

Were Black feminists like Audre Lorde and Barbara Smith from the USA deliberately excluded? some women asked. Was this because they had spoken out and challenged the racism at the first international bookfair in London? (Parmar and O'Sullivan 1986, 19).

On the First International Feminist Book Fair, see the catalogue compiled by The Feminist Book Fair Group (1984) which contains articles about the origins of the Fair; see also Sarah Jane Evans (1984) and Roy Kerridge (1984). Fischer (1987) deals with this fair and others. *3<sup>e</sup> Foire internationale du livre féministe* (1988) was produced for the Third International Feminist Book Fair.

31. The catalogue is available free of charge to customers of the bookshops participating in the Fortnight. In 1986, 25,000 copies (excluding W H Smith's extra 15,000) were distributed by the Chatto/Cape/Methuen Group (Glendenning 1986). The 1985 catalogue represented 55 publishers and 200 titles; in 1986 there were 80 publishers and 300 titles. The catalogue is paid for by the publishers who paid £40 per title in 1986, though small independent publishers, 'publishing 12 or fewer titles per year', paid half that sum (Grace Evans 1986, 22). Those titles accepted in the 'Top Twenty' promotion paid £400 per title. 1986 was the first time the Fortnight had a full-time publicity officer; the eight judges for the Top Twenty were also paid (Jane Allen 1986, 8). Jane Allen was involved in putting together the first list of recommended titles in 1984:

I well remember the pressure from publishers and others to include particular titles - pressure which was resisted, except for a few books where the organisers' wishes prevailed. [...] Publishers were able to buy advertising space within the catalogue (ibid., 8).

According to Allen, this was in contrast with the way things were handled in 1986:

the publishers can now submit, with annotation, any titles they want - and they are all included, regardless of 'feminist content or merit' (ibid., 8).

All the books are promoted as new books, though some of them are re-issues.

32. The commercial success of feminist books has led to a change of heart on the part of the chains:

One of the biggest patrons of the fortnight has been W. H. Smith, the chain that once declined to handle *Spare Rib*. This year they are supporting the promotion at 150 of their shops, and have ordered an extra printing, at their own expense, of 15,000 copies of the catalogue. 'We recognise that we haven't catered sufficiently for this section of the market in the past. We want to put that right. The Feminist Book Fortnights are a great success' - more successful, because more sharply targeted, than the Book Marketing Council's promotions of the Ten Best This and the Twenty Best That (Glendenning 1986).

33. Grace Evans continues:

In recent years many of these bookshops, particularly in urban areas, have received grants from regional arts councils to help support the work of community writers, run literacy and mother tongue teaching projects, and cater for sectors of the community - women, Black women and men, the elderly, children, speakers of community languages and the disabled - largely ignored by mainstream bookshops. With the demise of the GLC and other metropolitan borough councils and the drop in levels of public support for the arts in general, this backing for bookshops has been largely removed (p. 23).

34. Jewish women have been silenced as a group by the feminist media and within the Women's Movement generally in Britain. Although The Women's Press is supposed to issue a collection of writings edited by the Jewish Feminist Group - which will be the first book to be published by and about contemporary British Jewish feminists - there is still no sign of it in their 1989 catalogue. The fact that Jewish

women have been denied a voice in feminist media has become clear at various times. Most recently, Jewish feminists were denied the opportunity to respond to an article appearing in *Spare Rib* by Jenny Bourne which attacked Jewish identity, equating it with Zionism. Jewish feminists met to discuss this article and out of those meetings came a pamphlet entitled *A Word in Edgeways: Jewish Feminists Respond*:

our exclusion from the feminist media is a painful reality that, after some thought, we realised we must deal with now. At the meeting, it emerged that, despite the anger of most women in the room, none of us had felt there was any point in writing to *Spare Rib* to complain about Jenny Bourne's article. This feeling was based on *Spare Rib's* refusal to print any of the letters they received from Jewish feminists following their critique of us in 1982-3 and their subsequent unwillingness to face what seemed to us to be antisemitism. The proof that nothing has changed was provided by discovering that *Spare Rib* had not printed a letter from the only Jewish Feminist we knew of who had written a letter critical of Jenny Bourne. Because we know this woman personally, we are aware that this happened. How many other women have been silenced unbeknown to the readership? (JF Publications (eds.) 1988, 1).

See also: Gill Seidel (1986) on 'antisemitism in an anti-Zionist guise' (pp. 147 - 8). Steven Cohen's *That's Funny, You Don't Look Anti-Semitic* (1984) examines anti-Semitism on the Left in Britain from a socialist perspective. Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz's essay 'To Be a Radical Jew in the Late Twentieth Century' (1986) illustrates the manifestations of anti-Semitism in the Women's Movement. Although she is writing about the USA, there are parallels with the British situation. See also: *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology* (ed. Evelyn Torton Beck 1982).

35. The backlists of the feminist houses after 10 to 15 years of publishing only now total about 1,000 titles. While it is probably fair to say that their impact has been far greater than the aggregate number of titles, it is still a very small number compared to the circa 55,000 books published in Britain each year.

### **PART III: CASE STUDIES OF WOMEN AND READING**

#### **A. Introduction**

The first two parts of this study looked at two literary institutions - academic criticism and the book trade - and at how they delineate readership patterns. Endeavours to change the relations between consumers and producers of literary culture were also analysed. This part examines three groups of women discussing their reading and the way their experience of reading is socially constructed in three contexts.

A range of methodological approaches to the question of readership was considered at the beginning of this project. Quantitative analysis answering such questions as 'what percentage of the female population reads Virago books?' was abandoned at an early stage when qualitative questions theorising the link between reading and gender and the social construction of reading in general became more pressing. The sample of readers was drawn up with the latter questions in mind. Case studies allowed for theorising - rather than generalising - and offered a more manageable unit of analysis than a survey. The criterion for selection was that of reaching women of a wide range of backgrounds as regards class, ethnicity, age, sexuality, level of education and life experience. While all the women interviewed were London-dwellers, many originated from other parts of the country and the rest of the world. Thus, while the sample makes no claims to being statistically representative of the

female population, it includes the experiences of individuals of extremely diverse backgrounds.<sup>1</sup> Although my initial interest had been to study the impact of feminist publishing, I opted for a broader spectrum of female readers. Women were therefore not approached on the basis of whether or not they read 'feminist books'.<sup>2</sup> The sample includes women belonging to social groups deemed likely to be sporadic readers, according to research into British reading habits.<sup>3</sup> It is not just the 'educated' reader that has opinions and attitudes to offer on books and reading: indeed, it is vital to listen to the stifled voices of those who have been cut off from certain kinds of reading and literacies.

Three case studies form the sample of readers. As schooling helps to shape most people's experience of reading and books, two case studies were drawn from educational settings. The first is a group of 11- to 17-year-old girls who were pupils at an Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) mixed-sex comprehensive. This particular school was chosen because it has a very mixed population as regards class and ethnicity; many of the children are immigrants or children of immigrants. The second group consists of women between the ages of 18 and 41, again of a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds. Many are speakers of English as a Foreign Language (ESL). They were enrolled in an ILEA College of Further Education to take English courses designed to improve their chances of finding work. The third group is a snow-ball sample of women who defined themselves in one way or another as feminists and who read feminist books. They come from a variety of backgrounds.

Written questionnaires were rejected as they would have biased the sample in favour of the more highly educated women and those whose first language was English. This was confirmed while I was interviewing at the College of Further Education. In her interview, Maxine was very communicative, interested in the research and forthcoming in her responses. On another occasion, I helped her to fill in a form and noticed how very brief and repetitive her answers were because she had difficulty expressing herself in writing. Written questionnaires would have elicited very little from her. Instead of using questionnaires, I conducted semi-focussed interviews which covered a series of points about attitudes to reading and gender issues and about reading habits, but which also allowed the subject to develop issues important to her. Rigid interview schedules would have imposed certain categories *a priori* and would not have allowed others I had not thought of to emerge; this would have been contrary to the exploratory nature of my work. Each interview was different. I allowed myself to be drawn into conversation without trying to suggest 'appropriate answers'; I felt this to be particularly important given the institutional setting of two of the case studies and the fact that I might be seen as an authority figure.<sup>4</sup> But even if the subjects produced discourses that they felt to be 'appropriate', this would itself be a valid finding: school and reading are plagued with worries about approval.<sup>5</sup> Of course, feminist culture is also an institution encouraging consensus: in the third group, I tried to allow space for each woman's own version of feminism to emerge.<sup>6</sup> New issues were followed up as they surfaced and sometimes incorporated into subsequent

interviews. This is justified by the fact that this work is concerned with theory-building, rather than with statistical analysis and proving hard and fast hypotheses.

My first approach was a pilot interview with a group of fifth form girls to see if the points I wished to cover yielded any results. They did. Subsequent interviews were individual to allow for greater depth and to diminish peer pressure. All of the interviews were taped. Questions centred on reading and gender, but also covered the individual's background and interests. Looking at the ways in which reading is socially constructed also means contextualising it; thus I tried to assess the importance of reading for each of them. Publishers, teachers, writers and librarians who believe that reading books changes lives tend to attribute an excessive function to the books they are pushing (or pulling off shelves). Most of the women I spoke to do not read vast amounts of books.

I have organised the material from these interviews into three sections corresponding to each of the three groups, to preserve their distinct character. While the various groups raised similar issues, each setting fostered different kinds of literacies. The schoolgirls were learning what I call a *literacy of differentiation*. Categorisation of 'good literature' and 'trash' and of their readers was central to their discourse. While all the girls showed an awareness of this concern, some resisted its dominance. Appropriation of and resistance to this discourse was split along class and ethnic lines as part of the process of educational

streaming. The women in Further Education have been encouraged to perceive literacy as a series of discrete skills which, once attained, will enable them to get a job. This is the logical continuation of a literacy based on differentiation. Because these women have been encouraged to develop only a fragmentary literacy, I call this a *literacy of alienation*. Both these literacies enforce consensus because their fragmentary nature does not empower the individual to make the link between the personal and the political. Breaking this link obscures the social construction of literacy and enables the ideology of 'personal response' to become the catch-all for 'failure'. A literacy of alienation paves the way for alienation in the labour market and from the rest of society's institutions. It must be stressed that the constant reproduction of these limited forms of literacy are not to be blamed on individual teachers but is rather the result of wider social policy (see Ira Shor 1986; see also Bourdieu and Passeron 1977 on social reproduction through education; and Scafe 1989 on co-optation of oppositional discourses). The group of feminist readers was different. In Paulo Freire's terms, they were developing a political or critical literacy which enabled them to make the links between the word and the world (Freire and Macedo 1987), with particular reference to gender. Because it empowers the individual to remake the links between the personal and the political, I call this *feminist literacy*. Unlike most of the women in the other two groups, these women explicitly articulated the link between their identity and experience and their place in society. Feminist literacy enables them to locate themselves in the social

hierarchy and to understand the role the literary sphere plays in upholding the *status quo*.

Extensive quoting from the interviews will allow, I hope, for the voices of all these women to emerge. Although I have referred to the interviewees by name throughout, this is to preserve the distinctiveness of their voices; I do not expect the reader to keep track of each one.

## B. Learning Differentiation

### 1. The School

The school is a modern building encircled by trees and tucked away behind a main road in West London. A mixed-sex comprehensive in the doomed Inner London Education Authority (ILEA), the school has a commitment to anti-sexist and anti-racist educational policies.<sup>7</sup> Upon entering the building, one is immediately aware of the diversity of the student population. The corridors are decorated with pictures the pupils have painted of their countries of origin and captioned in their native tongues. Approximately eighty languages are spoken by the children in the school. Working-class children and middle-class children attend this school.

I interviewed both the present and a former librarian about book buying policies and the reading habits of the girls in the school. Both librarians actively supported the anti-sexist policy and believed there was a need to 'redress the balance'. The library stocked books portraying 'strong girls'. They subscribed to *Everywoman* magazine but it was not very popular. The library also had a positive policy towards lesbians and gay men which was reflected in the choice of books. Many such books had disappeared. The girls tended to be shy about asking for lesbian books directly. Rather they would ask if there were any more books 'like' another lesbian title they had read. Now that many had been stolen, they had no point of reference. The previous librarian said that these books

were often taken out 'unofficially' only to reappear on the shelves at a later date. Such books were collected in the 'Friends, Feelings, Families' section along with other books about relationships and growing up. (The section had previously been called 'Romance', but was changed for ideological reasons.) A particularly popular title with a lesbian theme was *Annie On My Mind*. The library included a Women's Studies section and mounted a special display for International Women's Day. According to the librarian, books from the feminist presses, especially Virago, were popular with the girls.

Romances were, however, the most sought after books. The girls especially liked the Sweet Dreams series, but the library did not stock these books. When the library had stocked these books, they were so popular that the girls fought over them or stole them. The librarians were against buying romances; they felt they were incompatible with their anti-sexist policy because of the stereotypical images of girls these books present. But, while both librarians believed it was important to make 'positive images' available, they questioned this approach to some degree. The present librarian wondered if it were not counter-productive to dissuade the girls from reading romance novels when she was primarily concerned with encouraging reading. She felt that if they acquired a taste for reading, they might then 'progress' to the 'classics'. The former librarian had different qualms about discouraging the girls from reading Sweet Dreams:

I mean the problem I find about this discussion about Sweet Dreams, and I always get angry and it's a stock line of mine at librarians' meetings - everyone groans, 'cause every single time I get very cross - because the discussion about sexism in children's reading always focusses around Sweet Dreams and I think why doesn't it focus on science-fiction or cowboys - you know all the kinds of things that boys read - or Stephen King [...].

I mean, I buy science-fiction. I'm not very critical about science fiction - it's more or less universally read by boys. I'm not half as critical about that as I am about the other. And the other thing is that you end up saying that girls have got a problem. And if you're going to concentrate on how terrible Sweet Dreams and stuff is - you end up - and trying to hassle girls about that - you end up with saying, you know, you've got a problem. We're telling girls that there's something wrong with girls yet again - everybody's said that to them and it's just another area [...].

Both librarians maintained that reading was gendered. Not only did girls read more than boys, but the choice of reading material was different. Girls read more fiction and especially liked reading about relationships. Boys read more non-fiction and were particularly keen on Kung Fu and weaponry. When reading fiction, boys were more interested in science-fiction and westerns.

Anti-racism was also a major concern in the school. The library stocked books by Black and Asian authors and in foreign languages. Maya Angelou and Alice Walker were popular Black authors with the girls. The librarians had introduced a special scheme to encourage critical thinking on racism and sexism. Students concerned about the

racism or sexism in a given book could fill in a form to point out negative language, pictures or stories. Students were asked to decide whether the book should be kept on the shelves with a sticker warning other readers of its offensive nature, or removed. Books were generally not taken off the shelves unless they totally excluded girls, e.g., books with such titles as *Carpentry for Boys*.

Girls and boys had few criteria for choosing books other than 'judging by the cover'. They generally preferred paperbacks to the more imposing hardbacks. The librarian believed that students needed more input from teachers because when a teacher recommended a book, they would ask for it in the library. Students were also influenced in their choice of books by other media, especially television. *Anne of Green Gables* and *Northanger Abbey* had just been broadcast and this occasioned requests for those titles.

## 2. The Interviews

Two teachers assisted me in arranging the interviews. After initial contact with a group of fifth year girls, I decided to proceed with individual interviews with girls of a variety of reading skills and attitudes to reading. It was as important to interview girls who were 'poor' readers or who disliked reading as it was to interview those who were 'good' readers or enjoyed reading. The girls also came from different class and ethnic backgrounds. In order to trace any development in attitudes to reading and gender, I interviewed 22 girls of different ages. Eight came from the same

first year class, two from the fourth year, nine from the fifth and three from the sixth form. Because there was a noticeable shift in attitudes to reading from the first form girls (ages 11 - 12) to the older girls (ages 14 - 17), I have presented the material in two parts. The duration of the interviews varied but was limited by the length of the class period.

The girls discussed many aspects of their reading habits. I asked them how often they went to the library, how many books they read a month, how they chose their books, what and how much the other members of their family read, if they bought and owned books, if they felt reading was encouraged at home and so on. I wished to gain an idea of what role reading played in their lives. Reading was not a priority for most of the girls. They engaged in a range of extracurricular activities from football and ice-skating to politics and music. Even their primary form of cultural consumption was not in the written form. Most girls watched television and listened to music; occasionally they went to the cinema. They spent time with friends and siblings at home and outside. Shopping was a popular pastime, even when it was just window-shopping. One of their major concerns was homework. Ironically, they felt it took time away from reading. Many girls found they were able to read more during school holidays.

Most girls did find time to read books. Some read daily, after school or at bed-time. Others read less often. Only one girl claimed to read virtually nothing at all. Magazine reading was

popular and wide-ranging. They read teen magazines such as *Just 17*, *Smash Hit* and *Jackie* as well as the newspapers they found at home: *The Sun*, *The Guardian*, *The Gleaner* and others. Many girls went regularly to the public library and, although few bought books frequently, they included bookshops in their regular rounds of window-shopping; this gave them ideas about books to look for in the library. Some girls came from homes where books abounded, others where there were hardly any books at all. Either way, most girls felt that their families encouraged them to read.

The girls mentioned many titles. Judy Blume was a favourite author with the younger girls, although there was controversy over her novel *Forever* because it was what some of them termed 'rude' (i.e., it discussed sex). Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* was popular with the younger girls and some of them also enjoyed reading Agatha Christie. The older girls mentioned numerous titles within a range of genres: romance, pulp fiction (e.g., by Jackie Collins), the classics, books by Black authors and by women, including those published by Virago and, to a lesser degree, The Women's Press. (These interviews were carried out shortly before the launch of the Upstarts and Livewires series these two presses now put out for teenage girls.) Although the authors, titles and genres mentioned were many, the girls spoke almost exclusively about novels. Even when I specifically asked about non-fiction, the girls indicated that their reading was generally confined to novels. This would appear to confirm the librarians' observation that the choice of books is gender-specific.

The girls' discussions with me focussed less on reading habits than on the experience of reading. The institutional setting in which reading is taught and where much of it takes place shapes our attitudes to reading. This process becomes more entrenched through the years: the younger girls all liked reading and focussed on their enjoyment of the story-line. Many relished relating whole plots. While they no doubt read at different levels, the way they talked about reading was very similar. Girls in the fourth year and above were distinguishable as different types of readers. By this age, feelings of obligation and boredom had manifested themselves in relation to their reading. These feelings illustrate the ways in which reading is socially constructed. Those girls who accepted the obligation to read what they were told to read discussed reading in terms of differentiation: they talked of books which they 'should' read and books which they 'shouldn't' read. Those who resisted that sense of obligation generally either read the 'wrong' books and claimed it made no difference or expressed their resistance by saying reading was *boring*.

The girls also spoke about reading in terms of experience and identification. The ability to identify was important in establishing the sense of obligation (distinction) or resistance (boredom). The category of experience exposed the sense of belonging or unbelonging to the hegemonic culture.

### 3. First Year Girls

The first year girls I interviewed came from a wide range of backgrounds. Gail was Black British; Angie was Asian British and spoke Punjabi as well as English; Eileen was born in England of Irish parents; Michele was white English; Sameya was born in England of Pakistani parents, had herself spent some time in Pakistan and spoke both English and Urdu; Sarah's mother was white English and her father Indian; Rachel was white of mixed Belgian and English descent; Hannah was white and her mother was American and her father was English. The girls came from working-class and middle-class backgrounds and from one and two parent families; all had siblings.

#### a. Gender

In one way or another, all the girls perceived sexism to be an issue. They all believed sexism to be wrong and that girls and women should have equality.

When I observed Michele and Gail in class, I noticed that they would sit together and that they seemed to put energy into resisting schooling. In their interviews, they were less communicative than the other girls, avoiding eye contact and not wasting words. This was especially true of Michele, who only livened up when I asked her about her future and she answered she would probably be expelled from school for 'being cheeky'. She had a hard time concealing her smile as she told me this and finally did break into a laugh when I asked

her if she enjoyed being cheeky. She did. Gail was more communicative and did consider her answers to my questions. I mention their attitude because while they may have found English classes and my interest in their reading in some way irrelevant, when I asked them if men and women were equal both were very clear in what they thought. The firmness of their voices contrasted to the listlessness in their tone elsewhere. Michele stated: 'No, they're meant to be equal, but they're not. They should be'. Similarly, Gail said: 'They should be equal'. But she didn't think they were 'because there's some things girls aren't allowed to do'.

Angie held the same view:

They aren't equal, but they should be, 'cause the ladies, their work is not just to be a housewife. You see, 'cause all the men, they go out to the pubs and drink and they work as well, but they have enjoyment. The ladies don't have that much enjoyment [...]. They go home and cook [...] and when they get a child, the lady has to go out and get the child, 'cause then the man's at home or he's at work. [...] That's not fair.

Their perception of gender roles within their own families varied. Angie said of her mother, who was a housewife: 'I think she's quite happy the way she is' but added, 'I'd like to be different'. Eileen finds her brother's behaviour very sexist. Outside the family, the girls could think of specific cases of sexism and generally questioned the gender roles they had encountered. Rachel liked sports very much, but had come across obstacles in practicing them:

My brother plays soccer. So I was the first girl in my old school to go on the football team.

Yet she found that they tried not to let her play:

Like at my old school, boys would sort of say 'Oh, 'cause you're a girl'. I said, 'what's wrong with being a girl?'

She also believed that a lot of other girls found this behaviour annoying:

'cause quite a lot of my friends want to go out and they like playing football. [...] The headmaster we had was quite sexist because he wouldn't give us a ball. But he retired, so they're getting a new headteacher.

When I asked if she had let this discourage her from playing, she answered with a firm 'no'.

Sarah also believed that 'boys can do girls' things and girls can do boys' things' and found that in her family this was accepted. She has a brother:

You know we've got a tree in our backyard and we both climb trees and all that - we don't have to do different things.

Other boys were another story:

They say, 'no, you're a girl, go away'. [...] I just tell them to shut up and do that and play. It's like in drama yesterday, we were standing next to boys and the boys refused to hold our hands when we were told to make a circle. I said 'we're only girls, we're not *poisonous*'.

Eileen met with sexism at home as well as outside:

Well, I find, like some people are very sexist. Like boys - if you want to play football, they say 'oh, you can't do that'; in a book they'll say 'oh, you can't do that, you'll get yourself all mucky and boys can only do that'. [...] Like my brother's very sexist, he'll say, 'you can do the washing up and all this lot' and he won't do a damn thing and he'll say, 'oh, that's women's work, men have all the fixing, like electronically, all things like that'. Well, I don't like that. I think men have just as well chance as a lady and a lady's got just as good chance as a man. I mean, why can't life be like that? I mean, if a boy's good at football, why don't give a girl a chance at being good at football, because I said to people you have to give a girl a chance. And some people take it too seriously. Like when we play football, like in a game, they'll say 'oh, you stupid, you shouldn't have let that goal in'. And I think, why do you take it so seriously and everything?

Their attitudes to gender roles also emerged in relation to their envisaged future. No one said she wanted to be, as they phrased it, 'just a housewife'. Sameya was not sure whether or not she would like to get married and have a family, but she was certain that she would like to go to university and work; because her cousin had just got a job as a secretary, she thought she might like to do that as well. Rachel said she'd 'like to go to college or university and study sort of English [and] become an English teacher or something

like that'. In any case, she was clear that she'd 'like to work'. I asked if she would be interested in having a family and she replied: 'Yeah - but have time to have a career first'. She felt she could manage this by working part-time and having her partner share the responsibilities: 'Take it in turns to look after it, because people get more used to one parent'. Eileen oscillated between the desire to become a fashion-designer, a hairdresser or a writer (she had a very good idea of the inner workings of publishing) and much bleaker prospects:

I could see that in about ten years' time that I might be on a dole queue or I might be out doing - working in a shop or something - I don't see myself as a fashion designer somehow [...] that's what I'd like to do, but I can't see myself doing it.

She herself recognised that she suffered from lack of confidence. But she wanted a career for herself and was less than enthusiastic about marriage and children:

Well, I don't mind having a family, but you see, I want a good career and I don't want to be the only person who's just in the house. I want a career just as well as my husband or whatever will be. I want to prove to people that I'm not going to be just a housewife, like just staying around the house, cleaning up. I'm going to let the man do it just as well as what I'm doing.

Sarah hoped to become a doctor. When I asked her how she saw her personal life she said 'I suppose I'll get married'. As she didn't sound enthusiastic, I asked if the idea appealed to her: 'I don't know, it depends who I marry'. Again, as regards children her reply

was: 'I should think so'. However, she added: 'I don't think I'd be a housewife and just stay at home. I don't think I could really bear that. But at the same time, I wouldn't just leave my kids in someone else's house'. She felt that childcare was not necessarily a women's job and she knew 'a man in the house who does all the housework. He does everything [...] this is my mum's friend [...] her husband does all the housework'.

In spite of the perception that sexism existed in their daily lives, that greater equality was desirable and that they wanted lives which were fulfilling for themselves, the word 'feminism' did not generally produce a positive response. Gail and Eileen said they did not know what it meant. Hannah said she did not know, but that it conjured up negative feelings. Yet she believed that women and men should be equal. Sarah was somewhat more specific and said a feminist was 'a woman who's into women's lib and all that sort of thing. [...] I'm not sure really you know, you hear the words around a lot and you don't [know] really'. She personally thought it meant: 'A woman who's really for women's rights and all that sort of thing - women shouldn't have this and women shouldn't have that'. It would seem therefore that she perceived it to be proscriptive: 'I don't know - it's all right women wanting their rights, but, you know, but sometimes they go much to extremes - they just keep on and on. I think people get bored of it sometimes'. I asked what her mother and elder sister thought about the issue: 'I'm not sure. I think they [...] think that the world should be equal - the country should be equal, but I don't think they're into women's rights'.

It was only Angie who replied positively to my question of what she thought about feminism, by saying, in a much more enthusiastic tone than her words belie, 'I think it's all right'.

The school may have presented an 'anti-sexist' curriculum, but somehow feminism got left out. In this way, discourses on gender fall in with the rest of the normative discourses school produces. Anti-sexism does not enable a critique of those normative discourses. Rather than empower, anti-sexism as it is currently constructed risks a decontextualising discourse which keeps women in the category of 'victim' or 'problem' in much the same way as 'anti-racism' does with racial minorities.

#### b. Reading

The most popular books at the time of the interviews were Judy Blume's novels about about teenagers. Unlike the older girls, the first year girls did not have definite preferences for female authors or characters. Angie and Rachel said that they had no preference regarding the sex of the characters. Sarah said she liked the characters 'to be exciting' and, when asked about her preference for male or female protagonists, said she liked 'both - I don't really mind - as long as it's a good book - it's all right'. Bileen elaborated:

I don't mind. Most stories that I read might have girls or boys in them. I don't mind. What comes first - I mean, I don't mind if it's a brother or a sister or a whole family. I mean I don't mind that, but I don't like it if maybe during the

whole story it was just one character being mentioned a lot. I like to have lots of different characters - like a play, you have lots of different characters.

Sameya preferred the main character to be a girl, but liked both female and male characters. Although the girls generally claimed that the actual sex of the character was unimportant, the girls preferred certain characteristics in the portrayal of female characters. Rachel said she liked girl characters 'to be tough and not to be pulled around by boys'. She had come across sexism in books:

Well, the authors should be a bit more careful when they're writing it, because one book was towards boys, then a girl picked it up and read it - you know - if it was really sexist [...] a couple of books I've read have sort of the boys going around playing football and the girls are just sort of - and the boys wouldn't let them play at all.

Sarah said she liked the female character to be 'exciting but [...] I don't like her to be all plummy'. When asked how she liked male characters to be she said: 'Well, they're usually in Judy Bloom all handsome'. There was not generally much elaboration on male characters; they just were. This would appear to indicate a greater identification with the female characters than the girls recognise. The female characters in those books have:

One side of them which is really tough but, oh - there's some on the other side that's romantic and all that. You get two sides of them. If they're - when they're being liked by a boy, they're all

romantic and when the boy hates them they get all tough.

This remark suggests, of course, that Sarah feels that the girls in these books are still revolving around and dependent on the male characters. Eileen doesn't like girls to be all good:

When I read a lot of books they're always that type of girl who shows off - who wants to act cool, like. There was a book by Judy Blume called *Sheila the Great* and the girl in it she can't swim or anything and these friends of hers say 'oh come on, we'll show you' and all that. And I like a story that has a person who shows off and a person who's not always good, but is bad as well, because I don't like a story where someone is just a goody-goody all the time. I like it when they're good and bad - or in between, like they get up to mischief or something. Because you can't go through a story without someone being a naughty person.

The girls' remarks suggest that they are less aware of the double consciousness which they bring to their reading than are the older girls. They can read books in which the boys have all the adventures and enjoy those adventures through their 'male' eyes. When reading about the more romantic female heroines they can like the toughness and tenderness which they display at appropriate times with their boyfriends. These protagonists are seen by the girls to walk the narrow line between allowing themselves to be caught up in a relationship without being pushed around by it.

The tension that exists for the girls between their male and female eyes is illustrated in the way they talk about *The Turbulent*

*Term of Tyke Tiler*, a book that they read and discussed as a class (Gene Kemp 1977). This is a story told in the first person by Tyke Tiler about her various adventures during the term which ultimately culminate in her falling from the roof of the school building onto which she has climbed. The twist is that Tyke Tiler's 'boyish' adventures are carried out by her female frame. It is only at the end of the story that we learn she is indeed a girl. The book belongs to the 'positive images' brand of feminism which argues that women can do 'men's' things, but which falls short of analysing the value of what men do. However, from the discussion I had with the girls, it appears to be a useful way of getting young readers to think about gender roles through their reading. The class teacher told me that the boys hated the book once they found out the protagonist was a girl; this indicates that they are already secure in their notion of what constitutes male territory. The girls on the other hand liked the book because it was about a girl and challenged those boundaries.

Gail claimed she had paid little attention when the teacher read the book to the class, but she caught enough to be surprised 'cause she was a girl'. She also said that she liked the portrayal of a girl doing 'boy' things, that she found it realistic and that it was important to show it. When asked why she liked the book, Hannah said, 'Well, I just thought it was adventurous'. But then she added that she had been surprised that Tyke was a girl and 'that's why I like it 'cause [...] you were sure it was a boy.' She wasn't sure why she thought it was a boy: 'just the way she acted'. Angie had

also been sure it was a boy: 'The boys were really amazed and I was as well'. Tyke's behaviour was astonishing 'cause mainly she climbed trees and she'd done most the things that boys do'. She knew no girls like that, though she admitted to climbing trees upon occasion herself. She added: 'I liked the way it ended [...] because in the end it said she turned out to be a girl [and] 'cause most of the things she does was what boys do'. She also liked the fact that Tyke Tiler was not afraid to do these things because 'most of the time [girls are] scared to do the things that boys do'.

Sarah thought:

That was a good book because, well, it was adventurous and when you found out it was a girl - you know because of all the things the character did - they were all boyish things - and when you found out it was a girl, you're really surprised.

Though, in real life she felt that 'boys can do girls' things and girls can do boys' things'. Rachel enjoyed the book and was surprised by the ending because Tyke was

playing football, climbing roofs and going down ditches and all that and climbing around and going into the boys' toilets and everything - 'cause in part of it he [sic] went up into the boys' toilets and slept up there. And so you assumed it would be a boy. And at the end when you find out it was a girl, you know, it kind of surprised me.

Rachel's comments are telling. Although she knows by now that Tyke Tiler is a girl, as she talks about Tyke's adventures, she forgets herself and calls her 'he' (as did Eileen) and also assumed she went

to the boys' toilets. It is not only the outside world that has impressed gender roles upon her. Rachel is herself a footballer, hockey-player and swimmer who put up a fight to be the first girl player on her previous school's football team. In real life, such activities on the part of a girl would not surprise her or her female classmates. Rather, she and her classmates - girls and boys - have learned to read stories in a certain way and to have certain expectations. In particular, the girls have learned to read adventure stories with their male eyes and enjoy the story from that point of view. The surprise ending was such a pleasant surprise for them because it allowed them to bring that doubleness momentarily together. Similarly the boys were unpleasantly surprised because it temporarily displaced them from what they held to be rightfully theirs.

The girls in this group had already been socialised in what they read and in the expectations they had from their reading. This is apparent with regard to gender. The girls show different preferences in their choice of books from the boys and they also expect female characters to act in stereotypical ways. Anti-sexism has become part of their vocabularies and has crossed over into their attitudes to reading, but only to a certain extent. Through the concepts of sexism and anti-sexism, the category of gender is largely perceived in negative terms, e.g., reading sexist books is 'bad' for you.

Unlike the older girls, the first year girls did not generally distinguish between types of books. Of course, they had their preferences and mentioned liking mysteries, ghost stories, adventure stories, Judy Blume's books, Sweet Dreams and books by American authors. Eileen read The Bible and Sameya was learning to read The Koran. They also read star-sign books, comics, poems, a variety of newspapers and magazines and books about soap operas and pop stars. All went regularly to the school and public libraries and read regularly, often everyday. Although the girls liked the books they read to varying degrees, they talked of their reading in terms of enjoyment, rather than in terms of differentiation and obligation. They believed that reading was good for you because it was enjoyable (Angie) and good for your English (Angie and Sameya) and because it helps you learn (Gail), but, unlike the older girls, they did not distinguish between types of books being better or worse for one to read. Sarah was the only one to mention having heard that it was good to read the classics from her mother and elder sister, but she did not see the distinction between types of books herself. The only times the first year girls thought a book might not be good was if a young child read about sex (Hannah and Eileen) or if a book were racist (Rachel, Eileen and Sameya) or sexist (Eileen and Sameya). Given that they were aware of the library's scheme to point out sexist and racist books, it is not surprising that this was an issue.

#### 4. Older Girls

I interviewed the older girls in two different situations. As mentioned above, my first contact was with a group of six fifthform girls: Tasha, Eliza, Dolores, Juliet, Alice and Xanthe. I later went on to interview ten girls individually, two of whom had been in the original group. In the fourth form, I spoke with Sandra, a white Latin American girl and Heather, who was of Afro-Caribbean descent. In the fifth form, I interviewed Rebecca, Alice and Xanthe, who were white English, and Georgette and Dellary, who were of Afro-Caribbean descent. In the sixth year, Rose was Black (her mother was born here and her father was Venezuelan) and Emma and Charlotte were white English. The girls were also from different class backgrounds; generally the white girls were middle-class, while the Black and Latin American girls were working-class. All of the girls lived with their mothers, but only half of them lived with their fathers as well.

##### a. Gender

Almost all the girls perceived gender to be an important issue. This was clear in their discussions of gender roles inside and outside the family and in the way in which they perceived their future and their sexuality. The girls did not bring up issues openly relating to sexuality with great ease; rather, they approached the

issue in a discussion of relations between the sexes or in terms of what they wanted for their personal lives.

All envisaged some kind of working future for themselves. Rebecca and Alice were thinking of careers in journalism or perhaps in research or politics respectively. Emma felt that careers were especially important for women: 'I think it's important for women and certainly, yes, I suppose I do think it's important for me'. She had in fact chosen to do science A-levels partially because she was a woman and this would give her more self-confidence. She talked about the possibility of writing in the future and was certainly as interested in the humanities as she was in the sciences. Charlotte was also doing maths and science A-levels. Heather wanted to go on to college, but she had not decided exactly what she would study. She also thought she might like to be a dancer. Xanthe had thought of going into medicine and in any case wanted to travel. Dellary was certain she wanted to work as she had already tried it. Working in a hairdressers on Saturdays was something she liked, but she thought she might try something else. She did not want to continue her education beyond school level. Sandra, already bilingual (Spanish was her first language), wanted to learn another language and return to her native South America as a tri-lingual secretary. Georgette wanted to become a fashion designer. The other girls wanted to continue their education, but were not sure of the career they would choose. Many of the career options mentioned were generally female occupations - hairdressing, fashion-designing, secretarial work and writing - which are poorly paid. It does not seem that the girls

have been invited to think their options through in any detail. Only Emma voiced recognition that girls and women were channeled in certain directions, i. e., away from the sciences.

Their envisaged future on a personal level was less traditional. This may in part be because not all lived in traditional families. Only five of the girls lived with their mothers and fathers, one lived with her mother and stepfather, two lived with their mothers and two lived with their mothers and grandmothers. Rose's father had never lived with her and her mother. Rose was clear about wanting a career and said she could not imagine working with children and a husband. She might live with someone eventually, but now she was concerned with staying with her disabled mother and, as far as she was concerned, marriage was 'death' and a 'trap'. When talking about their future, most did not emphasise the personal. No one categorically stated a desire to get married and have children. Sandra was the only one to mention a boyfriend in her present life.

Dellary was a very lively young woman who needed no prodding to talk whatsoever. Indeed, she brought up all the issues I was interested in before I even got a chance to ask her. She lived with her mother and step-father who were from the Caribbean. She was an active member of an evangelical church and this in many ways gave her a different outlook on life from the other girls. Her views on men and marriage were a curious mixture of the progressive and the traditional. She was not interested in going out with boys 'because after you see [...] all them girls - 15, 16, 17 - they're pregnant

The boy never loved you - the boy just came to get what he wanted and then he left you'. She first said she never wanted to get married, but then considered she might after she had lived her own life:

The only time I want to get married is when I reach about 25. When I've really seen the world for myself, instead of getting down to one relationship and you realise you haven't done anything with your life. So I want a time when I want to *enjoy myself* - make sure I've got things, a bit of money behind me, before I think of getting married.

She is also clear about not wanting to get into the wrong relationship because in her religion 'you stay together', though her own parents had not.

Xanthe was leaving her options open. She said she had 'to have a career', but was not excluding a family:

It wouldn't stop me if I had a career, but I wouldn't - Alice says, 'You know, I'm not going to have a family' - I don't know if she said that to you - if I found that I wanted to have a family, then I would. I wouldn't positively say that I wouldn't or I would have family.

Her sister, Emma, was also leaving things open. She had had a boyfriend a few years back, but she was not interested in boys now. Although she said she thought she was probably heterosexual, she did not exclude the possibility of a lesbian relationship. Indeed, her most 'intense' relationships were with her girlfriends, but she found boys interesting to talk to as they 'see things at a different angle'. If she were to get married, she felt it would not be a conventional marriage.

Charlotte was uncertain about her future but

I don't see my life as just getting married or living with someone and having children [...]. I see it as me making decisions, they might not be the right ones or the wrong ones, but being me.

She did not 'see another person there' deciding for her, but felt she had a choice about whether to have a career, a family or both.

Although some girls appeared to be interested in relationships, none of them professed to be aiming primarily at that. Whether or not that is the case, it is certain that alternatives have entered their minds either through family experience or the kinds of discourses they have absorbed through feminism about finding satisfaction in a life and career of their own. It is in terms of satisfaction, rather than economic necessity and independence, that many of them seem to place the emphasis.

Although the girls had taken on some ideas from feminism and were also aware of sexism as an issue, feminism produced ambivalent and sometimes negative images for them. The girls in the group discussion declared themselves not to be feminists. They didn't like the actual word and the 'man-haters' they said it conjured up for them and, more importantly, for others. However, it seemed that while they claimed they were not feminists, much of what they said about the roles of women and men sounded like what could loosely be termed feminist sentiments. Alice 'didn't like the word feminist' and felt that women and men should be equal, but that women should

not form separate groups. Xanthe objected that separate groups were acceptable as men had had theirs up till now. But there was also the feeling that while feminists were 'supposed to be making it better, not worse', they were in fact just trying to turn things around in such a way that women were on top of men. Such women were 'man-haters'.

When I asked the group if any of them considered themselves to be feminists, they all said 'no'. However, Dolores took Xanthe up on this: 'You wouldn't consider yourself feminist?' to which Xanthe replied she would not. (In her individual interview, she explains her rejection of the label, see below.) When I asked the girls what feminist meant, they talked about 'someone who wants to get on with life'. Xanthe explained: 'we're all ambitious, we don't want to be stuck at home with ten kids and washing up. We want to get out and do something'. Another added: 'It doesn't bother me one way or the other, just so long as we're not put down'. Alice said:

I don't tend to agree with feminists now or people that call themselves feminist. I tend to agree with the women who started it off - the suffragettes - because all they wanted was equality, not female dominance. But now it's gone so beyond the point of equality, everything that men do - that's what I hate. It's like Black people - everything that white people do is wrong.<sup>13</sup>

In the individual interviews, the girls had more of a chance to elaborate their feelings about feminism, without peer pressure. Even so, Xanthe and Rebecca were alone in accepting the term 'feminist'

for themselves. For Xanthe, this was a qualified and non-public acceptance. As she first said:

I don't categorise myself as a feminist, but I would say I was towards feminism.

When I asked her why she would not use the term to describe herself she said:

Because when you say you are a feminist, then everyone jumps to the conclusion that you're a total feminist and that you're anti-male. I would express my views and I would go to meetings, but I wouldn't go so far as to ban men from things I was doing.

But she continued:

But if a boy asked me if I was a feminist and I said yeah, they expect me not to talk to them. I mean some people see feminists as a threat to themselves. So it's hard to say that you're a feminist without saying that you're not a threat to them.

When I asked her if she meant that she was feminist within herself but would not say so for fear of being misunderstood, she said:

Basically, yeah. But it wouldn't stop me from saying something, if I thought that it was wrong. I don't think it's wrong to be a feminist, but I hate the way people misinterpret the word.

Rebecca gave her own definition of feminism:

It's not sort of getting independent and not having husbands or boyfriends. I think it's being able to stand up for yourself and make your own decisions, being able to do what you want and not because of your colour or because you're a woman.

According to this definition, Rebecca felt that she was probably a feminist.

Sandra felt that her Latin culture and feminism were incompatible: 'I don't agree with that really with my upbringing':

Some people, they go over the top about it - I mean, yeah, all right. You should have the same kind of jobs - but some people they go over they go so much over the top they're against men - some of them resent men - I don't really agree with that.

I asked if she believed in equality at work:

Yeah, but to a certain extent, you know. I don't know, I don't think it should be such - so put forward - there should be this, there should be that - if there are fine - if there are not, then there are not.

Yet at the same time, when I asked her if she thought racism and sexism were important issues and if she liked the way they were dealt with in the curriculum, she said:

They certainly are - because I know friends from other schools, say boys, and when I say I'm taking design and technology and they go 'I beg your pardon' - I mean you have to take it in this school, you have to.

The boys from boys' schools that she knows are surprised because what she thinks of as something that both sexes do, they think of as something only boys would do.

For Georgette, that women were not equal did not matter and she asked me in some surprise if it mattered to me. She described herself as generally non-political, although racism was an important issue for her. Rose felt that what was meant by feminism was unclear. However, for her women's issues were important, especially equal opportunities and being assertive and not pushed aside. This was important in both the work and the personal spheres. Although she felt very strongly about women's rights, animal rights, racism and anti-apartheid, she did not see herself as political as politics were 'boring'.<sup>9</sup>

Although Heather said the word 'feminism' meant nothing to her, she felt quite strongly about sexism, as she did about racism. She believed there were different expectations of her as a girl: 'Like the women bus drivers, up until a little while, there weren't any of those, but there are quite a few now'. She felt it was good to see women doing such jobs and that it did make a difference.

Although her mother belonged to a women's group at her place of work, Charlotte did not like to use the word feminist to describe herself. She did, however, believe women's issues to be important. She felt she was fortunate that her parents did not limit her because she was female. Emma came from a politicised socialist family, but was critical of the way the male members in her family sometimes behaved. She and her sister both believed women's issues to be important, as did their mother, but she felt her mother was leaving it to her generation to sort things out. However, she thought her

mother had acquired more confidence from her daughters and from her own career. Although her father is a socialist who thinks he is non-sexist, she is critical and feels her father tends to dominate her mother. At the same time, Emma feels alienated by many feminists. She thinks that many have instituted a new Victorianism by not allowing women to show their bodies and prescribing what she terms 'a-sexual clothes'. When I pointed out that she had described her own clothes as asexual, she ascribed this choice to insecurity and pointed out that she had kept her shocking pink hair long in denotation of incomplete conviction about feminist dress codes. She felt that the feminist uniform of short hair and baggy clothes was 'another form of oppression' and pointed out that

Those kind of women, I don't see them in high-powered jobs. Men find them ridiculous and I don't have a great deal of confidence in what they're doing. I mean, I really want to see women running businesses, doing things like that, being in the media [...]. The trouble is they just get labelled as lefty-loony-lesbian women and so, I don't mind if they're lefty-loony-lesbian, if you want to say it that way, but I just wish that....

While the older girls had certainly developed a greater understanding of gender issues than the younger girls, they still had ambivalent and stereotypical feelings about feminism. Sexism was an important issue for almost all of them. They generally felt that equality for women had not been, but should be, achieved and all wanted to be in charge of their own lives. Feminism, however, produced ambivalent, and sometimes negative, feelings because of the associations of 'man-hating' and lesbianism it had for them.

## b. Gendered Reading

A gendered dimension to the girls' reading emerged in their discussion of the types of books they read, the authors and protagonists they preferred, in their ability to identify more readily with certain books and protagonists and in their reading of books from the feminist presses.

Gender played a key role in the reading habits of the girls' family members. All the girls reported that their mothers enjoyed reading and discussed books with them. Mothers and daughters - and often sisters - had similar tastes in reading. The women in the family generally read romance, pulp fiction and the classics, though there were some exceptions. Fathers and brothers read newspapers, non-fiction and science-fiction. Men read less than women, talked less about their reading and seemed to care less about what they read. As Charlotte said of her father: 'I don't think he's particularly discriminating'.

The girls all disliked the 'male' genres. No one read science-fiction. Alice disliked it because it was 'not about people, but things'. Sandra had attempted to read a 'boys' action book' but disliked the way 'it goes into such a macho image [...] it's not realistic'.

The girls had different opinions about whether they preferred books by women. Emma was not concerned with the sex of the author as

she felt she could get something out of any book she read. She did, however, think that there were certain things about which only women could write effectively, such as the experience of miscarriage.

Charlotte thought that the point of view was sometimes more important than the author's sex, for example, she had preferred *Jane Eyre* to *Wuthering Heights* because the later book had what she termed a 'male view'. Georgette claimed not to have a preference for female or male authors, but she liked the romances she read to be 'through a woman's eye'. Although Rose also felt she did not have a preference, she found that she was mostly reading books by women or Black people, but not by white men.

Alice, on the other hand, preferred women writers:

I prefer women writers. I mean, I don't do it on purpose, I just seem to enjoy reading women writers. [...] I think because they probably write about women - and I find women more interesting than men, I don't know why - because I suppose I can relate to them a lot more.

Xanthe also preferred books by women:

Well, I like women writers. I don't get so interested for some reason in male writers [...].

Dellary liked

Women writers - 'cause women writers, they always write about the experience of having grown up. I do read a few male writers, but with males, they

don't tend to see the inner working, because they've been brought up as being out there, where you bring the money, but the woman sees everything. A woman's the one to go shopping, she cares after the children, she does this, she does that. Where women they can actually describe, while men, they can say 'I saw this', a woman can actually describe. Like a wedding dress, a man could say 'she looked pretty', a woman can actually describe how the wedding dress looked. Things like that with most women writers, they don't go on the top like men, they usually go on the bottom. They describe their own feelings towards the story and I quite like that.

I asked Dellary what she meant by 'on the top' and 'on the bottom':

Men don't really have time to describe as much as a woman, 'cause a woman sees everything in everyday life. Men, they usually get office jobs. Men, because their fathers used to bring them up to work and send them to grammar schools. Girls, they were, in Victorian times, they were taught to clean the home, how to work the schedule out in the house. Men just bring the money home, sit down, expect a cup of tea when they get home. And that's why I tend to like to read a lot of woman books because they give more enjoyment out of the story.

I would suggest that by referring to men as 'on the top' and women as 'on the bottom', Dellary is not just pointing to a difference between the world of things and the world of feeling, but also to unequal power relations between men and women which show up in their writing. Men might see the 'bigger' picture, but they overlook the daily work and details which keep things going.

Most of the girls expressed a preference for female protagonists and for certain kinds of characters. Alice not only preferred female characters, but

I like them to have a really strong personality. I like them to be shouting. I don't like the ones that are really weak, 'cause I get irritated and start shouting at them.

Emma and Charlotte believed that a direct relationship between themselves and the character was not important. Both had enjoyed books by Russian authors which had what Emma termed a 'male approach' or, as Charlotte put it:

I don't think that necessarily you have to be living the sort of life that the characters are for it to make sense.

Yet she did have a slight preference for female protagonists:

I think I prefer it to be female, but I've just read this book called *A Hero of Our Time* [...]. The main character is a man and the way he talks about females isn't so great, but there are other aspects in that - his boredom, that's interesting, that he's a man in that time, because a female in that time, you'd have less power. So there are things that as a man they're more interesting, certain issues.

Charlotte did not like certain female characters:

I suppose if the female character was consistently being negative about other female characters [...] sort of pushing the others characters out of the way.

A number of girls voiced a dislike for female protagonists who were portrayed as overly 'pretty'. Sandra prefers reading about

women because she relates to them more, especially when they are her age. She is particularly fond of the romances in the Sweet Dreams series. But she does not like the protagonists to be too beautiful:

They used to talk about tall blonde girls sometimes. The younger girls were all normal looking ones. They would always talk about this certain girl that was so beautiful, all the boys fell for her. I didn't like that.

Rebecca generally preferred reading about women because 'you can sympathise with the women or identify with them'. She preferred 'the oddball character, not the pretty one. Sometimes the sweet, beautiful and clever one doesn't really attract me'. Rose likes female characters to be 'just realistic - not all pretty, gentle, soft. I like reading about different types, not the stereotype'. She remembered liking a book in which the female protagonist was 'as tough as any boy, she always speaks her mind'.

Most girls found female characters more interesting because they felt they tended to grow more during the course of the novel than did the male characters. The girls in the group discussion felt that many male characters were portrayed in such a way that 'everything's right about them', that they 'don't change' and they are not 'introspective'. Rose felt that male characters

behave like stereotypes most of the time. I like the book to show up what they're really like, not that they're just so wonderful.

One of the assumptions behind the campaign for 'positive images' has been that girls identify more readily with female protagonists. In the girls' discussion of the types of female protagonists they like, this would appear to be true. Their resistance towards characters that have stereotypical looks and behaviour suggests that, although they are drawn to a closer identification with female protagonists, this is fraught with difficulties because the view of women presented does not always correspond with their own. This is also at issue when they read books by and about men, where the question of identification means switching off their female side. Charlotte expressed her sense of double-consciousness as a female reader:

I think when you're a female, you're reading a book by a man knowing that you have to come to the text as just a reader, you can't really keep on feeling like a woman. So there are going to be things where it's a problem, where they're talking about a female and you identify with the hero. That's a problem.

The girls were aware of feminist publishing houses to varying degrees. Generally, it was the middle-class girls who were aware of Virago and The Women's Press as publishers with distinct identities (none of the girls had heard of the other feminist presses). Dellary did not mention Virago or The Women's Press as such, but had read at least one book of each: Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Rose had heard of the presses, but was not sure if she had read any of their books.

Heather and Georgette were unaware of their existence as was Sandra. Sandra did, however, think she had read a feminist book which had 'women standing up for themselves [...] I don't agree with that really with my upbringing'.

The girls in the group discussion had all heard of Virago and The Women's Press. The only Women's Press title mentioned in the group discussion was *The Color Purple*, but one girl said

Everybody thought it was brilliant. There was a bit in it - especially the letters - where my interest suddenly dropped. I think some of those books are really over-rated because it's a novelty - it's The Women's Press.

As Charlotte said, 'All the girls I know read *The Color Purple* and there's no way you could say that about most books'.

Alice read Virago books, but

I started *The Color Purple*, but only because it was *The Color Purple*. Otherwise I haven't, because we don't have many [Women's Press books] in the library. We have more Virago - lots of Virago.

The girls in the group found the books published by The Women's Press to be 'more modern day' than those published by Virago. The girls who preferred the classics and admired the suffragettes more than contemporary feminists liked Virago better.

Rebecca felt that some of the Virago and The Women's Press books 'have been very good', but she would not consider all of them feminist because

a few of them have told the women's lives, like being a battered wife or, like the story, you know it was more or less all to do with men, their involvement or their betrayal with men. So it's not about them being - some of them - but sometimes they can go too far, like all the men are horrible.

She believed that this was the message in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and *Meridian*.

Charlotte also found Virago's output to be 'quite good stuff', but did not consider all of it to be feminist. I asked her to give an example of what she thought a feminist book to be:

Tilly Olsen. I read *Tell Me A Riddle*. I'd call that feminist in that female characters have as much potential as a man. It wasn't women are great and all the women love each other, 'cause that's sort of stereotypical.

She had read a lot of Virago's books about a year earlier, but

I think I prefer The Women's Press, because I like reading about other cultures.

She found Virago's output more white, English and conservative.

Xanthe had chosen two Virago Modern Classic authors for her open study: Rosamond Lehmann and Antonia White. Indeed, she read a lot of Virago:

When I go to the library, I look for Penguins and Virago. [...] It's because I've read so many books which I've enjoyed in these series that I thought if I have no idea I'd just look along - then I'll look at them because I know I've read some good books of theirs. If I find something else I look at that, but I need somewhere to start because I browse along the titles.

She felt that The Women's Press and Virago had very different images:

Women's Press are very modern. They talk about today-and-age people - the ones I've read [...]. But the Viragos, they have a mixture [...].

The emphasis on the Virago Modern Classics showed her that there were

feminist writers then [...]. You think it's a new thing, but these books show you it's not - which is really quite interesting.

She also felt that the two presses represented different brands of feminism

I think that The Women's Press is a lot more forward - more direct to the reader [about feminist issues].

Emma began reading Virago when she was in her early teens. She remembers that before that she had been reading what she termed sexist books. She began to compare the different types of books and think about the ideas they proposed. She felt that her ideas about women's issues came from feminist books and from her mother. She first happened upon Virago books in the library. She was the only girl to mention using Silver Moon, the feminist bookshop in Central London. Like Xanthe, she felt that Virago and The Women's Press had

a different image. Virago was 'snobby', The Women's Press was 'lesbian'. She said she felt there was now a backlash and that women were no longer reading these books as they had been very trendy and it was 'obvious' to read them. She felt that herself, but now wanted to get back to them. Emma was convinced that it was important for men to read them as well in order to have another perspective on life.

The girls who read Virago and The Women's Press books generally liked them and were convinced that their presence made a difference to them as women. Some of the girls wished they would do more with women writers at school. Although Rebecca had had the chance to do a project on women for her social sciences class and was enjoying reading about famous women for it, she found that she had read no novels by women for English. Rose, on the other hand, said she had read a lot of books dealing with sexism at school and that she liked them because they were 'more like life'. Charlotte also felt that too few women writers were represented in some of the English classes she had taken.

### c. Race and Reading

For many of the older girls, racism was an important issue; this was particularly true of the Black and Latin American girls. At some level, however, it was an issue which had entered the white girls' consciousnesses too, in spite of their lack of direct experience with racism. Generally, the white girls believed that anti-racist policies were a good thing at school, but Alice felt that 'some people were obsessed by it'. Her attitude implied that she felt under attack by discussions of racism and she justified her difficulty with race issues by adopting the Labour Party's line on 'no Black sections' (she had similar problems with the notion of women organising separately). She felt that too much emphasis on racism at school would only mean that racists would become more entrenched in their views. Most of the other white girls were more relaxed on the question of race. Charlotte felt that, given the cultural diversity of the student population, it was a pity that more was not done to represent those differences; she would have liked to read more books from other cultures.

Most views on race emerged from the Black and Latin American girls' discussions of books, rather than from specific discussions on race. Georgette did not elaborate on racism, but did feel it was an important issue for her. Heather said 'I just think there shouldn't be any racism', but she felt there was unfortunately a lot in Britain. She believed this to be a more racist country than

America, where she had spent some time with friends. She said she was, however, satisfied with the amount of anti-racist and anti-sexist work in the school. As mentioned, Rose felt strongly on a number of political issues, such as racism and anti-apartheid. Sandra recognised racism as pertaining not only to Black people but to people of other backgrounds as well. She did not like the way television in Britain showed her country in a bad light:

all the programmes that I've seen always show the bad parts - the guerilla wars and all this - they don't show the peaceful life that when we go to Columbia on holiday we live peaceful we don't see the army or anything - mind you, we live in a residential area so there's calm around there, but they should show that part as well.

Generally she did not feel discrimination on the basis of her national origin: 'when you, say, talk to people and talk about your country, they're interested in it, they're not discriminating against you'.

It was Dellary who had the most to say about ethnicity and racism. Her Black identity is very important to her and she tries to find out as much about it as possible (see below). She talked about South Africa and how she and her friends 'wondered what is it about someone's skin has to discriminate them'. Although she would not like to go to South Africa because 'it's too racial' she did feel she would

want to go ask *why* - why - because if you knew it's in the news - they just say 'I don't like Black people', you ask them why - they don't know - it's because of what the media says - it's the reason they don't like Black people. I don't say

I don't like white people, I say I don't like their attitude. [...] I don't like to get into stereotypes - I like to give my views.

Most of the Black girls felt that reading books by Black authors was important for them. Heather said she did not like reading at all, except for a couple of romances she had read on the suggestion of her friends. But she was not able to say exactly why she disliked reading:

I don't know, I just seem to get bored after a while.

She said that racism was an important issue for her, so I asked if she had ever read books by or about Black people. She initially said she had not read any in class or otherwise. I asked her if she thought she might like to read such books or if it would be equally unappealing:

No, I think I would - we did - oh, what was it called again - *Roll the Thunder, Hear My Cry* with [our teacher] - that was quite good.

When I asked her why she liked it, she said 'I just thought the story was good really', but did not elaborate; nor did she feel she 'related' to it more.

Georgette was the only girl to remember learning to read. Her uncle had taught her to read at home before she started school and had used books by and about Black people to do so. Georgette liked books in English class

because they're mostly about Black people and white people in different countries and racism and all that.

She also chose books by Black authors when she went to the library. However, my conversation with Georgette presented a number of contradictions. After first saying that she liked the choice of books in class because they were by Black writers and that she chose her own reading on the basis of it being about Black experience, she then went on to say that it did not matter to her if an author was Black or white and insisted that her reading was of romances. She also said that she found English classes a bit dull because of 'Macbeth and all that'. I asked her if 'Macbeth and all that' had any meaning for her personally and she said they did not and added that she did not think that books about Black authors had much relevance for her either. I asked her if literature was worth studying and she replied 'Yeah, it's good to know', but it had nothing to do with her life. When I asked her how she would change English classes, she said 'I wouldn't do none of the Macbeth stuff' and that she would do more books by Black authors. She would also centre the curriculum more around contemporary issues. The classics would be out as 'they're boring'.

These contradictory comments were not all grouped together, but her opinion oscillated throughout the conversation. Georgette was very soft-spoken and did not talk very much. She only occasionally spoke up and became animated and that was when we were off the subject of reading. Yet reading was something that she enjoyed very

much. I can only imagine that reading was a loaded issue for her and that the reason she kept changing her mind about Black writing was because of where it is located within the hierarchy at school. Because of the way the English curriculum is constructed, Georgette knows that what counts is 'Macbeth and all that'. Her identification with Black literature within the framework of school and when talking to a white researcher is ambivalent. Georgette is caught between rejecting the dominant discourse ('Macbeth') and yet finding it problematic to accept the marginalised discourse of Black literature within a system which uses oppositional discourses to exclude them and those associated with them. Identification without contextualisation within the power relations only reinforces the *status quo*. As Suzanne Scafe (1989) writes:

Texts and cultural symbols cannot be introduced on the assumption that students will automatically identify with them and feel better for their entry into the classroom. Black students experience their relationship with a culture they define as 'Black' differently in different contexts - sometimes they see it as a powerful, enabling tool; at other times they express rejection of it, feeling that their identification with certain forms and practices disenfranchises them from British society and prevents success in it. Often they experience a mixture of the two (p. 23).

She continues:

To introduce Black literary texts into the classroom without being aware of some of the contradictions of a culture and its production, and some of the complex feelings students have in relation to it, creates problems. The potential the school may have to devalue the texts and their reading merely reinforces students' feelings about its otherness and may confirm their sense of the superiority of the dominant culture. Black literature as an oppositional cultural form cannot

be taught alongside traditional literature in a way which leaves the cultural assumptions uncontested. It has to be used to question assumptions, and in order to do this effectively Black literature must be taught in the context of a completely revised approach to English teaching (p. 25).

Georgette seems to appropriate Black literature and distance herself from it at the same time. There is an uncomfortable feeling that it both belongs to her and at the same time ghettoises her and excludes her from discourses of power.

Dellary seemed much more comfortable with the issue; indeed, she seemed much more comfortable altogether about expressing her views than most of the girls. Race and gender were obviously important to her and she had given them much thought.

I asked her if she was reading anything at the time:

At the moment, I'm reading *Nigger* by a man who was born in South Africa and as he grows up he gets told racist comments. 'Cause I'm not reading a book because I want to know what they're like, because I want to read someone's personal experience - their autobiography of what it's like for them to live in South Africa - instead of seeing it on the news - 'cause the news can blow it out. So I want to learn for myself [...] I read Alice Walker - *The Color Purple* - you can't put her down. And after I read *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. I've got to get through it - I've just got halfway through the story.

Dellary had picked up her first book by a Black author at her local library. She did not recall the exact title

but I really did like it. It was in the children's library. And that's the first time I read a book by a Black author - and I really did enjoy it. And from that day on, I've been trying to read as much Black authors as I can because really I want to read about my own culture, so I usually like to read a lot of them. And if they have Black programmes on I generally watch them, like *Ebony*. I do intend to watch that because - not just because I'm Black, but I like - I don't want to forget what I am. And anytime - when it comes down to cooking, I make sure I keep to my mum, because I know my mum like to keep the West Indian food.

Dellary was critical of provision for Black children at school.

She tried, as she put it, 'to broaden my aspect', but

I learn in school, but really even in school, they do so much for Indian children, but they don't do - they don't know. They should do more from each person's culture, instead of doing - they're just doing only so much. They just give a lot of Black books, but they don't do any culture of Black people. Because when I was doing the map of South Africa, I always wondered what it is about someone's skin has to discriminate them.

She would discuss this question with her friends, but school never provided any answers, nor a context in which she felt the questions could be formulated. She believed more should be done in school involving Black writing. She was also critical of the folkloristic approach Black culture received:

Yeah, there should be more because there's a lot you can learn from Black people. But I don't like - the only time you see Black people coming on is when the Carnival is there - that's when they really come alive because everyone knows that Black people - that's what the Carnival is. I want to know - Black people should be known, like everybody should be known. Black people should be known, that they're there, that they're something.

They're not there because of the colour of their skin because there's not much you can do about your colour. You're born with your colour. There's no way you can change that. So I think they should do more. You should take a child down to the Commonwealth Institute and you see there are all these countries down there. But if you tell a child, they won't know nothing unless you tell them [...]. I want to read to get people to know what people's cultures are because I like to know what Indian people's cultures are. I like to know this person's culture, what that person's culture is [...]. Because I always think the reason why people get called something just because they didn't look like something [...]. I don't think it's nice really to call someone that because you wouldn't like it if someone told you you were white [...]. I wouldn't like it and I get really upset when people say 'you Black this', because if you ask them what Black is [...] they say that's what you've been born with, but I always say brown skin people are not Black. They're Indian [...] because most of these people [...] they don't speak a word of English and just because they're not up to your standard doesn't mean you have to go telling they're down because someone is new - you're just dirt.

From the beginning of her speech, Dellary moves from education and taking children to the Commonwealth Institute (as a way of contextualising teaching about different cultures) to a wider notion of culture and racism and the role that colour, culture and language play in defining one group as superior or inferior. Dellary sees that Black culture is devalued, yet this does not stop her from seeing its importance for herself and others.

Rose liked reading books which dealt with the issues of racism and sexism because they were 'new' and 'more like life'. She liked things written by women - Black or white - or by Black men, but steered away from books written by white men. Although sexism and

racism were important issues for her she said she had one teacher who focussed on them so much that even she got 'fed up'. Sandra spent most of her free time learning about her native Latin culture and this involved the study of Spanish language and literature in Spanish three days a week after school. This meant studying for a series of examinations in addition to her post-16 examinations:

I like to read about my country. I like that - stories, kind of stories about towns - histories of towns, the strange things that happen.

She was also interested in reading about other cultures. When she and her sister used to go to the library

we used to take books on customs. I'm very interested in people and cultures - but not, say, textbooks. I like to see pictures.

Throughout our conversation, Sandra also made it clear that she was very much of two cultures. She seemed less aware than the Black girls of how cultures were differentially located within a hierarchy. She was aware of the predominance of Spanish over Latin American culture from the Spanish school she went to, but had not thought about why that might be. It is not surprising that she was less aware of these issues than the Black girls, given the more intense racism against the latter group. This may also be because, although she feels different, she still comes from a group which is seen to have a European tradition and culture in its own right. Sandra herself came from a family from whom she had to hide the fact that

the boy she was going out with, though Latin American, was what she called 'coloured'.

d. Obligation and Resistance: the classics and romance

The girls were divided along class and ethnic lines with regard to whether they accepted or resisted the dominant discourses about literature. School taught them that the 'correct' discourses were those which taught children to differentiate between what was considered literature (the 'classics') and what was not worthy of the name (what the girls referred to as 'rubbish'). Because the effect of differentiation is to channel the students into different streams as regards further education and work opportunities, it also engenders an oppositional discourse which manifests itself as resistance. The predetermined nature of this separation means that with few exceptions the students belonging to the dominant culture accept and those belonging to the subordinate culture resist following the divide already present along class and ethnic lines. While this differentiation between students has already been seen with reference to Black literature, it was also evident with relation to the discourse students produced about what they felt they should and should not read.

On the whole, it was the white and middle-class girls who expressed concern about reading the 'right' things and generally did not question the discourse of differentiation which they had appropriated. The Black and working-class girls were more likely to say they found the books they were supposed to read at school 'boring' and that it did not matter what one read. It would be erroneous to suppose that this is because they did not understand the 'value' of literature. On the contrary, they understood and resisted the loaded nature of literary value and their exclusion from it. The discourse of differentiation was articulated through concern about reading the classics which were 'good for you', 'impressive' and something from which one could 'benefit'. Romance, on the other hand, was what one should not read as it was socially embarrassing and distorted one's perception of reality. Those girls who resisted the discourse of differentiation found the classics - and sometimes all reading - 'boring'. They tended to feel there was nothing wrong with reading romance fiction and that generally it did not matter what one read. By not accepting the premises on which differentiation was based, they attempted to resist the impact differentiation was having on their lives.

Emma dated her interest in the classics (a lasting interest) and in romance fiction (a passing fancy) from about 13 when she realised there was such a thing as 'the classics' - such as Dickens and Chekhov - and that reading them somehow made one 'intellectual'. But it was Alice who expressed concern about reading the classics most articulately. When I asked why it was 'generally the classics (she

felt she should read', she laughed and claimed she did not know.

Upon reflection, she continued

Classics - probably because they are called classics and you feel, you know, because they are so famous, you should read them as part of your education. I mean you feel like you've really missed something - you must have missed something because everybody else has said how wonderful they are over like hundreds of years - well, a hundred years - so you feel there *must* be something good about them - that you should read them - so I suppose that's why I read them.

Reading certain books lets one into a select group of people who have read the right things:

'Cause then you can say, 'I've read this and it's this thick'. I mean, I read *Nana*, it took me about 600 years, but I mean afterwards, I went round saying, 'I've read *Nana*', you know [laughs]. I didn't say 'I didn't like it very much, I found it a bit boring', but 'I read it, I finished it'. So yes, it does, because so many people haven't read them - and people say 'oh, god' - they do tend to say that actually. So yeah - it's pop snobbery actually.

Alice clearly perceives the social uses of books. Her comments on the 'need' for categorisation of books are also telling. When she mentioned that she read Virago books (which she felt were acceptable to read, especially the Virago Modern Classics), I asked if she was usually aware of which houses had published the books she read. She replied that she was only aware of Virago, as a publisher whose books she would read, and Mills & Boon, as one whose books she would not touch:

I find it really difficult because there are so many books and, I mean, unless you have

categories, you don't know which ones to pick at all.

Alice's discussion reveals that she finds such categories useful not only in helping her choose books she might like, but books which would be considered appropriate. Alice does not know whether or not she likes romance fiction, but only that she has learned that someone of her background and aspirations ought not to read them. Although she is impressed by the thickness of such books as *Nana* and novels by Dickens, she is unimpressed by the width of pulp bestsellers. She confesses to having read and thoroughly enjoyed pulp fiction, but she felt guilty about having done so:

Well, there's the sort of books that you read in public and the sort of books that you read under the bedclothes - you don't want anyone else to know and I suppose like the sagas, like *The Thornbirds*, that sort of thing are - that you'd not necessarily let everyone know you're reading them. There's everything in them and you never get bored [...]. I have read a few - I haven't read that many, I have to admit it - I've read about three of them. And I must admit I can't put them down - they're just full of everything - I mean it's impossible.

Alice is intensely aware of the public face of reading and acutely attuned to the kinds of credit or discredit which reading certain kinds of books brings to the reader. Because of the status that books can confer on the reader, she spoke of the necessity of keeping certain kinds of reading under wraps. She also talked about how certain books were 'really in'; both she and Xanthe mentioned *Absolute Beginners* in this respect. She agreed that books could be a fashion accessory because 'so many people don't read books, they just

get bored'. That only a select group of people reads and reads the right books creates an elite through literary consumption. We had the following exchange:

S: I thought that it was very interesting when you said [...] that if you had to take a Mills & Boon sort of book [from the library] you'd feel sort of embarrassed - you know, that someone would see you actually carrying it around [...]. I wonder if there are other times when you're reading a book that [...] gives you sort of street cred of some sort - do you feel like, you know, you want some people to see you carrying it around?

A: Yeah, I do, you do, *you do* [...]. I mean, you'll like walk around on the tube reading your book, you know [laughs] and sit on the bus reading it - yes, definitely.

S: 'Cause I think that people use books as props

A: So that people will know what sort of a person you are - it's like, you know - I find it really interesting what other people read. I'm always looking at what people are reading on the tubes - like knowing what sort of music they listen to - it tells you something about the person - so it's really confusing if some person's only using it. Like Marilyn Monroe, she was carrying around some massive great - I think it was the one with Laurence Olivier - anyway, she was carrying this great massive Dickens around and you know she didn't even sort of read [laughs]. She thought it was cool, so she carried it around - just so everybody'd think 'oh, she reads these things', which is really quite funny [laughs].

S: Have you ever caught yourself doing that [...]?

A: Probably, probably. I can't actually remember, but I probably - had something to take home from English which I would find really boring to read but really intellectual, you know [laughs] and I probably carried it outside of my bag [...] something really intellectual and political, you know, which I wouldn't ever read 'cause I'd just find it so intensely boring - but I've done that, yeah, I'm sure I have. It's really quite funny. I mean, it's the sort of thing you crack up about if you see someone on television doing it and you know what they're doing it for.

Alice shows herself to be sensitive to the cues people use to say something about themselves. She was not the only one to voice this concern, but articulated it at greatest length. When I asked the group of fifth year students if there were any books they felt they should not read, I was answered by a loud chorus of 'Mills & Boon'. All but one of them felt that pulp fiction was generally unacceptable reading and she bravely defended her choice against the others. Charlotte was a sixth year student; she read widely and enjoyed discussing her reading with her mother who was an English teacher. We had this exchange about what she felt she should not read:

S: Do you ever read things you think you shouldn't be reading or that are not really worthwhile?

C: What, like stories in *Women's Own*?

S: Whatever. What are the things that you think are not worthwhile?

C: Yeah, stories like that in magazines, you go to the dentist and read them.

S: Do you enjoy them?

C: They're entertaining, but they - you can't help but be prejudiced against them.

S: Where do you think those prejudices come from?

C: I don't know where they come from but - the fact that someone's - that it's not a book, that it's just a story, the paper's not good - all sorts of things. I don't know actually. Maybe it's because the amateur female writer isn't particularly well regarded. There's an idea that from some books you're benefitting if you can say you've read this book - that's quite impressive. Whereas with other ones no one's really going to say, 'Ah, you've read - whatever'.

Alice had never read a Mills & Boon romance but that did not stop her from 'going on about what rubbish they are'. She also recognised that this opinion was based on prejudice which she felt came from school, friends and parents:

I mean, everyone who influences you - because I mean, my parents never read Mills & Boon - they wouldn't read them. And my friends wouldn't. If any of them found out about it, they'd all fall down and have hysterics. So, yes, there's quite a lot to put you against it [...]. If no one else would go on about how awful Mills & Boon were, you'd probably read them and you'd probably - I mean if I read one - that's my secret fear probably. I probably - oh, my god - if I read one, I probably would end reading the rest of them under the covers so no one knows the rest of my life. 'Cause I think everyone sort of likes to read shallow books that you don't really have to think about it and happy ending at the end and that sort of thing.

Alice and Charlotte were not alone in seeing the enjoyment of romance reading, while feeling they were unworthwhile or embarrassing. Emma cited girls' magazines (*Just 17* and *Number One*) and pornography as the sort of things she would never read. She had gone through a romance reading phase when she was about 11 or 12, when she

went through reading *Sweet Dreams* [...]. And I think I got very bored very quickly was about how I'd put it.

She claimed it was 'interest in America - I assume they're American' which got her interested in them in the first place, but then discussed the major attraction:

There's an element in me that quite likes romance, quite likes someone saying 'here's the rose' - I think to everyone - I think it held an attraction for me at the time.

I asked her how much she had accepted that image of women and men and their roles

I maintained that the books were a complete joke the whole time I was reading them - and yet, on the other hand, I was addicted to them for about two months. So I don't know. I think I pretty much rejected most of it, but then particularly as you read them and you go through the story and then at the end there's a very exciting part and it finished off great - though it's quite nice if you're feeling a bit insecure - going to read books where everything's going to be fine. So when I was in the third year, I suppose I was 12 or 13, I had a boyfriend [she puts on a mock love-sick face and sighs] - no, uhm - so I suppose I thought it was appropriate.

But this did not influence the way she interacted with her boyfriend:

No, because, you see, reading these books is like having a dream at night - absolutely nothing to do with how I was in my relationship with him.

Other girls felt that romance reading had deleterious effects beyond the socially embarrassing. Rose could not bear romances. She had read a few when she was about 11 years old and disliked the portrayal of 'perfect' girls with 'long blonde hair' who acted 'weak'. She recounted an exemplary tale of a friend of hers who was 'addicted' to romances. This girl read at least three romance novels a week and Rose was convinced it had 'affected her' because she would 'tell whole plots' to her friends, who were not eager to hear them.

Rebecca was unclear about the term romance. At first she said she liked them:

I like the sort of romance books but not sort of teenage ones - things like *Pride and Prejudice*, I liked that. I really liked that and I read *Room with a View*. I like that [...].

But the idea of liking Mills & Boons romances made her laugh:

when I was second year here, I had a friend out of school who went to a local school and she kept going on and on about how wonderful they are and I took one from the library and tried to read it and I couldn't. I found I couldn't sort of read it at all. [...] It was soppy and made all the girls just seem weepy and dressed up beautifully behind closed doors and waiting for somebody. I couldn't. It didn't - no, it didn't interest me at all [...] it was silly. It doesn't - it's not girls in general are like that - it just didn't seem reality at all.

She was concerned that this distortion of how girls really are might adversely affect younger girls:

if I saw my sister reading them a couple of years ago I might have been a bit worried because it can colour people's minds by thinking that happens, but - I think if you're old enough, you can sort of pick and you'll know what's - if you like it, then I don't think there's any harm really.

Dellary was more convinced of the bad effects of romance reading.

She did not enjoy them herself:

I find it really boring. [...] It's all the same thing really - all falling in love and they break up.

Some of her friends liked these books,

but I never read them really because I don't think reading them romances is going to make your relationship any better anymore. I'm more like one who'd venture out and find out for myself. I think romance books are so *boring*.

She also felt they were sexist:

it's always the girls - the boy always breaks up with the girls, finds someone better or something. So I don't read them. It always starts with the same thing and ends with the same thing. So I don't read them. The thing is I start reading them and then I throw them away. I can't be bothered reading those books. What it does is - it's going to give a girl a view of something that's not true. 'Cause no one, no one, no one's sweet. Love's not sweet. When you get a boyfriend, the boy is not going to be what you read in the books. He's going to be himself and you can't expect the boy's going to be like that. 'Cause the boy'll say, 'come on, grow up, I'm not like that in the book'. And so I don't think a romance book does anything to help a girl at all. And also them girl magazines as well - I don't see what it's going to do [...]. I know boys don't take life very seriously, but when it comes to girls' magazines, it's mostly relationships or photo-stories: boy of her dreams, back again, breaks up, she lied to me, he does this, he did that, all so that next week, the same story again and again.

Dellary only reads the recipes and fashion features in such magazines. If she were to read about relationships, she would want to read about a 'proper true relationship' because

when you go out in the world, it's not going to be like that. Because no one, no one, no one's going to be romantic all the time. We don't live in a romantic world. Because it doesn't matter, when you get older you've still got the washing up, the cleaning, you've got problems, you've got responsibilities, so you can't always be romance, romance all the time. 'Cause in the books it's always kiss, kiss, love, love, make-up [laughs] and I don't believe that because it gave me that viewpoint, I don't want to get married. I decided

I'm not going to get married. I'm just going to stay single. I'm not getting married.

Dellary's comments show more than how level-headed she is for a girl just going on sixteen. She sees gender relationship in terms of power; elsewhere she talked about how boys only want 'one thing' and leave the girls once they have got them pregnant. She also discusses books in terms of the good and the harm they can do. For Dellary this is related to the extent to which they are true portrayals of life. Perhaps she articulates this so clearly because of her religious commitments. As a member of a fundamentalist Christian sect, she places heavy reliance on the written word and believes in the literalness of *The Bible*. It is probably for this reason that she sees book reading in terms of good and harmful effects and directly correlates them with behaviour. She also sees books as preparing one for the world in much the same way as *The Book* prepares one for the other world.

Emma, Charlotte, Alice and other girls who did not like or approve of romance reading articulated some of the pleasures of romance reading. Some of the other girls still enjoyed reading romances. Although Sandra was no longer doing much extra-curricular reading because she had to study for both her post-16 examinations and for Spanish school, she used to enjoy reading and was convinced she would find more time to read in the future. She used to go to the library:

I used to go with my sister and we used to go straight to the Sweet Dreams rack - there were always new books - they came every two weeks I think it is - so we used to go straight there. And then I used to take out - it depends - if

there was five books, I'd take them all out - or we used to have fights with them. Mostly we used to take those books [...].

She and her sister would have races finishing them:

I used to read them quite quickly actually - a book a day - but they're good because you get so interested, you want to finish reading it [...]. Sometimes we used to say our opinions on it - say, one had already read it and if I was going to take it out of the library, she'd say 'oh no, don't take that'.

She and her sister had very similar taste in romance novels.

Sandra felt she could identify with the girls in the books:

The girls have restrictions and I do have a lot of these because I have a very Catholic family. My friends go out and I'm not allowed to do that.

Unbeknownst to her family, she has a boyfriend, but her approach at home is different from that of the protagonists she used to read about:

They'd stand up to their parents and, I don't know, their parents used to come round, I suppose, after a while [...].

While she enjoyed reading about such solutions, she did not think rebellion would work for her.

Like some of the other girls, Sandra said that one of the things she liked about these books (and the Judy Blume books) was that they were American and she 'just liked to read about what life is like

over there'. This confusion between a fantasised version of relations between the sexes and the differences of life in a distant land was common to a number of girls.

Heather had also enjoyed the Sweet Dream books. Indeed, they were some of the only books she had ever enjoyed reading. She found reading a boring activity and this was not something that was limited to school books or to the present; she could not remember a time when she had liked reading. The only things she ever read now were short stories in magazines. She described herself as more of a visual person and one who enjoyed music as well. She had only read a couple of these romance novels at the suggestion of her friends. She could not say exactly why she had liked these books but she rejected my suggestion that it helped her think through boy/girl relations. She did not think they had anything to do with her real life and said they were pure fantasy.

Georgette was another fan of romances. She especially liked those published by Mills & Boon. Unlike Emma and Heather, she initially said they were true-to-life. She liked the happy endings. Later, she conceded that this was actually wishful thinking and not how relationships between the sexes were:

I think that if I was a big woman and my husband left me and then he came back after - no, I don't think I'd just say 'yeah'.

The initial claim that romance fiction is 'true-to-life' may have less to do with how things work out in the end than with the

perception that male/female relationships are the main issue. It is probably also the case that, within the context of school, the girls have no other way of claiming the legitimacy of romance fiction and therefore claim it is true-to-life.

In some ways, it is easier for the girls who do not like, approve of or no longer read romance fiction to articulate not only the negative sides of the genre, but also its pleasures. The language for appreciating popular fiction is unlegitimated. Romance is 'entertainment' rather than 'literature'. The only appropriate language for discussing it is critical language which devalues it in some way. One can either find it embarrassing, harmful or, if one can see some of its attractions, then one can talk about it from a distance: one now reads the right things, but used to read romance. It was the girls who had negative views on romance fiction who had the most to say about it. The girls who enjoyed reading romance did not have a language in which to talk about it with me. While the anti-romance girls can talk about romance as unworthwhile (in terms of differentiation) or not good for you (in more feminist terms of not presenting positive images of girls), those who do read them have no language which is socially or educationally legitimated with which to discuss them. This is not because the girls are 'poorer' or 'less academic' students. Although they may be less versed in the dominant language and values, when they talk to their other romance reading girlfriends they have plenty to say about them. As Rose mentioned, her romance reading friend related entire plots with relish and Sandra and her sister used to discuss them avidly. Such discussions

are similar to the ways in which people talk about their favourite soaps on television. These are also discourses into which one must be initiated, but which hold no status in the educational world. One imagines that people talk about characters in soaps in much the same way as Dickens's early readers must have discussed the fate of Little Nell, when Dickens belonged to the masses. Now that this work belongs to the academy as part of the canon, it is decontextualised and not discussed as part of everyday life. This way of talking about reading is similar to the way the first year girls discussed their reading when it has not yet been separated into 'literature' and 'entertainment'.

One might object that such discussion is not critical discourse. But it is necessary to look more closely at what constitutes critical discourse and what its purposes are. The girls who did not read romances and disapproved of them had a validated language in which to voice this disapproval. Indeed, voicing disapproval for such 'rubbish' is that language. It is a discourse they have learned at school and from parents and peers. It is a language which describes romance reading as an 'addiction'. Romance reading is bad for your health: it softens your brain and lowers you socially. There is a gender dimension too. Feminists have been quick to point out the patriarchal message of romance. With few exceptions, they have been less aware of the way the devaluing of romance reading is part of the overall devaluation of feminine discourse and the way, as the librarian quoted earlier said, 'we're telling girls that there's

something wrong with girls yet again - everybody's said that to them  
and it's just another area'.

## C. Resisting Alienation

### 1. The Sample

Much discussion about the putative effects of reading ignores the fact that many people spend little time reading or have difficulty with the written word. Nonetheless, reading plays an important role in their lives because of the access it can afford to the public sphere. It would be therefore be facile to dismiss non-readers or light readers with the assumption that, because they do not read very much, they have little to offer on the subject. It is essential to listen to such people as their experience shows how partial literacy disempowers them in their lives. It also shows the ways they find to resist the alienation that a limited literacy engenders.

Because I was convinced of the importance of talking to women who were likely to be light readers, I decided to interview a group of women who were studying at an ILEA College of Further Education and taking part in a course funded by the Manpower Services Commission (MSC). The course was mixed sex, but predominantly female. I interviewed women taking the English for Work Preparation course and the English Workshop. Some women attended both courses, one of which was a more structured class in which the group did written and oral work together, while the other enabled students to concentrate on individual problem areas with the help of tutors. As these women were mostly interested in going on to do secretarial work after

completing the course, they focussed on developing skills - such as application form-filling and letter-writing, punctuation and spelling - that would enable them to get a job. They were also taking related courses at the College. I interviewed 13 women from the two classes. The interviews lasted between twenty minutes and an hour.

This was a very mixed group of women. They ranged in age from 18 to 41, though most were still in their twenties. Most were Black and immigrant women. Sylvia was from Jamaica, Rosemary was from Mauritius, Cecilia was Nigerian, Jolanta was Polish, Hirut was from Ethiopia, Ning was Philippina, Rolanda was a Londoner, Barbara was born in Jamaica but had come to Britain as an infant. Helen and Angelina were born in London, but had spent much of their childhood in Nigeria. Chitra was a Tamil from Sri Lanka and Maxine and Yvonne were born in London and were of Afro-Caribbean descent. Those that had immigrated to Britain had been here anywhere from three months to 24 years.

Their family situations also varied considerably. Jolanta and Chitra were married, but had no children. Cecilia was a widow with three children still at school. Sylvia had a small son whom she had had to leave in Jamaica and she was living with her aunt. Yvonne, Ning and Angelina lived with their mothers and siblings. Rolanda, the youngest of the group, had the responsibility for looking after her 13-year-old brother since they had been orphaned four months earlier. Rosemary and Barbara had two children each, while Maxine

had one; all three of them were single-parents. Hirut and Helen lived on their own.

The women had attained different levels of education. Some of the immigrant women had reached relatively higher levels of education in their countries of origin than the women who had been educated primarily in Britain. Jolanta, Chitra and Ming had all begun higher education before coming to Britain. Sylvia and Hirut had completed school in Jamaica and Ethiopia respectively. Rosemary completed the second year of secondary school in Mauritius and Cecilia had stopped school in Nigeria at about 14 or 15, when her father died. Helen did her schooling in Nigeria until she came to Britain at the age of 15 and went to school and college on and off for a while. Angelina had had a similar experience. The women who had been educated exclusively in Britain left school with few or no qualifications. Rolanda left school at 16 with no O-levels to join a Youth Training Scheme (YTS) programme. Barbara left school at 17 also with no O-levels. Maxine also left school without qualifications and Yvonne had an O-level in art and a grade 3 English CSE. A number of the women had taken secretarial or English as a Second Language (ESL) courses since leaving school.

Most of the women had had work experience. While they were on the course, they were not working, with the exception of Yvonne who had a part-time job at a chemist's. Chitra was a housewife and Ming and Sylvia had never worked. Cecilia had worked in a variety of jobs: at a teashop, in a school canteen and cleaning floors. Jolanta had

worked in a clothing factory when she arrived as it did not require any English. Hirut had worked for an airline in Ethiopia, but could not yet work in Britain as she was awaiting refugee status. Rolanda had had a job working with children but she had to quit because she received more money in social security benefits than from her wages. Barbara had done office work and Rosemary had worked as a receptionist. Helen and Angelina had worked as sales assistants. Maxine had worked as a cashier in a supermarket and as a clerk typist in an office and Yvonne had had a job in a printing department doing what she termed 'a man's job'.

When setting up these interviews, I found some of these women to be initially reluctant to talk to me because I was interested in their reading. One woman decided she did not want to do the interview because she did not read, even though I explained that I was interested in speaking to women who did not read just as much as to women who did. Barbara also claimed she did not read, but agreed to be interviewed; it turned out that she was more involved with books than she realised. Their initial hesitance was due in part to their lack of confidence in their reading abilities and habits and, for some of the immigrant women, to their difficulty with spoken English.

Although I explained to them from the outset that I was interested in their own personal opinions and that there were no right or wrong answers, they sometimes needed further reassurance during the course of the interview. When Maxine expressed the opinion that she could

learn more from books 'than some people are paid to tell you', she said she 'shouldn't even be saying this'. I asked her why not:

Well, they always say we're supposed to have a balanced side, aren't we - a sort of negative side and a positive side - so there's positive balancing.

Similarly, when talking about politics, Helen stated that she was

that kind of person - I see two sides of things. I just don't see one side - I'm neutral.

This non-committal attitude pervaded many of the things these women spoke about, from reading and education to gender issues.

## 2. Gender

The attitudes this group expressed to gender roles were mixed. Only a few accepted the term feminist as possibly applying to themselves. Although some felt that political issues were important, no one was politically active in feminism, or otherwise. Sylvia felt that it was important for women to be independent and would consider herself a feminist in terms of believing that it was important to rely on herself financially. Jolanta also considered that she might be a feminist. When I asked Hirut if she believed in equal rights for women, she replied

I don't think any woman would disagree with that.

And she discussed the differences she perceived between women's roles in Ethiopia and Britain. She felt that women in Ethiopia 'are very oppressed [...]. No matter how we read or we know or write, we are always psychologically very down [...] men still dominate'. Helen also believed firmly in women's rights and thought that this was because Nigerian women were raised to be independent.

Cecilia and Rosemary, on the other, believed that men and women were inherently unequal. Cecilia's opinion stemmed from her belief in Christianity:

Really as I said that I'm a Christian, you know, your way of thinking or way of life may not be to mine, you see, so I can't speak in general, I can only speak for myself. So as far as I'm concerned as a Christian that women should be in subjection to their husbands [...] men should be the governor of the house [...]. There must be a difference between the two of them [...].

She felt that her husband 'used to treat [her] kindly' (she is now a widow). She was also convinced that the differences between women and men did not mean that women had no importance:

but you have to play the role as a woman, but a lot of women are doormats.

Although she seemed to believe that women and men should receive equal pay for equal work, she did not appear to think that this was a major issue because men and women did different types of work anyway: 'the role of a man or a woman is plain in industry'. Although Rosemary was also religious, she based her opinion on the things she thought that men could do and that women could not:

I don't believe in equality personally [...] because I can't do all the things that men does. I mean I might be able to lift a heavier box than they can, but there's many things that I can't do that the men does. [...] I mean, drilling a hole in the wall. I mean I tried and it's a really hard job to do [...]. I like to be spoiled by a man and be treated [...] I think if we get equality we won't get that.

The others generally believed that women and men should have equal rights, but did not consider themselves to be feminists nor did they feel that women's liberation had anything to do with their lives. A few did not recognise the term 'feminist'; this was true of both native English and ESL speakers. Indeed, Rosemary thought it meant feminine and therefore believed the word referred to women who were against equality between the sexes:

I wouldn't describe it as looking for equality [...]. I would describe it as not looking for equality - that's feminism for me - if I'm looking for equality, I'm not a feminine, really.

Although they equated feminism with 'lesbians' and 'manhaters', Maxine, Yvonne and Rolanda generally supported equal rights for women. When I asked Yvonne what she thought of feminism, she responded:

What are you saying - do I think a woman's job's still in the kitchen? Oh, no, none of that.

She was against sex discrimination in the workplace, but she did not feel that feminism had anything to do with her life:

No, I don't really get into that [...]. It's like women's lib and it's all them marches and things like for women's rights and lesbians and things like that.

Rolanda had experienced sex discrimination at work:

I went into [a chemist's] to get a job and on the outside it said girl or boy and I went inside and he said he wanted a boy [...]. I think that was wrong.

But she felt that feminists 'object to everybody':

Like, you know how they say 'bus conductor' - the bus conductor is a lady or a man [...] but they've changed it, the feminists have, to conductress or something like that, I remember that was on the newspaper [...]. I don't see why they changed it, why they're making such a fuss, 'cause I can't even say 'conductress'. Also another thing - like 'manhole', they were saying it shouldn't be called a manhole, which is silly 'cause it's just a name now. [...] I think sometimes they go over the top.

Although Rolanda, like most of the women, felt that feminism was somehow irrelevant to her life, she had strong views on what she would be willing to accept from a man:

I do think that if I get married, if I have a husband, that he's damn well not going to expect me to wash up every night and do his socks every night - he can do his own blinking socks [...].

These women wanted to get on with their lives and careers. While inequality between the sexes was generally perceived to be undesirable, like the schoolgirls, they did not see feminism in a positive light. Unlike the schoolgirls, they did not use terms like 'sexism' to name the inequalities they perceived.

### 3. Education and Reading

The women in this group discussed their previous experiences with schooling and with reading in ways that indicated that they felt that they had missed out on their education. Many of these women had had erratic school careers. Some had been uprooted from their native countries at crucial times. Some blamed themselves. For example, Sylvia regretted that she had not realised the importance of education to financial independence in time; she would have liked to have become a nurse but now thought it was too late. Those who were schooled in Britain did not feel they had received proper attention at school. Yvonne clearly felt cheated:

Like I went to school, I didn't even come out with a lot. I got one O-level, that was art and all the rest, I got grade 3 English CSE and that was it - all the rest of the lessons were a total waste of time. And I only stayed on till the 5th form 'cause I thought I would have done better [...] so I left school.

She laid the blame on low expectations:

I don't think they were strict enough. I mean, they mainly let you do what you want. And, you know, when you're young and, you know you don't have to work, 'cause you can get away with a certain amount - that's what they were like - they don't put their foot down.

She felt she had not been adequately prepared for the examinations:

What happens is they gave us childish work at the time - so when you get to the exams it's nothing like the work you had in class. [...] I mean they put a paper in front of you that you've never

seen before - you don't know where to start.  
[...] I mean I just didn't come out with nothing.

Angelina felt the teachers had not attempted to understand her Nigerian accent and had consequently tended to ignore her:

The teachers sometimes are a bit, all right, but sometimes [...] they tell you you're strange, they don't understand you at all. [...] I try to say something to them like trying to explain I don't understand a term and I was told that 'your English is not quite good' [...] sometimes I felt myself that it doesn't matter at all.

Maxine had a difficult time in school partially because of family troubles - her mother and sister died - which led to psychological problems. Because of this she was sent to the psychiatrist and expelled from school. She would have liked to have done better but recognised that

it wasn't all my fault 'cause it was [...] in my head. I didn't really know what was happening to me.

But she also felt that the school did not handle it well:

It's just the usual, because I think that teachers [...] weren't sort of aware of that sort of thing - to me, I think they were still a bit behind. I mean when they try to talk to your family and things like that, they're not sort of sympathetic.

She found this to be the case for other students and suggested that racism may have been to blame.

Even aside from these problems, Maxine did not feel she had been encouraged. She was not allowed any choice in her options for her examinations. While she wanted to do geography and history, she was made to do art - she could not draw - and French which did not seem particularly relevant to her:

they was doing about cheeses and wines at the time.

Barbara had liked English at school, but had not found the books they read interesting. The teacher would read aloud to the class and

Maybe she'll stop and ask us, you know, what do they mean, you know.

Rolanda was the only one who clearly remembered learning to read. After changing to a special school at the age of eight because she was epileptic, Rolanda got into a fight with another girl. For punishment, she was put into a reading class:

When I went there I was being told off [...] there was this old teacher there who was nice and he used to make you say the word but he wouldn't read it out for you. I mean he used to rhyme it with things.

In spite of the fact that she was sent to reading class for misbehaving, she enjoyed it until the teacher retired and was replaced by another who would rap Rolanda on the hand with her ring when she made a mistake.

What is apparent from the ways the women in this group talk about their experiences with schooling is their feeling that they were not

taken seriously in a variety of ways. This was particularly true of those who had done most of their schooling in Britain, in situations, that is, where they were perceived as 'different' because of their race and class, as well as their gender. Although only Maxine openly discussed racism, that it was a factor is apparent in the ways that the women talk about the inacceptability of their varieties of language. Although they show an awareness of the ways in which they have been streamed into the lower levels of the workforce through education and limited literacy, they do not generally talk about the role that race, class and gender play in the routes they have followed.

All of these women read - or used to read - for pleasure, but at the time of the interviews, most were not reading very much. All had read more during their school years. Many now felt that they did not have enough spare time because of domestic responsibilities which, for several, included child-care. Leisure activities included painting, knitting, watching television, cooking, listening to music and were mostly based in the home; only a few mentioned going out and socialising. Sylvia enjoyed writing in her diary. The women spent varying amounts of time reading. Wing said she spent about 75% of her free time reading books, while many of the others, such as Barbara and Rosemary, no longer found the time to read because they both had small children. Yet both they and Maxine read to their children regularly and felt this to be important. Yvonne could not find the time to read because of her part-time job and she also had trouble concentrating. Others found that the course took time away

from reading and generally that they read less than they had when at school.

A few purchased books regularly. Several mentioned buying books at W H Smith's and at second-hand bookshops while Helen bought some at Dillons and Hirut bought a book a month at Foyles. Hirut was the only one to mention having been to a feminist bookshop. A friend had taken her to Silver Moon; she did not buy anything, but thought she might go back another time. Barbara claimed she read virtually not at all because she did not have the time. However, she belonged to a book club from which she bought 20 to 30 books. She bought cookery books and keep-fit books for herself and dictionaries, educational books and story books for her children. Some of the women borrowed books from friends, while most relied on the public library for their supply of books. Again, most claimed they used to go to the library more often, but that work, family and the course now took up their time. Some still went occasionally and a few regularly. When using the library they would generally choose the books by browsing through the library. A few mentioned specific sections they would go to such as history, art history, study books and health. Chitra went to read the magazines once a week. Some asked the librarian for a specific title.

The women read a number of types of books. Jolanta and Cecilia liked reading health books. Others mentioned psychology books, romance, horror stories, ghost stories, suspense and mystery, animal books, books by Black authors, cookery books, pulp bestsellers and

short stories. They did not read feminist books, nor were they aware of the existence of the feminist presses. While several of the women did not read books very much, most read periodical literature from daily newspapers (*The Guardian*, *The Sun*, *Evening Standard*, *The Sunday Times* and *The Observer*) to women's magazines, such as *Women's Own* and *Cosmopolitan*. Some also read about knitting, gardening and cookery.

Much of the discussion concentrated on the use of books and reading, rather than the content of books. These women were far less concerned with what was in the text and their ability to relate to what they read than with their lack of access to the skills they felt they did not possess and which reading might offer. While they mostly believed that it was important to read, they generally did not think it mattered what one read. As Angelina said: 'I don't think it matters at all'. None of the women expressed a preference for books by women. Nor did they care if the protagonists were women or men. A few did prefer female characters to be a certain way. Ning read romance and did not like the female characters to be perfect. She was one of the few to discuss her reading in terms of identification: 'sometimes I think I want to be like her [...] sometimes I apply it to me'. Sylvia liked the women characters she read about to be 'strong', as did Helen:

I always like my women to be in charge of things  
[...] to be in control.

When Yvonne had spent time reading, she especially liked reading books by and about Black people:

I read a book about - it was based in Africa about white and Blacks and how they got on and how the schools were like, how the parents were like to their Black child, you get what I mean, and how the friends and everything. It's just a good book and when you get into it you want to read it till you get to the end. [...] Most of the books are mostly Black books - like Black people did it, yeah.

She preferred books by Black authors because they were 'funny' and because she could relate to them better than to books by white authors. Helen also mentioned reading some books about Black culture because one of her relatives writes such books and Sylvia liked reading books from Jamaica. Hirut raised the issue of ethnicity with relation to pulp fiction which she had read, but about which she now had reservations:

For my kind of a person, a person that comes from the Third World, that kind of books doesn't go to their - it doesn't tell much of their way of living. Things that's mentioned in there might be happening in America or a place like that. But for us it's just [...] confusion. I don't think they're good books.

These comments about relating reading to the experiences of being Black or from another culture were not typical. Generally, whether in terms of gender, race or class, identification with their reading was not something these women talked about or claimed was important.

Nor did the women usually think that the contents books affected their readers either positively or negatively. Cecilia, however, thought books could have a good or bad influence on people: 'you could as well act from the knowledge you're getting from the book'. This view derives in part from her strong Christian belief because of which she would not read romance novels. Rolanda was sometimes concerned with her brother's reading as she had taken care of him since their mother's death. When she bought a book on witchcraft, she hid it from her brother as she was afraid he might think she was into the occult and become frightened. Similarly Ning thought that zodiac books were potentially dangerous as people who believed in them tended to run their life accordingly. Hirut used to read pulp fiction but felt that it was not recommendable:

They're all right, but they don't give you that much education - it's all right for improving your English, but not very educative.

While Hirut makes the distinction here between books being good for one's English and generally educational - in terms of ideas - this distinction was not made by other women. Their major concern was with improving language skills. Reading itself was considered important. Because what one read was seen as only a matter for personal choice, the discussion on the importance of reading did not centre on the ideas one acquired from books or the ability to identify with books, but on the general usefulness of reading. Books could impart useful information. A few mentioned that books 'broadened' one's mind. But their major concern with books was the extent to which reading could help them to develop marketable skills.

Most women believed that reading was useful because it might lead to a better job. Any benefits beyond that were welcome, but not the main issue.

Reading was seen as *useful* in a number of ways. It could help to improve one's English and lead to better employment prospects. This was of concern to the ESL students, such as Rosemary:

To me, personally, I do think it's important really because - especially English being a second language, it does help if you keep on reading all the time [...].

But it was also a major preoccupation with the women who spoke English as a first language. For the latter, this tended to mean improving their written English and, in particular, certain skills. As Yvonne said:

I think it helps you to read better, like you know when you can't really pronounce a word, you read it and if you read books, it's better, I think it is, 'cause then you can learn on your own.

Rolanda also saw the necessity of reading in practical terms. Like many others, she felt that reading helped spelling:

If you couldn't read, you couldn't spell it.

She particularly found official documents and forms 'intimidating' and 'vicious' and she wondered how people managed if they could not read at all:

I wonder if there are people on their own who can't read and write and they've got cheques and

things. I think it's really important 'cause there's like signs and things.

Similarly, Maxine felt that being able to read was important because she liked to travel and would not be able to get around without reading. Barbara generally felt that reading could make one more intelligent. She had noticed this with her brother who began reading more under the influence of his girlfriend. Yet, she claimed it was not very important to read:

Well, I mean, I can't really say, it's just - if you read a book, you've got nothing to do, you just read it. I don't know. I don't think it's that important really.

At the same time, she made sure she bought plenty of books for her children for whose education she had high hopes.

Angelina felt that reading was important:

Because if you get an office, your boss give you something to read, to read for him, if you can't understand it, you're not able to work there.

When I asked Maxine if reading helps in life she replied 'well, they say it does'. When I explained that I wanted to know what she thought, she paused and then said:

You know, you've really got me there [pause], I don't know. I don't think I can answer that question [pause]. I think it's important.

I asked her if it was important for getting a job, to which she replied that

It depends on what sort of job you're getting [...] because some jobs you don't really need qualifications [...].

Ultimately, she felt that reading must be important to her:

Well, I can't really say that it's not important because if it wasn't, I wouldn't be here now.

Maxine's statements are indicative of an alienation not only from the written word, but from institutionalised education and culture generally and, consequently, from full participation in the public sphere. Literacy is seen by these women as a series of discrete skills and education as the possession of qualifications. Like many of the other women, Maxine felt the attainment of reading and other skills was useful and what mattered. Although potentially interesting, ideas from books were for many considered incidental. Angelina's main concern was with the access to employment reading could offer. It did not matter so much *what* she read:

Sometimes it's true, sometimes it's not true [...]. If I ever improve my English, I don't mind. So I know I've got a future ahead of me if I know I can read.

It was in relation to their reasons for doing the course that the women expressed most of their attitudes to reading and literacy rather than with reference to particular texts or genres. All of them came to the course because they felt it would improve their

English and consequently their job prospects. 'Bad English' effectively silenced these women. Angelina told me how her 'bad English' had even stopped her from writing stories for herself when she was younger, even though she had enjoyed writing them:

I stopped when I was in the fourth year - that's when I stopped writing all those stories [...]. I stopped because I started finding my spelling a bit bad.

She was silenced by her sister and poor spelling:

My sister is a bit noseey, she started going into my room to look around [...] reading my things. I'd leave them in the typewriter. 'Cause when I finish in the typing, I just leave it there so when I come back [it would be in the right place] - that's if I going out [...]. She'd start making comments, start screaming [about the spelling being wrong].

When talking about improving their English, most women were referring to specific writing skills, most notably spelling. Like many others, Yvonne voiced a concern about spelling:

Spelling, yeah, spelling. I'm all right with punctuation and that, but spelling is terrible. [...] I'm all right with writing, you know, I can write a letter perfectly, but it's the spelling, the spelling's bad.

Yvonne was taking the course

to get a job, 'cause you need that, especially English, that comes first.

Rolanda did not understand how she could be so good at reading and yet have so much trouble with spelling. Spelling was fundamental:

If you can spell [...], they'll look at you differently.

Sylvia also had difficulties with the written language because

how I talk, I write just the same.

And Rosemary had problems with punctuation and paragraphing:

My weak points are - sometimes you write a letter - like paragraph - I just write a letter from one end to the other, you know, have no paragraphs, question mark, all those little things, you know, which I never sort of realised how much there was. You know, I get a lot of help from that and where to use the capital letters.

Form-filling - particularly for job applications - was something that many women felt they needed help with. Letter-writing was important both for applying for work, but also because many of these women hoped to go into secretarial jobs. As Angelina said:

I wanted to do some secretarial course so I could work in an office, get some good money [...] so I came to this course. And also to improve my English because my English is not very good.

While most of the women stressed that they were on the course to improve their chances of finding satisfactory employment, a number of them were hoping to continue studying. Jolanta wanted to go on to a secretarial course. Sylvia hoped to be able to continue part-time education at a polytechnic or university once she found a job. Ning planned to continue the engineering course she had started in the Philippines, while Hirut thought this course would prepare her for a two-year course she wanted to take at a college of distributive

trades which would enable her to become a travel agent. Helen also had plans for the future:

I don't want to be a sales girl. I want something I can make a career of [...]. I want to get a good education, so that anywhere I go I will be able to - at least I want to understand the basic things they are talking about and understand the people's idea.

These women are not lacking in the desire to get on with their lives in the best way possible. But they were generally unaware of the kinds of routes they could follow to achieve their goals. Their experiences with education - and literacy - had generally left them unprepared not only for many types of work, but most importantly it had alienated them from many of the institutions in the public sphere. They did not generally have access to information concerning their options. A number of women had done various other courses between jobs, but these did not appear to help them develop a clear progression in their working lives. Some were not optimistic. Cecilia felt that she was too old to compete; she was 41. Rosemary felt she 'was out of touch [...]' with all the new system of working' since she had been at home with her child. They seemed to feel that if they do not get a job, it is because they should do another course. That is, they believed there was something lacking in themselves, rather than in an educational system which had channelled them away from further options. As Barbara said:

If I don't get a job by next year, I might do another course.

Maxine had done a number of courses and had come to the college with the intention of doing her post-16 examinations, but she was too late for the class and was told she was not ready for them. Maxine seemed bewildered by the system:

I seem to do all the correct things and never seem to get anywhere - so I decided to come here.

These women have been alienated from society's institutions. Their experiences of and attitudes to reading parallel those of the older working-class and ethnic minority schoolgirls in the previous section. The discourses surrounding reading at school effectively differentiated them from their white and middle-class contemporaries and channelled them into the lower levels of the work force. Because of their experiences in the workplace, they are now trying to resist that exclusion by gaining skills that they feel will help them to get on. They find themselves in a system in which literacy is available to them only as a series of discrete skills. Although they are aware that they have been denied access to education, their fragmented literacy does not encourage them to distinguish between personal difficulties and structural failure. Their resistance to alienation is apparent in their discounting of personal identification and content and their emphasis on the *usefulness* of literacy skills. They resist by insisting upon talking about issues of access to education, literacy and skills in direct reference to their future possibilities on the job market. Although they derive pleasure from the individual texts they read and may discuss them with their friends, they made it clear that, at least within the institutional

setting in which the interviews took place, textual meaning and the ability to identify with the text were not relevant to the business at hand. Because they spoke only briefly about actual books and their feelings about them, it might appear that they spoke little on the subject of reading. But by shifting the discussion on reading to issues of the *uses* of reading and language skills, they were attempting to resist the centrality of a decontextualised discourse which had left them out.

#### D. Towards a Feminist Literacy

I think it's always important to be aware of your position as a reader, like historically speaking, in class and gender and so on, that you have a specific relationship to any text. I believe in appropriation, rather than being appropriated.

- Heather

##### 1. The Sample

During my research into feminist publishing, I attended numerous events which attracted a large number of readers of feminist books. The discussions which inevitably took place at these events revealed the major concerns of feminist readers. Because of my familiarity with these discourses, I decided to conduct in depth interviews with a relatively small group of women who defined themselves as feminists and who read feminist books. These interviews were much longer than those with the girls and women in the other two groups, lasting between an hour and a half and three hours. This was partly because they took place outside an institutional setting and there was more time. It was also, I believe, because feminism had given these women confidence in the value of their experience and a language - that we shared - in which to frame it.

Because feminists are not a known population, I relied on the informal structure of the feminist network to set up these interviews. I first approached a woman working at a feminist

resource centre because she was concerned with feminism and books. Through her, I contacted three more women, one of whom introduced me to another. The sixth woman was contacted through a feminist network.

This is not a representative sample of feminists, but the discussions they produced are representative of the main issues that were raised by feminist readers in larger groups at the time the interviews took place. It may be that their comments were more typical of women based in London who have access to a wide community of feminist readers and of feminist books. While these women do not cover all the strands of feminism in Britain today, nor, consequently, the full range of viewpoints on these issues, their comments do hit upon many of the topics of major concern at the time. Nor does the sample reflect the full diversity of the feminist population. This is most notable with regard to age. I limited my sample to women in their twenties and thirties partly so that they would be of comparable age to the women in the Further Education group, but also because women working in various sectors of the feminist book world indicated that women in that age group were their most frequent readers, as far as they were able to tell; my observation of the women who frequented feminist book related events also showed this to be the case. Again, my main interest here is to theorise the existence and nature of a feminist literacy, rather than to give a statistical analysis of the population of feminist readers. Working-class women, ethnic minority women and lesbians were included to theorise the interaction of gender, race, class and sexuality.

Tina was from London, white and of working-class background and had grown up as the only child of older parents. Her mother was a school-dinner lady and her father had worked in a furniture factory. Both her parents had left school when they were quite young and her father was semi-literate. When I interviewed her, she was working at a women's resource centre.

Heather's parents were Irish and she grew up working-class in Lancashire. Her father had worked in a factory and her mother was a cleaner. At the time of the interview, she was working in a community centre and also with a radical training and advice collective.

Natalie was born in Jamaica and had come to London at the age of thirteen to rejoin her mother who worked as a nurse's auxilliary. She left school at the age of 16 and went to college. When I interviewed her, she was working in a women's resource centre, but planning to leave to study journalism.

Liliane was of mixed parentage. Her mother was from the Caribbean and her father was Arab. She had lived in Lebanon until she was in her mid-teens and then spent varying numbers of years in different countries in Western Europe before coming to Britain. Most of her work had been in social and community work. At the time of the interview, she worked in a women's resource centre.

Clare was white and from Northern England of a middle-class professional background. She was raised as a Catholic and had been involved with the Moonies for several years. At the time of the interview, she worked as a sales representative for a large publishing company.

Melanie was a white working-class Londoner. Her father had been a black cab driver and her mother had worked in hairdressing, but they had studied and changed professions in their forties. Melanie works as a primary school teacher.

## 2. The Self as Reader

The women in this group constructed histories of themselves as readers in a very different way from the women in the previous group. I believe that this was not only because they were generally more highly educated - over half had been to higher education - but because they were feminists and feminist readers. Feminism had given them a way of thinking about their past experience and of structuring, contextualising and politicising it. Feminism also encourages an autobiographical mode because of its concept that every woman's experience is important and valid. It was not necessary to ask very many questions of the women in this group as they were generally used to a reflective mode encouraged by feminism.

All of these women had enjoyed reading from an early age. Reading and education were held in different esteem in their families of

origin, though it was generally seen to be a good thing. Natalie's grandfather had encouraged her to read when she was growing up in Jamaica. When she joined her family in this country, she found that her sister encouraged her to read and to get on with her education, while her mother did not. She was not sure how much her mother could read; she had overheard her saying that she had never gone to school.

In Melanie's family, reading and education were very important; her family believed that if one tried hard enough anything was possible. Both her parents studied later in life in order to get on:

I'm the eldest child of a working-class family and my father particularly felt that the best way to improve ourselves and get a job and to be all right would be to get an education. So I've been very much pushed academically and I read a great deal as a child.

Although there were not a lot of books in the house when she was growing up, she and her family used the library regularly.

Like Clare and Heather, Melanie particularly remembered using reading as a way of escaping from feeling unhappy. While Clare read to remove herself from her parents' arguments and Heather read because she was ill as a child and to withdraw from an authoritarian and violent father, Melanie read because she felt different from other children:

I was unhappy living in Walthamstow. I knew a few middle-class children who were more like me. I mean it sounds dreadful. I have a big problem with it now because what I'm saying is that I'd much prefer to have been brought up middle-class [...] and I was a fairly sort of academic child

and I couldn't find anybody else who related to me, who, like, read a lot and had a fantasy life.

For Heather's family, reading was not so important:

It wasn't necessarily something that was valued in the way it would be valued in a middle-class context. I think for me it was always a form of escape [...], but also a way of expanding out of something that felt very restricted, so it gave me an access to so many different worlds and different cultures and difference experiences.

She remembers particularly liking:

books about poverty and about vulnerable young girls and also about people who were on the outside or kids who were on the outside.

She felt that the books she read as a child were

what I would define now as kind of oppressive books that, if and when I have a child, I would certainly not encourage a child to read.

Ideological objections to books read as children were common to many of the women I interviewed.

Liliane did not elaborate on the place of reading in her family, but remembered learning to read at the age of eight in French, 'that is supposedly my mother tongue'. She knows Arabic but does not read in it very often: 'that's got to do with the way Lebanon was colonised'. She did, however, remember preferring books by women even as a child, although she read widely.

Although her parents did not read a lot, Tina felt she had been encouraged to read at home. As she got older she became

really interested in books and writing and I read all the time and [...] I remember wanting to have loads of books in my room on my bookshelves and I was very frustrated I couldn't buy those books.

The experiences of reading at school were generally ambivalent. Clare's sister taught her to read before she went to school and she read avidly from an early age. However, she felt that reading was something that was personal to her and not something she would discuss with her school friends:

I always felt that it was something only I did [...] very private - it was my way of being on my own as well [...].

And she was certainly more interested in her own reading than school reading:

We weren't really given very much to read at school - apart from the set texts - I never remember reading them - the set texts - in the sense of reading - they were work and that was quite separate.

Clare felt that the books she had read as a child had given her

an idea that life must work out some way - which I suppose is a little dangerous [...] I think I've taken more out of books than I have out of real life to actually apply to my own thoughts [...].

Her relationship with books has changed since then:

I suppose recently books have made much more of an impression on the way I've thought consciously, whereas I think the books I read as a child and a teenager gave me a generalised picture of how the world was - that things eventually would work out and that one finds a mission for life [...].

Natalie remembered being given Peter and Jane readers in her school in Jamaica and

I remember noticing that there were Black people there, even though I wasn't aware of colour - you know, everyone being Black - but I remember thinking this was very good seeing someone like myself there.

However, when she got to school in Britain she recalls incidents where racism appeared to be accepted. She remembered not feeling that she fit in at school.

It was the working-class women that expressed feeling most at odds with the educational system, whether at school or at university. For Melanie school was not enjoyable, but it did not stop her from reading:

reading was personal and separate from my education at school really. We were encouraged to read certain books [...]. I can't remember it being very related, what I did in school and my reading.

Tina remembered being good at reading at school:

I remember winning a packet of crisps at school because I read this story and they thought I read it so well.

But she felt that only those who read with ease were given any encouragement.

Melanie, Tina and Heather all described themselves as working class. Books had played a large role in their sense of exclusion because of the lack of books available about working class experience and, once they had gone to higher education, in their sense of partial separation from their origins. Melanie felt that most of the books she had read during her education were not things she could relate to:

I don't think I ever thought of reading literature as supposed to be relating to my life and when I was doing my degree, I got used to it being something that took me to another world.

Literature 'carried on not relating to [her] life for quite a long time'; indeed, she 'wasn't looking for anything that related to [her] experience [as she] was trying to get out of it'. But she no longer feels that way about her reading largely because of the rise of feminist publishing:

At the time, because that's what I was used to and I didn't read anything that really did relate to my own experience. [...] The books about - the feminist press - and books about working class women have only arisen very recently.

Heather also felt alienated not only in her reading, but from education in general. When she got accepted into university,

My mum said, you know, people like us don't go to university, we can't afford it, you'll not stay there, you're shy, you know, you'll never stay there and my father wanted me to be a secretary

and wouldn't sign the papers for me to go to university, in fact, my mother had to sign them.

Heather felt that reading had a different value in working-class and middle-class families:

I think I often felt - and still do - that so little is written by working-class women. In a sense you're always a little bit outside of it, you're other, you just reclaim a little bit and a middle-class person would reclaim a lot more from so many of the books that are out there really.

Like Melanie, Heather found that the books on her syllabus at university had no relation to her life:

I really questioned why I was there, it had no relevance to my life whatsoever. It was sort of - Milton - and a poetry course that consisted of four great male writers and the bloke who taught it looked at a poem, with sort of, 'why is the space at the end of that line, why is there a comma there, you must carry this around in your heart [...]' and I just couldn't relate to it at all [...]. And I nearly left - instead I changed schools and started doing a feminist course [which] sort of integrated literature with social history, women's history [...].

Tina articulated most clearly the difference that books meant in her life as a working-class person and the way owning and reading books is equated with middle-class privilege:

My life's so different from my mum and dad and people I knew before - it's all tied up with books - I can't separate it - just almost because I did English at university and that almost separated me - or was very different from [...] what anybody else in my family had done. It's a real separation from my mum and dad about books. Like I'm in a house now where there's loads of books on the shelves and our house doesn't have any books -

so they're also really symbolic of that change. I suppose I read books at that time, but I suppose they'd just get thrown away, because I think in a working-class culture you don't often keep books - they don't become a sign of value or they don't necessarily have to say something about you. I think most people read things and then throw them or pass them on or give them to jumble sales or give them to the local library. For me anyway books on book shelves is for me a real class thing.

### 3. Becoming a Feminist

The women in the sample came to feminism in various ways and at different times of their lives. For all of them reading feminist books played a part in their politicisation as feminists, whether or not it was the actual catalyst. They defined their feminism in different ways and some of them expressed changes in their feminism from the early days. Generally, theirs was a broad type of feminism which included other politics as well. For Natalie Black politics were an essential part of her feminism. Lilliane stressed the need for an anti-imperialist perspective. Class, race, sexuality and ability all figured in their definitions.

Natalie first remembered coming into contact with feminism through the magazine *Spare Rib* when her sister brought home a copy. This immediately led to involvement because she answered an announcement asking for women to help produce a feminist magazine for young women, which she worked on for a number of years until the magazine folded.

For most of her time on the magazine, she was the only Black woman which meant that she was always expected to cover Black issues. Since this experience, she has become involved with Black women's politics more closely. She helped organise the Black women's conferences and helped start a Black women's group in South London. Because of the way white women have dominated feminism, Natalie does not always like to apply the term feminist to herself:

Well, yeah, exactly, sometimes I do and sometimes I don't. I work in [a feminist resource centre]. I suppose I realise that I am in a way, but I don't go around telling people I'm a feminist. I believe in obviously women's equality but I don't call myself a feminist as in the old days - I don't relate to that anymore. I suppose I see myself as a Black woman who believes in Black women's equality and fight for Black women and all women and unless that's incorporated then I don't see how I could call myself a feminist, if feminism didn't recognise that.

Liliane has been active in feminism for a long time. In Europe, she was involved in various campaigns, including the campaign for abortion rights. She also worked on a feminist periodical in Britain and was involved in an Arab women's group. She defined her feminism in these terms:

I would describe myself as a radical feminist but as a radical anti-imperialist feminist. I don't know if these things come together, but for me they definitely come together. For me, patriarchy is the thing and I would see myself as a socialist feminist but I would never call myself a socialist feminist because of what socialist feminism means in this country and the way this strand has gone. I mean it's a white, sort of almost Labour Party - so I suppose a radical anti-imperialist Marxist feminist.

She felt that radical feminism was misunderstood in this country

because of all the hoo-hah around it and who sort of espoused it and held the banners for it. I think it gave a lot to the women's movement and to feminist theory, definitely. And I believe that really class, race and sex interact without one having to take priority over the other.

The other women came into contact with feminism at school or in higher education through feminist or socialist teachers. Melanie came to her sense of feminism while still at school:

I'd say I was calling myself a feminist by the time I was 17. I went to an all girls school in Inner London where there were many feminist teachers and there were a few lesbian teachers as well. And there were about six women teachers who were lesbian at this school and a couple of them who were open about it. [...] It was quite a political time in London because of the rise of the National Front in 1978/79 and I went to a multi-racial school and Walthamstow has got a very high Asian population [...] so in the sixth form we became very politically involved with opposing the National Front. There was a young kids against Nazis group - there was the Anti-Nazi League [...].

Besides the general politicisation of the time, her teachers showed how 'feminist issues really applied to our lives'. Her first approach to feminism was not through books but 'through political happenings'. Melanie felt that her feminism was changing:

I was told I was a radical feminist - I don't know if I still am - I object to the label really - because I said I wasn't interested in working through the Labour Party. [...] Recently [...] I've felt less strongly a political feminist and a lot more - you can either say tolerant or you can

say liberal and this is a very recent development for me. In fact, it's going off on a tangent because I feel that things have got too heavy in lesbian feminist politics and it's to the exclusion - it excludes women and there's a lot of division and I feel now that that's reached a point where it's - it doesn't do anybody any good at all, really.

Politics have always been important to her but she has become 'fed up with the negativity':

It's guilt, that's what I'm objecting to. I am a feminist and I would continue to define myself as a feminist - I wouldn't want to drift away into some kind of liberalism really, but I do feel that heavy feminist politics has become too much about guilt-tripping people. [...] Enemy camps have sprung up and I feel that feminists - women - are too divided to be a powerful force.

Tina came to feminism after being politicised first in other ways. At school, a sociology teacher encouraged her to read political books and at university she came in contact with other feminists. She belonged to the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) for a time and she also

joined a socialist group - although I don't think they were feminist, I would see some sort of connection, so I didn't just find a radical politics through reading - it was through the people I met I think. But I never met any feminists or I never met any women that would call themselves part of the women's movement till I went to university. But I met women that were socialists that would have feminist politics attached to that. So partly through books and partly through meeting people and my teachers.

For some, reading played a large part in becoming feminist.

Heather came to her feminism and politics generally through reading. A school teacher gave her *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropist* which

she read around the same time as *The Women's Room* and *The Second Sex* 'and that was it really'. From then on, she read books concerning social issues. She did not find that any one strand of feminism suited her and had liked the writing of some Black women because of the way they addressed different 'oppressions'. Another book which had been important to her had been *Shadow On a Tightrope* which is about fat liberation. She felt that this book had helped her to define herself not only in terms of being fat, but in terms of her Irishness, class and sexuality because it made her realise that 'it is structural, it's not just me'.

Although Clare became aware of the issue of sexism while she was in the Moonies because of the emphasis on sexual stereotyping, she began to become more socially aware through reading sociology and education when she left the group and studied education. It was not until she left education to enrol in a religious studies course and encountered Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father*, that she realised how important feminism was for her:

I remember being absolutely bowled over by this [book]. I think it was really the first sort of feminist thing - explicitly feminist thing - that I had ever read. And of course it was about something which I was very involved with. It was about theology and everything - she's a very passionate writer as well, Mary Daly - I mean, hot stuff it was, and I just thought it was fantastic.

Her friends from her course also read it and then they got involved in setting up a women's group at her college:

As soon as one starts talking and reading about these things you actually meet more people who are interested and it snowballs.

Her reading started at an especially good time for feminist books:

I remember Virago was just about to open, the First Feminist Book Fair was in London in 1984 and I remember queueing up and going to that and it all became terribly exciting [...]. Sisterwrite had just opened as well - a bit earlier this was - but I remember going up there and being terribly excited going up to a *feminist* bookshop for the first time - Silver Moon hadn't opened yet - I mean it really was exciting to go to a whole bookshop full of women's literature.

Since then, she has read 'everything that [she] could get hold of'. She became more involved in feminism and she is now active in a feminist network. Although Clare began by being interested in feminism through Mary Daly's writing, she now feels that hers is not the sort of feminism to which she would subscribe. It was through the events at the First International Feminist Book Fair that she began to feel that she was more closely aligned with socialist feminism. She attended two events at the Fair:

One with Mary Daly which was amazing. Another one with Hester Eisenstein which was supposed to be a debate with Mary Daly. Mary Daly wouldn't do it. Now that was kind of the first - I was just beginning to get an inkling of the sort of divisions between socialist and radical feminists. I'd just read Hester Eisenstein's book *Contemporary Feminist Thought* - very good.

Most of the other women also felt that there were one or two key readings for their politicisation, particularly as feminists. This was particularly the case with Clare who mentioned books by Mary Daly

and Carol Christ's *Women's Spirit Rising*. For Natalie, it was *Spare Rib* which first introduced her to feminism and inspired her to get involved. But the writings of Alice Walker and June Jordan were particularly important to her:

I remember reading Alice Walker - *My Mother's Garden* - reading some things that she's got there and June Jordan. I really like June Jordan's political essays. She's just so good [...]. She just puts everything so right about racism and [...] about how oppressed people, whoever you are, you've got to get it together to fight, you know, who's got the power basically and she's dealing with all Third World people's struggles and how you can't just see your own struggle. Because I think what I tended to do was like see my own struggle, as a Black person, that's it - and there was all this thing about who was Black and who wasn't - and I think reading some things that she's got to say about people's colour or whatever and all oppressed people have got to join together. She's made me see a lot on that side. So I think she's really good, she's really sort of strong and really committed.

Liliane felt that she had been changed by Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* because of the way it challenged gender roles:

Just this utopia of no sexes and therefore no gender and anybody being able to be anything and your name would not tell, say, whether you are a man or a woman and that really sort of excited me, this vision. [...] It just changed my concept of gender and sex I think very much and I think politically I used that, but not in a conscious way. I mean in sort of realising that, yes, there are possibilities for change.

Books about Black and Arab women were important in clarifying her relation to feminism: *This Bridge Called My Back* showed her

the existence of a Black feminism and how that differs from white feminism in terms of its taking on board anti-imperialism as a major strand.

She also found Nawal el Saadawi's book *Woman at Point Zero*

a brilliantly written radical feminist book - radical feminist in the Western sense - in terms of defining patriarchy and I think she did it almost unconsciously, in getting to a point where really any man is your oppressor and is potentially a rapist. I think that was laid out so clearly in the book and for it to have come out of an Arab perspective was for me quite important.

The books that were important for Tina were about both Black politics and feminist politics which she began to read because she was influenced by her sociology teacher at school. Because of him, she had read George Jackson's *Soledad Brothers* and Angela Davis and she became interested in Black politics. She also read Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* and *Sita* at the time. These readings made a big impact on her and she was describing herself as a socialist and a feminist by the age of 15. Tina felt that reading had played a large part in her politicisation, especially as a feminist:

I definitely developed my feminism through reading - and through my friends and not really through the political stuff. It's interesting, whenever I've been politically active in a group, it's usually been a mixed group. I mean I left the SWP for lots of reasons, but one of them being because of its attitude to women and women's politics. But I could never find a women's group - apart from something that wasn't political - like a writing group or something which I found very satisfying. Although I helped [a feminist periodical] for a bit and that was satisfying and like working here. But in terms of actually being politically active - so I suppose they must have been [...]. I don't remember ever really loving *Spare Rib* or dying for it to come out every month, but it was always bought. But I don't remember it being the thing that informed me most of all, but it was one of the things. I would say it's been

important to me in a way and I mean, books by women, definitely.

All of the women I spoke with had a preference for books by and about women, though other issues such as race, class and sexuality also came into the choice of reading. Many found themselves reading books by women almost exclusively, especially when they first discovered feminist books. They spoke about these preferences in terms of being able to relate to such books more readily. The way they relate to books according to gender, class, race and sexuality is different from the way the other groups discussed their identification because their feminist literacy enabled them to place themselves and their reading in a social context of power relations. This group of women are in more of a position to articulate their exclusion from discourses of power.

A non-English perspective was particularly sought in books by the women belonging to ethnic minorities, although the white women also mentioned writing by Black people and women of other cultures as important to them.

Heather was particularly interested in recovering oral histories of her family. She had been keeping diaries based on stories about Irish immigration and culture told to her by her mother and grandmother. However, she did not specifically mention reading books by Irish people. Yet she did make it clear that she was aware of the 'absences' in relation to her experience in the things she read. She identified herself as Irish, working-class, a lesbian and a fat woman

and found that few things could relate to her experience as a whole, but that she could relate to certain parts of it or to books which were about the experience of being an outsider. She particularly liked Audre Lorde's writing because of the way she saw the connections between 'oppressions' without prioritising one over the other:

So Audre Lorde was really important because she was kind of saying what I'd practically grown to believe - that you've got to make room for some connections between oppressions or the *status quo* will always remain a certain way. [...] And I like her because she doesn't prioritise one of her own oppressions, you know, she's Black, and she's a lesbian and she's a woman and she's old and she's been ill and there's all these issues - working-class and so on, all those things come together and she kind of validates them.

Natalie enjoys reading about Black people and felt that, because she was Black, she could relate to such books more:

I can relate to it more [...] because you can see something of yourself, whilst if it's about a white person, I think, well, that's nothing to do with me. A lot of fiction - a lot of lesbian fiction from America [...] I started to get into that because it's about lesbians. I wish there was about Black lesbians - that would make it a lot easier, but I'm trying to read about it [...].

Although Natalie felt that much of her feminism came from reading, she did not think this was the source of her Black consciousness, which came 'more directly from [her] own experience'.

All the women I interviewed felt that they preferred books by women writers and that they could identify more readily with female characters. Clare especially enjoys books which are about a search for wholeness and she finds this particularly in books by women:

I still look for that in a book. Those are the books that I really enjoy - books about people looking - particularly women. I do find it quite difficult now to read books with men as the central character. I mean I didn't read any males for a long time from when I started really and I've only recently started to read men and they tend always to be foreign writers, either Canadian or Czechoslovakian, you know, the Picador ones - I've read quite a few of those. And those are interesting but they're very alien. But on the whole, I actually avoid male writers because I really don't find that they have anything very relevant to say to me and they always seem to be about things and doing things and action stuff where - and although I don't object to that particularly, but I want something else as well. I want some kind of search for wholeness.

She was also more able to identify with a female character:

Things like *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* - which I really did think, that was a wonderful book, but I didn't identify with the - I mean, it was almost like reading poetry - it wasn't like reading a story about someone, because I didn't identify with the bloke in that at all. [...] You don't know enough about the woman to be able to place yourself in her place.

Tina also preferred books by women. While she rarely read books by men now, she read more than she had as a teenager. Like most of the other women, Tina felt that this was not 'a conscious choice' but simply that she found books by men uninteresting. She did however like books by Black men more than books by other men; and she still

had some favourites from the classics. Tina also felt that she related better to books by and about women:

I think I like women more than men generally. I have more respect for them. I think they're more grown up. So I've always had a thing they're bound to be more interesting, really. [...] I think I like things that are really melancholy and quite powerful and I think women write much better in that way. I don't like things that are clever-clever and I think [...] a lot of men like to write things that are clever-clever.

Her preference for books by women and her ability to relate to them was conditioned by physical differences as well:

Partly, I suppose, it's even in terms of someone's body in that if it's a man and it's the main character - it's weird, it's like coming out of this body that you can't [...] it's kind of weird - it even articulates itself in that way for me in that if it's a book by a man and I don't know - the fact that even the character goes to the toilet or has sex - I can't - because it's a man and I've never been to the toilet or had sex as a man and it's a barrier. I mean women are very different - but it's even those small things. [...] It's partly political, but it's not because I have a thing that women are wonderful and better than all men - it's just how it feels [...].

Liliane read books by men:

I do read books by men - but they will tend to be mostly political books with a big 'p' and that would be mainly Black and Third World men. I don't read books by white men at all. [...] Not by choice [...] I don't find that they've got much to say really to help me in my political development [...].

However, she generally read books by women.

Natalie also found that, while she preferred to read books by women, she especially liked reading books by and about Black people, male or female:

Like when I read fiction it could be about anything. I suppose I don't like the idea of men - I don't like the idea of men too much writing about women - speaking for women in other words. I don't like that idea - if there's something like theory about women written by men, I don't like it because they're still seeing it from their point of view.

She felt that this was less of a problem with fiction 'cause I just see it as a story I suppose'. However, she did feel she related differently to female and male characters:

Oh yeah. I think I'd prefer it to be a woman especially if it's a strong person. I mean, if it's about a man and I can't identify with that man - and I think that men are always portrayed in a certain way in books, aren't they? I can always relate more to things about women but as far as if it's written by a woman or a man, I suppose it doesn't matter to me. It does matter, I would prefer it, but it's not going to put me off if it's written by a man unless he says something really obviously terrible - if he says something sexual about a woman, I might not like that too much - if it's just a general book then I think that'd be all right. But I prefer it if the character's a woman, I'm much more interested.

Melanie also found that once she started reading books by and about women, especially feminist books, that

I started to enjoy them more to the point where I found I wasn't enjoying reading something by a man because I do relate so much more to a woman author and point of view. And now it's quite difficult for me to read something written by a man. I wouldn't sort of buy something really and I've stopped reading literature - what's regarded as literature - and I buy contemporary women writers.

Books about lesbians were important for the women whatever their sexual orientation had been when they read them. *Sita*, for example, had made Heather 'think about aspects of [herself] that [she'd] denied before'.

Tina was not a lesbian but enjoyed reading books by lesbians. Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* and Kate Millet's *Sita* had been important when she was younger:

I never felt that I was a lesbian or that I might want to be a lesbian, you know, I quite enjoyed sex with boys or men. I didn't feel - but I think it gave you that feeling that if I didn't, then there was - I think it's just something liberating anyway - the idea - in terms of women's sexuality.

Natalie also found reading about lesbians was important for her now and when she was younger:

Some of The Women's Press books I remember - this was before I was a lesbian - I suppose I must have been. I remember one of my sisters had this book - I can't remember what it was called - it was one of those science-fiction about women taking over the world and something, but I remember really liking that, even though I wasn't very much aware of anything then. I think I must still have been about 15, 16. But I remember liking that and the idea of it being all women. I suppose that did subconsciously - was there helping me and now I suppose whenever I see anything about gays - if I have a book, it might be a general book, but if it has anything about gay people, I'll always try and read that and I read magazines - any article about Black gay people, I'll always try to read those.

Natalie had been trying to read more books about lesbians, such as those put out by Naiad Press in the US, but

I find them a bit Mills & Boons, you know, it always goes really right and sometimes I just laugh [...]. I suppose that because it's about women I put up with it. I don't mind.

Melanie mostly read books by and about lesbians. As a young girl, she had disliked reading teen magazines and found nothing at that age 'to relate to in exploring [her] sexuality from reading'. She felt that it would have helped her to have found lesbian books at an earlier age:

Had I read something positive about lesbians I think it would have helped. By the time I got to 17, by then I had realised, yes, I think it would have helped tremendously because I had a lot of negative images and stereotypes which meant my thinking no, you mustn't be a lesbian because it's too awful.

Because of the negative images she had about lesbianism, she found a boyfriend and was heterosexual for three years. Now that she reads many lesbian books, she has 'found books which [she] can relate to very strongly'. When she was first coming out, she read a book which helped her because of the positive portrayal of the lesbian character:

I read this book which I don't think is a very good book - I enjoyed it very much at the time. [...] It's about two women who have this relationship when they're 20 and one decides to be heterosexual and the other one decides she's going to be a lesbian [...]. And it's the other way round with negative images because the one who decides to be a lesbian is happy, of course, and the one who doesn't, years later, they meet up again [...] you're not surprised by the plot - but

[...] it's a good book for a lesbian to read because it's very positive. And the one who is heterosexual, it's not saying she's completely ruined her life, she ends up being undecided and unfulfilled. It's not that she doesn't love her husband and, it's just that she could have done more. So that was a very good book for me to read at that particular time. And since then I've read a lot more by lesbian writers.

She also reads lesbian romance. These books are mostly American because British lesbian romance has only recently been available:

Yeah, that's nice actually, because you can read things which aren't that sort of deep, but which just feel very refreshing.

Melanie also buys 'a lot of lesbian books and even if [she is] disappointed by the quality of the writing, [she] never regret[s] buying the book'. Buying lesbian books also comes from a commitment to keeping lesbian literature alive:

When they produced *Beautiful Barbarians*, it's Onlywomen Press, and they had a poetry reading at the ICA [Institute for Contemporary Arts, London]. I went to that and the woman who introduced it made this point about lesbian literature being lost through history [...] and that inspired me to think, yes, I should buy - when I see a book, a lesbian novel or a poetry book, I should actually buy it and keep it for myself to preserve it. Things go out of print - you don't get them again.

Clare also enjoys reading lesbian books and romances:

I like to have a few trashy books. If it's a nice lesbian romance, then fine - as long as it's not too badly written, but, you know, just sort of nice ordinary books.

She feels that she can relate to books about lesbian relationships better as she is now involved with a woman for the first time:

I feel that stories about heterosexual relationships are just not relevant and I suppose I'm looking in books at the moment. I am looking for a guide, you know, what to do with my life and all, and I feel that it's not really very helpful if it's all about meeting a man and being happy ever after. So, I mean, it's all right as long as it's not the main thrust of the book.

The ability to relate to books is clearly important to all these women. In terms of fiction, it is important to see something of oneself in the protagonist. These women seek some correspondence between their own experience and those of the characters they read about, in terms of gender, race, class, sexuality and so on. This does not mean they cannot read books which have no overlap with their own lives. Often they enjoy books about the experiences of 'outsiders' who have completely different experiences from their own. Once they have become aware of their position in society, they find it difficult to read books which ignore it. Reading close to their experience gives them important confirmation of belonging to a wider social context and their exclusion from the dominant culture. In reading non-fiction, this is even more obvious. Natalie, for example, finds that in reading about political issues, it is imperative to read books by women or by Black people in order to eliminate a male-biased or racist view-point. She is less concerned with fiction in this respect.

All of the women felt that the rise of feminist publishing was important for their own lives and for women generally. Many believed that it would have been helpful to their development as women had feminist books been available to them when they were growing up. Tina summed up what many others expressed when she spoke of the impact a particular feminist book had made on her:

I think often what books have done for me is that I have feelings that seem very confused or they seem very personal and that made me put them in perspective and that made me politicise them.

Some of the women reported different stages in reading feminist books. Although no one felt that they were 'just a phase', the intensity with which they read feminist books was usually greater when they were first discovering them, at which point they would read less selectively. As they developed their feminist reading, they aligned themselves more with certain types of feminist reading and thinking and also seemed to branch out into other types of political reading. This was also because the output of the feminist presses is still small. As Clare said:

I'm looking a bit more widely now, having been through a time where I wanted to read specifically feminist books.

These women are what Alison Hennegan (1985) has called specialist readers in feminism. They read about women in fiction, poetry, politics, sociology, theology, theory, literary criticism,

psychology, cinematography, biography, spirituality and so on. They are all aware of the different identities of the different presses and know what kinds of books they publish and how they feel about them as separate entities. It is also quite clear that, although some read more than others, there is a shared body of feminist books and concepts them which they discuss with other women. Feminist publishing has made available to these women a shared culture which breeds further discussion and production. At least four of these women have also written short pieces for the feminist periodical press.

All of these women showed a great familiarity with feminist publishing houses, in terms of the types of lists they produced and the kinds of politics they represented. Virago was generally seen to be the least radical of the publishers with a list that concentrated on white, middle-class and heterosexual values. Few still read their Classics list. Liliane disliked the Virago Travellers series because she felt it was 'colonialist'. Although she saw the point of uncovering women's history, she questioned 'whose history are they reflecting upon and reflecting'. The Women's Press was seen to be more radical, particularly because it published more lesbian books. Although The Women's Press prides itself on its representation of Black and Third World authors, the women in this group believed that only Sheba had a real commitment to them. Sheba and Onlywomen had a lower profile with these women, except that Liliane and Natalie felt more of an alliance with Sheba as Black women and Melanie, who read more lesbian books than the others, was the only one to express a

particular interest in Onlywomen. Onlywomen was otherwise criticised for ignoring Black women or for its separatism. Pandora was only vaguely mentioned by two of the group and did not conjure up any particular image.

The rise of the feminist presses had been important to women in centring their attention on women's books. Melanie began reading Virago and The Women's Press books and then went on to the other publishers. Although she had always read a lot, she never felt the books related to her life. Even though she enjoyed Virago books and had read them for several years, she did not feel they related to her life either:

It was only when I started reading The Women's Press books that I started to [...] think that it could relate to my own life, rather than being something totally other.

From then on, she took 'a conscious decision that [she] wanted to buy and read books by women from the women's presses in general'. She now reads books by Sheba, Onlywomen and from North American feminist publishers, but she concentrates on books from The Women's Press. She also belongs to The Women's Press Bookclub.

Melanie was the one who still concentrated her reading on the feminist presses, while the others read more widely and were more critical of some of the books the feminist presses produce. All of these women were critical of the feminist presses to some extent, although they all felt that the presses were still important to them.

It would appear from many of their comments that they felt their relationship with feminist books to be slightly less intense compared to when they had first discovered feminist writing and publishing. This is apparent both in the way many of them now read more widely and in the way they criticise of some of the books the feminist presses produce. As feminist publishing is a new phenomenon, this initial concentration is not surprising.

Tina said she 'used to go to Sisterwrite and spend hours and hours in the bookshop' and although feminist books had been and still were important to her, she now knows which presses she likes:

Onlywomen Press I don't like. I think they have a very specific radical feminist politics - separatists. I don't like their politics. [...] I've got a thing against Onlywomen and Virago actually. [...] Women's Press I find more exciting visually and I much rather - if a Virago book comes in, I'll be less inclined to it than a Women's Press book. And Sheba and Pandora are quite interesting.

Most of these women seemed to be looking for new directions in feminist writing and publishing. Some felt that particularly the fiction had become formulaic to some extent, that it had to have the right types of characters and endings. Lilliane felt that it came down to definitions:

How do you define a feminist book? Like how do you define a lesbian book - that's always been a question in my mind. Is it sufficient that the author - say, in terms of lesbian books - is a lesbian and therefore it becomes a lesbian book - which I don't think is the case. And the same thing about feminist books [...].

She particularly enjoyed reading detective fiction by women such as Ruth Rendell, Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers and was critical about 'this new genre written by so-called feminists':

I mean there is nothing feminist about them in a sense. Gillian Slovo is just about all right, but, I mean, to have the right-on women detectives, dressed in the right way saying the right words and using the right terminology, I don't think that makes it a feminist book. And you sort of end up wanting to like, like wanting to go back to the Ruth Rendell and Agatha Christie - the old women thrillers.

Liliane said that it was possible to define feminist fiction by those in circulation but

you can get a stereotype about the feminist heroine, vegetarian, you know, that sort of thing, who's into right-on sex, for instance, you know, the sort who'd be a lesbian and isn't that great - but I think this is almost ridiculous. [...] It's tending to be the case more and more so - I think books are being written more to a recipe. I mean, I was struck by this book called *Jumping the Cracks* just published by Virago last month written by a woman called Rebecca O'Rourke. That's a sort of feminist book which is like a thriller [...] and that I thought was really sort of - you know, it's an unemployed woman who's a lesbian, having problems with her lover and a bit boring, called Rat of all things, a bit dirty, living in a council flat, about to be evicted or something, you know. I'm not being sort of arrogant about it, but I think there is more to a feminist book than that - to the feminist heroine and what sort of a feminist heroine anyway. Would we all agree that the heroine is a feminist? I mean if she goes to a consciousness raising group, does that make her a feminist?

The charge of formulaic writing came up for other types of books as well. Tina found some feminist fiction to be 'clichéd' and 'not

stimulating enough'. Although she recognised that such writing had at one time been important for her, she now felt that feminism had moved beyond that point:

Obviously, there's different types of feminism and feminists, but it's always safe - it doesn't experiment with itself or with these ideas and it doesn't question them. I mean in an extreme form it's like 'oh we're all women and we all love each other and let's write a book about how nasty men are to us, then we'll find each other and we're happy'. At one extreme it's like that. Feminism and me and everything's gone beyond that, so I just find that frustrating. But generally, there are many things that don't question things enough. Also I think I'm a bit of a snob and generally things start to get published that aren't very good, just because they fulfill a certain formula - they have enough of the right ingredients. But then I think that's not true in a way, but obviously these books sell, so there must be some people who want that and like it.

Heather also believed that only certain images of women were considered to be acceptable in feminist books.

Liliane and Natalie both voiced dissatisfaction with the paucity of books by Black women that were published by the feminist presses. This criticism was frequently heard at discussions about feminist publishing. They also felt that the books that were chosen for publication tended to privilege the negative side of Black experience:

I find that, say, Women's Press and the other feminist publishing houses are still looking for a certain recipe and would not publish different books by Black women - they would want something that would fit [...] if you've got a book that talks about incest and violence, especially if it

is written by a Black woman [...] a bit more oppression than you would expect in a white book (Liliane).

Both Liliane and Natalie felt that only Sheba had a serious commitment to publishing books by Black women.

A number of the women found the lesbian fiction quite disappointing. Clare believed that The Women's Press often published lesbian fiction for the sake of it:

I feel that they're actually publishing for women who just want a book about lesbians or a book about, you know, women of colour or something like that. And I think it's fair enough to publish it, but you've got to be publishing some good stuff as well.

While she liked reading lesbian books, she found that those available were not really satisfying:

I'm thinking of some of The Women's Press books because they tend to do a lot more lesbian books - they tend to be a bit pompous - I don't know if that's the word to describe - well, it's all a bit unbelievable. You know, lesbians are seen to be so much better people than everybody else, you know, it's sort of not really very realistic. It's a kind of wish-fulfillment basically, a lot of them are and I find - I just find it unsatisfying. I'll read them quite happily, but I don't find them satisfying. There aren't many lesbian books that I find satisfying to read.

While criticisms of feminist writing centred on fiction, Clare was becoming impatient with some feminist non-fiction, which

I used to be able to read with great gusto. I used to really enjoy them, but I don't know if I just got tired of reading non-fiction - and I do tend to read more fiction - I feel that I'm being

berated and I feel that it's pretty silly really because anybody who's reading that kind of book is going to be converted anyway, so often there's far too much negativity. I tried to read Andrea Dworkin, Susan Griffin, people like that - important feminist theorists - and you know I feel like everything could be said in one line and I don't find that way of going about it, you know, piling on sort of horror story after horror story kind of thing - I just find that boring really. I mean some feminist fiction - some of The Women's Press ones, they're not very good books some of them and some of them are superb, but I like having them, I like reading them anyway.

The women's comments on feminist book production show them to be at a point in their feminist reading where they want new challenges. They generally felt that the way of writing needed to change. Natalie expressed this in relation to the magazine for young women on which she had been involved several years before:

I think we were far too radical in the things we printed. If we were trying to make it an alternative, we were far too political. I think, you know, we had to get something more balanced than sort of preaching all this kind of hard core feminism [...]. We weren't really providing an alternative - it was too extreme.

Clare also found the overly 'polemical' nature of some feminist writing unappealing and was now

waiting for a new wave of feminist fiction particularly. I mean in the sense - the feeling I got a couple of years ago was really feminist theory had gone as far on a broad canvas as it could. Now people were sort of going off on very specific things - so you know there was the discussion about female sexuality and the sado-masochist debate [...], the housework debate and that sort of thing.

She now felt that because of the strong divide between socialist feminists and radical feminists, the best way 'to think in different ways about feminism is through fiction'.

Heather believed that one of the dangers in the present state of feminist writing was setting up canons along the lines of the traditional literary canon. She saw a need to get away from the polarities of good and bad books and the qualitative discourses that had featured prominently in discussions about feminist writing:

I just think we have to get away from all these polarities of good/bad - great traditions or great radical traditions - you know, all the bestsellers in *City Limits*. [...] It's another form of elitism, but it's trying to be more trendy and radical.

Overall, most felt that it was necessary to move beyond the facile declarations of what was acceptable in feminist writing and publishing. It also meant moving beyond paying lip-service to issues of class and race. Ultimately, it was felt, feminist publishing needed to become more challenging. Both Tina and Liliane saw the need for more courage in confronting the issues:

I don't like books that are too scared to be contradictory or explore, and dishonest. I mean, I don't mind if books want to talk about women having fantasies about rape or - I don't think that's harmful if it explores them, but I don't like books that are dishonest and pretend that these things don't happen (Tina).

Tina did not, however, feel this was only a problem in feminist writing. Liliane expressed similar sentiments:

The one thing that would strike me is that there isn't much courage, I think in the sense of exploring contradiction, exploring women's realities as they actually are - hesitations, problems about sexuality. You're either a right-on lesbian or a right-on socialist feminist living with a man but he does the washing up - or you're not, you're not a character worthy of being in a book.

For some of the women, this was related to the issue of censorship within feminism as evidenced in the debates around pornography and lesbian sado-masochism (cfr. Gail Chester and Julienne Dickey (eds.) 1988). Although these women were not in favour of either of these manifestations, most felt that banning them was not the best thing to do about them. Several felt that there was a strong moralistic strand within feminism to which they did not subscribe. Melanie said she would not tell her friends that she had read a book of lesbian erotica or, for that matter, that she sometimes read *Vogue* because it would be seen to be exploitative of women. Others felt that reading Mills & Boon novels was unacceptable because of the images of women revolving around men. But no one demanded outright censorship. Heather maintained that 'you can't draw lines and I don't believe in book-burning'. Tina believed that pornographic images of women could affect people 'but never in a vacuum': they were not the cause of violence against women, although they helped to render it acceptable.

Most thought it counter-productive for feminists to be proscriptive and censor books. Nor were they exclusively concerned with about promoting books with positive images. Although they all felt strongly that it was important for women and other groups to

have positive images of themselves available to them and that it did matter what people read, they also saw the issue as being connected with wider questions of access. Heather did not think feminists should blame women for the kinds of things they read as it was necessary to look at other factors:

I don't think women should be too proscriptive, but [...] also I think that women should have access to different things [...]. I have access to further education, I have access to friends who've read different things [...] and I think it isn't okay to sort of condemn them - also for like wanting to escape [...]. I also think that women are often sold out in a way and not given enough choice and enough access to other things that they might like better and I think that should be criticised, but that [...] women who read Mills & Boons or whatever - it's blaming the victim. I don't think it's a question of condemning people for reading that kind of stuff. I think it's about arguing that we should have more choices about culture and about everything really.

All felt that a variety of channels needed to be opened to give greater access to women. Tina mentioned the limitations of bookshops, Heather said that more books should be available in libraries and especially for the blind. Liliane recognised the criticisms that had been levelled at the organisers of the Feminist Book Fair and Fortnights, but felt that they had been important in increasing access to feminist books because they were now available to a wider readership. Liliane also thought that popularised books such as Marilyn French's *The Women's Room* were important as they reached a larger audience and Heather felt that to be radical, a book had to reach a wide segment of the population: 'something that lots of people would enjoy reading'.

Heather and Tina also broadened the discussion on access to include education and literacy. Education had enabled Tina to gain access to information. The illiteracy in Heather's family made her recognise that 'if you're illiterate, you're very powerless'. It did not just matter what people read, but the question was more basic:

I think that access to being able to read and write gives you power and choice and control and I think it matters in terms of supposed democracies because if people don't have access to information about different political parties and so on, then they can't make informed choices and that's the same for every area of your life and it affects your choice of jobs, it affects your choice of leisure activities [...].

Heather also believed that reading could help her be 'a bit less oppressed', because it enabled her to contextualise her own feelings in terms of the experiences of other people. She was also convinced that, if reading were taught differently at school, it could be a powerful tool for change:

*if you read in a sort of focussed way which encourages you to contextualise what you're reading and if you also develop those skills you use in reading to analyse music or art or TV or an advert or a conversation, then it moves into the reality of life, it's not just boxed off there - that's reading and that's everything else - I think they all link up.*

With these words, Heather describes feminist literacy.

Gender, race and class are important issues in relation to reading for the women in the three groups.

Anti-sexist and anti-racist policies clearly contribute to an awareness of gender and race for the schoolgirls in the study. Yet concentration on the negative sides of these issues (*anti-sexism, anti-racism*) seems to cloud the strengths to be found within feminist, Black and working-class cultures and to present them as a 'problem'. While the interviews show that some individual texts from these cultures have been made available to the girls, there is little evidence of any challenge brought to the categories established by the literary institution, which are themselves biased along class, race and gender lines. The girls still perceive books by, for and about women, Black people and working-class people to be marginal. In this way, anti-sexism and anti-racism fall short of empowering students to locate themselves as readers in the literary culture. (Class was not generally discussed as an overt category by these girls (cfr. Steve Goldenberg no date, on the lack of effective anti-classist policies in ILEA schools).)

While the women in Further Education focus less directly on issues of class, race and gender in their discussions of their lives and reading, some of them do feel a sense of identification with writing by or about women and people from their cultures. On the

whole, however, their sense of how those issues affect their lives and their reading is located outside, rather than within, the text. Their resistance, like that of the Black and working-class schoolgirls, manifests itself as a rejection of the centrality of textuality and an attempt to shift the focus on to wider issues of education, literacy and preparation for the job market in a bid to gain fuller entry into the public sphere.

For the feminist readers, the two sides of the argument come together. They believe that it is important to be able to identify their own experience in cultural forms. But they contextualise that experience with reference to questions which lie beyond the text: access to the production and consumption of literary culture, education, literacy and the public sphere. Identification is only a first step in creating a feminist culture and politics.

### Notes to Part III

1. There is a vast literature on research methodology and techniques. Hammersley (1984) and C. Wright Mills (1959, 215-48) were particularly useful on the importance of the research process itself. Howard Becker's study (1970) of marijuana users offers the classic case on theoretical sampling, snowball samples and theory building. Maren Lockwood Carden (1974) offers a good example of snowball sampling through the feminist network. Snowball sampling is particularly useful when dealing with unknown populations, such as feminist readers. These works and those of Norman K. Denzin (1978), Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson (1983) and, of course Janice A. Radway (1984) were especially helpful on the ethnographic approach which my work uses. Eileen Kane (1985) and Gerry Rose (1982) are good general books on the differences between qualitative and quantitative research, theory testing and theory building, research design, sampling and analysing data. Other background material included: John Brynner and Keith M. Stribey (eds.) (1979); Martin Bulmer (ed.) (1977); Alan Dawe (1970); Catherine Marsh (1982); John Rex (ed.) (1974); Margaret Stacey (1969); Michael Wilson (1979). See also Roland Barthes (1977) who, in reminding us that a thesis is 'a timid practice of writing, at once disfigured and shielded by its institutional finality' (p. 197), also warns against an obsession with methodology:

Some people talk avidly, demandingly of method; what they want in work is method, which can never be too rigorous or too formal for their taste. Method becomes a Law, but since that Law is devoid of any effect outside of itself (nobody can say

what a 'result' is in 'human sciences') it is infinitely disappointed; posing as pure meta-language, it partakes of the vanity of all meta-language. The invariable fact is that a piece of work which ceaselessly proclaims its determination for method is ultimately sterile: everything has been put into the method, nothing is left for the writing; the researcher repeatedly asserts that his text will be methodological but the text never comes. No surer way to kill a piece of research and send it to join the great waste of abandoned projects than Method.

The danger of Method (of a fixation with Method) is to be grasped by considering the two demands to which the work of research must reply. The first is a demand for responsibility: the work must increase lucidity, manage to reveal the implications of a procedure, the alibis of a language, in short must constitute a *critique* (remember once again that to *criticize* means to *call into crisis*). Here Method is inevitable, irreplaceable, not for its 'results' but precisely - or on the contrary - because it realizes the highest degree of consciousness of a language *which is not forgetful of itself*. The second demand, however, is of quite a different order; it is that of writing, space of dispersion of desire, where Law is dismissed. *At a certain moment*, therefore, it is necessary to turn against Method, or at least to treat it without any founding privilege as one of the voices of plurality - as a *view*, a spectacle mounted in the text, the text which all in all is the only 'true' result of any research (pp. 200-1).

Of major importance to the background for this study were works on feminist research and Women's Studies, especially for the issues of interdisciplinarity, research ethics, bias, objectivity and subjectivity, the theory of knowledge, etc. Helen Roberts (ed.) (1981) is particularly helpful. The following also offered useful insights: Deirdre Beddoe (1983); Gloria Bowles and Renate Duelli Klein (1983) (especially the essays by Sandra Coyner, Maria Mies, Shulamit Reinharz, Taly Rutenberg and Bari Watkins); Maren Lockwood Carden (1974); Mary Hughes and Mary Kennedy (1985); Elaine Ruben

(1978); Julia A Sherman and Evelyn Torton Beck (1979); Gayatri Spivak (1978); Carolyn Wood Sherif (1978); Liz Stanley and Sue Wise (1983); and for a valid criticism of the latter - and much else - Lynne Segal (1987).

2. By feminist books I mean books published as such.

3. See Part II, note 14.

4. Ann Oakley's essay 'Interviewing women: a contradiction in terms' (1981) is the single most important work I have read on interviewing. She rejects the conventional advice found in social science books on interview techniques on the grounds that they turn the research subject into an object. She particularly objected to the notion that, if the interviewee asks for the interviewer's opinion or for information, the question should be shrugged off with a flip reminder that the interviewer is asking the questions. She found this approach to be both ethically repugnant and bad research. In her own case, she was researching women's experience of childbirth and, having gone through the experience herself, did not feel justified in evading questions about whether or not it was painful. I agree with her on this point and also on the other. She argues that a researcher gets better results with a more egalitarian relationship based on give and take: there is 'no intimacy without reciprocity' (p. 49). Hugh Heclo and Aaron Wildavsky (1974, xi-xxiii) make a similar point about obtaining information through an exchange of information (within the limits of confidentiality). This gives the

researcher the advantage of appearing to be in the know and something of an insider. This can be particularly useful among those who are wary of outsiders, such as people working in the book trade. Eileen Kane (1985) and Louise H. Kidder (1981) also provide useful background material on questionnaires and interviews.

5. 'authority plays a part in all pedagogy' Bourdieu and Passeron (1977, 10).

6. On the diverse strands of feminism in Britain today, see: Valerie Amos, Gail Lewis, Amina Mama and Pratibha Parmar (eds.) (1984); Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe (1985); Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley (eds.) (1986); Lynne Segal (1987).

7. On the abolition of ILEA see the Education Reform Act 1988; see also Sarah Boseley (1987); Demitri Coryton (1988); John Cunningham (1988); 'English: the uses and abuses' (1988); David Gow 1988a, 1988b, 1988c); Martin Jacques (1988); Judith Judd (1987); Stuart Maclure (1987); Maureen O'Connor (1986a and 1986b); Maureen O'Connor and Wendy Berliner (1988). On anti-sexist policies, see also Inner London Education Authority (no date);

8. Alice feels that the issue of racism is over-emphasised and agrees with the 'no Black sections' line of the Labour Party. See section on race, below.

9. The girls think of politics as institutions. They do not think of gender and race issues as politics.

## **CONCLUSION**

To be literate is *not* to be free, it is to be present and active in the struggle for reclaiming one's voice, history and future.  
(Henry A. Giroux 1987, 11)

This study shows that women's experiences with reading are dependent on factors beyond textual meaning. Literary criticism's assumptions about the 'effects' of reading say more about the ways in which reading is socially constructed than they do about the actual experiences of readers. By looking at how the book trade shapes readership and at the experiences of readers in education and outside, this study has moved away from the emphasis on textual analysis to be found within feminist criticism and the sociology of literature and focussed instead on the way in which the literary institution differentiates readers and limits their access to the public sphere.

Although access to 'positive images' is important, it is not sufficient to change female readers' relation with the literary institution. Feminist publishing has been important not only in making books by, for and about women available, but also in attempting to change the relations between the producers and consumers of literary culture. In spite of the inroads which feminist publishing has made, the structure of the mainstream book trade in which feminist publishing is forced to operate militates against changing readership patterns.

The interviews with the schoolgirls and women confirm that reading is socially constructed and point to the necessity of recognising 'that there is no one "literacy"' (Graff 1987, 8; cfr. Street 1984, 8), but that there are many.' Different literacies locate people at different points on a social and cultural hierarchy.

Because of their gender, none of the girls and women I interviewed were full participants in the dominant culture. The younger group of schoolgirls appeared to be generally unaware of how their relationship with reading was influenced by their gender. Even so, their interest in female heroines and their feelings about *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler* show that they have already developed a gendered literacy. In the case of the older schoolgirls, these differences had become more marked. They were aware of the differences between what men and women read and often felt they were better able to identify with books by and about women. Their preference for fiction, rather than non-fiction, also appears to be gender specific. Gender was not the only variable. While the younger girls had very similar attitudes to reading, the group of older girls presented different types of readers. They had developed different forms of literacy according to their relation with the dominant white, male and middle-class culture which schooling perpetuates (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Steve Goldenberg no date). In aspiring to their place within that culture, the white and middle-class girls learned to accept the distinction between what counts as 'literature' and what does not. They discussed literature in terms of their ability to identify with it. The Black, ethnic minority and

working-class girls were also aware of these distinctions and how they excluded them from the dominant culture. These girls resisted their exclusion by maintaining that 'literature' was 'boring', that it did not relate to their lives and that it did not matter what one read. Dellary turned this passive resistance around by making explicit her awareness of the ways Black culture was devalued at school and by making a conscious effort to develop her knowledge of that culture on her own. In this way, she was beginning to develop a critical literacy which enabled her to remake the links between the personal and the political.

Similarly, the women in Further Education had been alienated from the dominant culture at school. Their experiences with schooling had left them with few or no qualifications and had not prepared them for the workplace. They resisted their alienation by returning to education in the hope of appropriating the skills and qualifications they needed. They perceived literacy as a set of skills; the value of reading was related to the extent to which it could impart these skills.

Like the older Black and working-class schoolgirls, the women in Further Education tended to reject the notion that it mattered what one read. They also did not generally perceive reading to 'relate' to their lives. On the whole, the importance of identifying with characters in the books they read was discounted. By rejecting the centrality of identification, personal response and the importance of reading certain kinds of books, they resisted the way literacy has

been socially constructed to exclude them from the dominant culture. For them access is the central issue.

The notion that it matters what one reads and that the task of education is to develop a discriminating reader is part of the Leavisite tradition (Francis Mulhern 1987, 33).<sup>2</sup> In this extremely text-bound vision of reading, students are expected to recognise the existence of a canon. At the same time, they are asked to identify with literature and produce 'personal responses' to it:

students were routinely faced with two conflicting demands: recognise the authority of the canon, but produce a personal response. The test of an authentic personal response is that it turns out not to be so visibly personal at all: it agrees with all other personal responses in confirming, yet again, the validity of the canon (ibid., 33).

Identification and personal response are learned social responses. Such a system excludes the 'personal responses' of many members of a heterogeneous student population:

It was a specifically middle-class reworking of humane learning whose base was the socially homogeneous culture of the grammar schools and the universities. Without that tacit community of interest and outlook, 'personal response' was no guarantee of agreement (ibid., 33).

Anti-racist and anti-sexist policies have attempted to accommodate the diverse population by introducing books with which girls and ethnic minority children could presumably 'identify'. Seeing 'positive images' of themselves would help to validate their

experience. Although the availability of such books is important, inserting specific 'positive' texts into a structure which discriminates against certain groups is not enough. At best, it produces a mixed message. If the structure remains the same, it may only become that much more obvious to the students how devalued Black, feminist and working-class cultures are by the dominant culture. In such a context, these books are seen to be entertainment and a diversion from the business of learning (cfr. Scafe 1989).

Identification and personal response is more complicated than the call for positive images would suggest. White and middle-class girls can still identify with and produce correct 'personal responses' to the dominant culture by virtue of their class and race, although they are excluded because of their gender. The Black, ethnic minority and working-class girls find themselves alienated on several counts. They are asked to produce 'personal responses' to a culture they do not identify with and from which they are excluded. When they are given, for example, books by Black authors, they are ambivalent in their desire to identify with what is perceived to be a subordinate or deviant culture within the framework of school.

Focussing on positive images is still a very text-bound approach. It is important not only which books are made available, but the values that are associated with them. Structural inequalities cannot be overcome by changing images alone. It is necessary to examine the kinds of literacies promoted for different segments of the population and how these literacies foster or deny access to full participation

in the public sphere. While curriculum development is outside the scope of this project, it would appear that devising a programme which looked at the social construction of literacy would be a priority. Such a programme would draw on the awareness of the social uses of books and reading that this study shows schoolgirls and women in Further Education already possess, but which is not recognised as knowledge. The women in Further Education, for example, are already attempting to shift the emphasis away from textuality and towards the issue of access. The development of a critical literacy would legitimate the knowledge they have gained from their own experience about the ways the social construction of reading affects their lives and would enable them to name that experience. Such a programme would aim at developing a literacy which helped 'reconstitute their relationship with the wider society' (Giroux 1987, 7). As Graff (1987, 7) says, 'literacy must be "deconstructed" [...] before it can be meaningfully reconstructed'.

Feminist literacy reclaims identification as a tool of empowerment by placing it within a wider social context. Feminist readers see themselves as *women readers* and are able to construct a critical history of their difference. Feminism is predicated on the connection between the personal and the political which allows women to recognise that their experience is not only the product of individuality, but of being women in a man's world. It enables women to see the social construction of gender and, by extension, of other categories and to develop a critique of the *status quo*. The recognition of the roles that race, class and other factors play in

locating the individual within relations of power have more recently enriched this awareness. Although identification is a catalyst for recognising where one is located in a patriarchal world, it is not an end in itself. To continue the ongoing process of developing a feminist literacy, one must move beyond identification and the category of personal experience. As Liliane said,

I used to [read close to my own experience]. I don't anymore. I think I've gone through that point, beyond it and then I'm not very sure about this thing about personal experience. I mean there is so far you can go and then you want to know how other women live and relate that to your own experience and find the similarities and they're always there. So I mean how does your own experience - what does it mean - is it just reduced to Arab woman of mixed descent, for instance, which would be the case for me, or would it be Black women all over the Third World, which I think is more likely. Finding the similarities there - and the differences are just as rich as the similarities.

Feminist literacy needs to be part of a larger feminist cultural project and feminist politics. The availability of feminist books has been extremely important to these women in developing a feminist literacy, but the 'positive images' these books contain are not enough to change their lives outside of a favourable context. The feminists I interviewed were part of a feminist culture to which they felt they had contributions to make. Because of the participatory nature of feminist culture, the distinctions between producers and consumers have been challenged and attention has been focussed on issues of control and access. In the group of feminists I interviewed, at least four had written short pieces for feminist or

community publications, three had helped produce feminist periodicals and one had been in a writers group. The rise of feminist publishing has fostered a feminist literacy. But as control of and access to feminist publishing and the media in general becomes more limited for women and as the community based projects find survival more difficult, feminists need to think of new ways to make feminist literacy a process available to all women in the 'wider project of possibility and empowerment' (Giroux 1987, 7).

## Notes to Conclusion

1. I am using Brian Street's definition of literacy as 'a shorthand for the social practices and conceptions of reading and writing' (Street 1987, 1). Writing as an anthropologist, Street criticises the 'autonomous' model of literacy and states that 'any version of literacy practice has been constructed out of specific social conditions and in relation to specific political and economic structures'. The 'autonomous' model defines literacy as a 'technology', thus masking 'ideological claims about cultural difference' between literate and non-literate (p. 29).

2. In *The Great Tradition*, F. R. Leavis (1948) insists on the necessity of distinguishing between the historically important and 'the significant few' (p. 3). For example, Dickens is not included in the latter category: although Leavis credits him with 'genius', it was 'the genius of a great entertainer'; he lacked 'a challenge to an unusual and sustained seriousness' (p. 19). For Leavis, learning to distinguish is crucial:

It is necessary to insist, then, that there are important distinctions to be made, and that far from all of the names in the literary histories really belong to the realm of significant creative achievement. And as a recall to a due sense of differences it is well to start by distinguishing the few really great - the major novelists who count in the same way as the major poets, in the sense that they not only change the possibilities of the art for practitioners and readers, but that they are significant in terms of the human awareness they promise; awareness of the possibilities of life' (p.2).

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