



Laurie Hilburn

Publisher Profile: Virago Press

HISTORY & RATIONALE

In 1973, Carmen Callil started Virago Press in her home in Chelsea, London. Still in her 20s, Callil had just graduated from the University of Melbourne and moved to Europe, seeking work as an “Australian, B.A., [who wanted a] job in book publishing.”¹ At the same time, the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM) was gaining global traction, forming into a second wave of feminism in the early 1960s.² Callil took notice; as the WLM strengthened in England, she found work at traditional publishing houses but familiarized herself more with underground and alternative presses, such as the counterculture magazine *Oz* (which had a controversial presence in both Australia and the United Kingdom) and its offshoot newspaper *Ink*.³ Callil also befriended other activists in the publishing world, like journalists Rosie Boycott and Marsha Rowe. In 1972, she watched them launch *Spare Rib*, a feminist magazine “to reach out to all women,”⁴ redefining “commercial women’s magazines with a product which would be zesty and comfy enough to compete.”⁵ As something familiar yet still radical, *Spare Rib* featured articles on health and beauty as well as “women’s inequality” and “sex work,” a collaborative effort running behind the scenes.⁶ *Spare Rib*’s success gave Callil an idea: a feminist publishing house. She came upon the name Virago when “[reading] a book about goddesses”: “There on the page was the virago, a heroic warrior woman.”⁷

Though at first called Spare Rib Books as a direct relation to the magazine, Callil embraced Virago Press as an independent venture as her mission better took shape: to create “a publishing house to put out books by new and neglected women writers, when it was mostly men

¹ Devlin, “Polly Devlin Remembers Her Friend.”

² Sullivan, “Turning Pages.”

³ Hutton, “The Five Most Radical Underground Publications.”

⁴ Rowe, “*Spare Rib* and the Underground Press.”

⁵ Jolly, “Women in Publishing.”

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Sullivan, “Turning Pages.”

who were telling the stories.”⁸ With Boycott and Rowe, Callil established Virago as “a feminist business” and “publishing company” in June of 1973,⁹ with its first catalog announcing, “There is a specialist publishing imprint for almost everything, except for 52% of the population — women.”¹⁰ As “an exciting new imprint . . . in a changing world,” Virago Press was represented by a bitten apple logo to “[symbolize] both the sharing of knowledge and the ways in which the female sex had been demonized throughout history.”¹¹ The publishing industry — made up of mostly men — were initially unimpressed: “[Virago] is an unlovely and aggressive name,’ the author Anthony Burgess famously sneered . . . ‘even for a militant feminist organization.’”¹² Nevertheless, Virago’s first book, Mary Chamberlain’s *Fenwomen: A Portrait of Women in an English Village*, came out in 1975: “Carmen could have gone for a big name to launch the new publishing house but she had, instead, commissioned a history of an obscure village told through the voices of poor, working, rural women by an untried and untested author.” The nonfiction novel was an immediate success, showcasing the “authenticity of women’s lives,”¹³ and today, it is “now considered a classic” — exactly the goal Callil set out for Virago to accomplish.¹⁴

Then, in 1978, Callil formed Virago Modern Classics, a list of rediscovered “‘forgotten’ women’s writing”¹⁵ determined to “celebrate women writers, to demonstrate the existence of a canon of women’s writing and to redefine the often narrow idea of a ‘classic.’”¹⁶ The idea began with Antonia White’s *Frost in May*, featuring “a young Everywoman up against an authoritarian

⁸ Sullivan, “Turning Pages.”

⁹ “Virago Timeline,” Virago Press.

¹⁰ Jolly, “Women in Publishing.”

¹¹ Smith, “Testaments of Twentieth-Century Writers.”

¹² Green, “Carmen Callil, Founder of the Feminist Press Virago.”

¹³ Chamberlain, 1076.

¹⁴ “Non-Fiction,” Mary Chamberlain Books.

¹⁵ Jolly, “Women in Publishing.”

¹⁶ “About Virago,” Virago Press.

and frightening body of adults who insist on subduing her spirit.”¹⁷ When published by Virago in June of 1978, it sold over ten thousand copies, “a bestseller for the company at the time.”¹⁸ Callil was inspired: “I saw a large world, not a small canvas, with all of human life on display, a great library of women's fiction, marginalized, silenced, out of print and unavailable.”¹⁹ Virago Modern Classics was thus born, “[helping] reshape literary history”²⁰ as it “[illuminated] women's history in a way that would reach out to a much wider audience.”²¹ These books quickly became known for their distinctive green spines, “[having] since become a fixture of the literary imagination: blocks of dark color that instated a quietly subversive and discernible feminist presence on shelves of bookshops, living rooms and bedside tables.”²² Today, the collection is made up of over 700 entries, including fiction, nonfiction, prose, poetry, and children’s books, and continues to grow.

Entering the 1980s, Virago was a publishing success, especially now with Virago Modern Classics in their repertoire: “Virago ‘became such a reliable brand . . . that you could buy a book on the strength of the green spine alone.’”²³ Virago had helped prove feminist publishing could be a success, marking a significant shift in demand for women’s writing. The increasing interest, both by mainstream audiences and retail publishers, showed recognition of the value to literature by women and feminist media. However, it also foreshadowed an underlying dilemma. On the larger scale, the WLM in England was appearing strong on the surface but fracturing beneath; the WLM conference held in 1978 was also their last due to the “growing rift” between liberationists and the feminist offshoots that had developed within the movement, such as

¹⁷ Callil, “The Stories of Our Lives.”

¹⁸ Withers, “Green Spines, Back Story.”

¹⁹ Callil, “The Stories of Our Lives.”

²⁰ Withers, “Green Spines, Back Story.”

²¹ Callil, “The Stories of Our Lives.”

²² Withers, “Green Spines, Back Story.”

²³ Smith, “Carmen Callil: Pioneering Feminist Publisher.”

socialist feminism and feminist separatism.²⁴ The arrival of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1979 catalyzed this conflict as she was the first woman to hold the position, a testament to women's suffrage, but outright rejected the feminist movement, calling feminism "a poison."²⁵ Globally, the second wave of feminism was beginning to ebb.

An identity crisis was similarly brewing for the presses of the 60s and 70s: Could you maintain independence if you reached commercial success? The two elements could not be seen as mutually exclusive. Underground publishing entities had already illustrated oppression was in part driven by bastardized practices of capitalism, necessitating women and other minorities make their own space. Yet, when these new entities triumphed, they were then viewed as having betrayed their origins. Virago exemplified this, supported by both the nonconformist power of underground media and the financial gains of delivering to everyday markets. In *The Virago Story: Assessing the Impact of a Feminist Publishing Phenomenon*, Catherine Riley writes, "Having the power to publish meant that Virago countered the dominance of male editors in the industry and presented new literary material that was the result of deliberately feminist editorial choices," but maintaining that power to publish necessitated Virago succeed as a business.²⁶ While playing a crucial role in elevating women's literature and increasing its visibility, the conflict over the coexistence of activism and commercial success — the integrity of feminist ideas in the face of mainstream status — made it difficult not to wonder: Was Virago now at risk of losing its feminist messaging in the pursuit of profit?

Arguably, Virago first felt the weight of this heavy quandary in 1982. Callil's publicist firm, Carmen Callil Ltd., had helped independently finance Virago since 1975, but at this point,

²⁴ Orr, "The Struggles and Retreats of the 1980s."

²⁵ Denman, "To Call Margaret Thatcher a Feminist."

²⁶ Riley, 23.

Rowe and Boycott had stepped back, publishers Ursula Owen, Harriet Spicer, Alexandra Pringle, and Lennie Goodings joining Callil. Virago's triumvirate was now "a quintet," and as recalled by Callil, "these five women were the core of Virago." But, the high demand for women's literature meant an increased workload, overwhelming Virago operations. When publishing group Chatto, Bodley Head, and Cape (CBC) offered to make Virago a wholly owned subsidiary, Callil accepted: "The alternatives were borrowing large sums . . . or the sale of parts of the company that would have given outsider's control."²⁷ The Chatto, Virago, Bodley Head, and Cape Group (CVBC) was born with Callil taking on extra publishing duties at Chatto headquarters. Despite being told it "was not to be read as Virago's assimilation into the mainstream," the sale was taken by many as a precursor to Virago's downfall.²⁸

Naturally, this also meant feminist publishing as a whole must have failed — even as it continued to be a lucrative business. The same publishers who criticized Virago were also "[seeking] to cash in on" the popularity of women's writing: "The feminist presses became, in a sense, victims of their own success."²⁹ Nevertheless, Virago persisted. Running on the success of Virago Modern Classics, the press continued its mission to unearth and revive forgotten women's writings. In 1984, Virago released *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou. Although it was "15 years after the first US publication," this groundbreaking autobiography had not reached audiences beyond America; as Angelou told Virago editor Goodings, "when it was shown to British publishers in the 1970s . . . they said that British people wouldn't care about a young black girl growing up in the American south in the 1930s."³⁰ However, when debuted by Virago, it garnered immediate acclaim, propelling Angelou and her experiences as a Black

²⁷ Riley, 23.

²⁸ Riley, 27.

²⁹ Riley, 59.

³⁰ Goodings, "My Hero: Maya Angelou."

woman into the global spotlight. Soon after, Virago released more titles by women of color, such as Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain* by Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie, and Suzanne Scafe. Virago would go "on to publish all [Angelou's] works: six more volumes of autobiography, her poetry, essays, and cookbooks," developing a lifelong partnership.³¹

The intersection where feminist and civil rights activism converged drew attention from mainstream and alternative markets alike, energizing the counterculture movements still hanging on as the 1980s ended. However, a "fracturing of feminism as a political movement" had already occurred, "Black and minority ethnic (BME), working-class, lesbian, and disabled women . . . [giving] voice to their feelings of disenfranchisement. . . . from feminist spokeswomen who had, up to that point, been predominantly white and middle class."³² Second-wave feminist orthodoxies were challenged and even dismantled, like seen with the termination of Britain's WLM conference; at the same time (and as a result of), alternative presses were confronted with heightened commercial demands, crippling the delicate task of forging ethical compromises with capitalism. In 1987, the Virago quintet — Callil, Owen, Spicer, Pringle, and Goodings — was able to regain independence, making a successful but costly exit from the CVBC as Random House USA (now Penguin Random House) took ownership of the group. But the overall industry was in decline. Though Virago's publishing efforts kept them afloat, even with its independence re-secured, its inner structure had started to unravel.

As explored in *Mixed Media: Feminist Presses and Publishing Politics* by Simone Murray, in the 1990s, Virago's background operations were "dominated by boardroom disputes, further staff and list cutbacks, and directorial resignations," with "changes in editorial focus" and

³¹ Goodings, "My Hero: Maya Angelou."

³² Riley, 64.

“retrenchment of staff” all being done “without securing the desired result of long-term growth.”³³ When Pringle left Virago in 1991, it signaled the beginning of the end for the Virago quintet, ultimately separating over the course of the decade: Callil would pull back to do editorial work with Random House, then return to Virago as chairwoman in 1994, then leave again a year later, exiting the book publishing business altogether; Spicer would work as managing director, celebrating Virago’s 20th birthday with *A Virago Keepsake to Celebrate Twenty Years of Publishing*, before resigning in 1995; and Owen would remain on Virago’s board until departing in 1996. At this point, Goodings had been promoted to publishing director, but she too considered leaving in the mid-90s. The finer, maybe juicier details behind what precisely happened between the Virago five is unknown, but tabloid speculation fell under one of three themes: “the personality-dominated ‘feuding feminists’ angle,” “the accusation of mismanagement and poor business practice,” and “the lament for a passing golden age of feminist and publishing history.”³⁴ This all came to a head in 1995 when Virago announced its decision to sell to Little, Brown and Company, again forgoing its independence.

Once more, feminist publishing had failed — except that, while “Virago’s sale was interpreted in media and industry circles as evidence that feminism was dead,” the three major publishers who had made bids for Virago were “headed by female [managing directors]: Liz Calder at Bloomsbury, Gail Rebeck at Random House, and Philippa Harrison at Little, Brown.”³⁵ Although the Virago quintet had disbanded, Virago as a feminist press had affected change, exemplified by there being women in positions of power to make the purchase in the first place. While once again an imprint, Virago had made an impact on the male-dominated

³³ Murray, 37.

³⁴ Murray, 29.

³⁵ Riley, 87.

industry, still fighting “deep-rooted prejudice and a continuing devaluation of women within publishing and within wider culture,” “in spite of the obvious progress women had made in advancing through the ranks.”³⁶ The conflict “between financial and editorial autonomy [had] underpinned the efforts of all of the second wave-feminist presses,” but Little, Brown’s acquisition of Virago provided a way to “reclaim the ‘male’ territory of commerce to maximize the reach it could achieve for . . . women’s writing.”³⁷ Virago had long walked the “impossible line between political authenticity and commercial viability.”³⁸ With this move, Virago made it clear: “Publishing is . . . a business — feminist publishers could not afford to ignore the realities of the marketplace.”³⁹

What had once set Virago apart as an alternative press, “the duality of its self-conception” as it was “simultaneously both . . . a commercial publishing house *and* . . . an intrinsic part of the British women’s liberation movement,” had now clearly changed to prioritizing “diversity and broad-based market penetration,” for better or for worse.⁴⁰ Murray writes:

Should Virago’s sale . . . be taken as evidence that feminism’s battle for representation . . . and cultural power has been won, and that its place in the cultural mainstream has been established? Alternatively, is the subsumption of Virago within the capacious corporate structure . . . the final victory of market forces and economic rationalism over political commitment — the selling out of a feminist dream? It is in keeping with the complex

³⁶ Riley, 87.

³⁷ Riley, 29-30.

³⁸ Murray, 26.

³⁹ Riley, 51.

⁴⁰ Murray, 27.

ambiguities of feminist publishing that . . . Virago's sale should be susceptible to both readings.⁴¹

As the remaining member of the Virago five, Goodings had made plans to exit once Harrison of Little, Brown took ownership, but Harrison "persuaded [her] . . . to take up the position of publisher for the new" Virago instead. Goodings agreed; this both "[reflected] the dynamic, strategic adaptability" of feminist publishing entering a new era while also meaning, as observed by former director Pringle, "'Virago as we have known it is completely over.'"⁴² Then, in 1997, Virago relaunched its efforts to elevate feminist literature, compiling the Virago *V* series, made up of "new women's writing targeted at twenty- to thirty-five-year-olds."⁴³ The first entry was *Tipping the Velvet* by unknown writer Sarah Waters, a coming-of-age novel with queer and lesbian representation, and it instantly achieved critical acclaim. Virago welcomed the 21st century as "something entirely different from the Virago of 1973," showing the "extent to which women [had] come" while steeling for "the new battles that women [would] face" in the new millennium.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Murray, 31-2.

⁴² Murray, 38.

⁴³ Riley, 88.

⁴⁴ Riley, 160.



Founding Directors of Virago Press. Susan Greenhill, National Portrait Gallery, 1988.
From left: Harriet Spicer, Ursula Owen, Lennie Goodings, Alexandra Pringle, and Carmen Callil.

STRUCTURE & LEGACY

When looking at the mid-90s revamp of *Virago*, “the feminist catfight line”⁴⁵ pursued by journalists was just another aspect of sexist discrimination *Virago* had to face. Were there tensions between the original five? It can be assumed as much — Callil had a “highly individualistic managerial style,”⁴⁶ even describing herself as “demanding and difficult to work with,”⁴⁷ akin to a “seething pot.”⁴⁸ She started *Virago* as a testament to women’s writing, and such a radical act demanded a tenacious attitude: “I was not collective-minded,” Callil once said. “I was a *leader*.”⁴⁹ In contrast to other alternative and feminist presses, which incorporated collaboration, *Virago* established a hierarchy more seen in commercial markets: “Callil always emphasized that succeeding in business terms was as vital a part of *Virago*’s remit as its publication of women’s literature.”⁵⁰ But the journalists who “[painted] a scenario of maenadic fury” in *Virago*’s changing structure were the same who covered “the mergers and buy-outs of largely male-run multinational publishing companies” without issue: “feminist publishing companies betoken nothing more significant than the hysteria of the wandering womb.”⁵¹ A quote from an “unidentified ‘ex-*Virago*’” source points out the double standard: “When men have boardroom battles, it’s heroic and Titanic and serious. When women do the same, it’s a catfight.”⁵²

Yet, with the end of the second wave of feminism, the rise of Thatcherism politics, and the next generation of young readers and writers coming into their own in the 21st century, Callil

⁴⁵ Murray, 30.

⁴⁶ Murray, 43.

⁴⁷ Smith, “Carmen Callil: Pioneering Feminist Publisher.”

⁴⁸ Goodings, “*Virago* Founder Carmen Callil.”

⁴⁹ Murray, 43.

⁵⁰ Riley, 160.

⁵¹ Murray, 30.

⁵² Murray, 30-1.

might have been *too* business-minded or not *enough* feminist-minded. As noted once by former Virago director Spicer, “When you’re a feminist, there’s a world of difference between being a businesswoman and being a businesswoman who says ‘I’m doing this with the awareness that this is making a stand and has a political angle to it.’”⁵³ Callil’s tenacity perhaps started hurting more than helping, which has been hinted at by the other four, but it can also be argued Callil’s tactics had to be more brute force because Virago, as a feminist press, inherently demanded the world change. Then, when the world did change, Virago needed to as well. Against all odds, it brokered results: “Virago’s alliance of feminist politics and capitalist economics, encapsulated in Callil’s vow that ‘it is our duty not to go bust,’ outlived the collective feminist presses, many of which . . . had folded by the end of the 1990s.”⁵⁴ Ultimately, the Virago quintet might not have survived, but it did not *need* to survive: Virago did, “always primarily and uncompromisingly feminist,”⁵⁵ and Virago continues to do so today.

In 2006, Little, Brown was purchased by Hachette Book Group, one of the biggest trade publishers in the world, with Virago “[continuing] to flourish” throughout the change, “though [still] . . . an imprint of a large, commercial enterprise.”⁵⁶ Goodings stayed on as publisher until 2017, taking over as Virago’s chairwoman after 20 years as lead. Today, Sarah Savitt is head publisher; she previously worked as editorial director at Faber and Faber as well as publishing director for headline fiction with Hachette UK. Virago’s public staff roster also includes Anna Kelly and Carla Josephson as publishing directors, Olivia Barber as editorial director for Virago Modern Classics, and Alexa Allen-Batifoulier and Matilda Singer as assistant editors.⁵⁷ Overall,

⁵³ Riley, 28-9.

⁵⁴ Murray, 43-4.

⁵⁵ Riley, 29.

⁵⁶ Chamberlain, 1079.

⁵⁷ “About Virago,” Virago Press.

there are under 25 employees at Virago today.⁵⁸ In 2023, Virago celebrated its 50th anniversary, though sadly, Callil passed away in 2022 at age 84. She had never married, “though many men asked her,” and was instead surrounded by close friends: “Every one of her many friends — and there were hundreds — were made to feel the most loved, the most important, the only genius.”⁵⁹

After her passing, Goodings recalled how, in the late 1970s, she “asked [Callil] why she founded the feminist publisher. She answered: ‘To change the world, darling, that’s why.’ And by God, that’s exactly what she did.”⁶⁰ While “Callil was not alone in crediting feminist publishing with effecting women’s incursion into the higher echelons of the mainstream industry, in spite of the institutionalized disadvantages,”⁶¹ Virago and her tenacious drive certainly left an impression; as of 2023, “about 78 percent of staffers at all levels and 59 percent of executives in the publishing industry identified as women.”⁶² But has Virago, “the largest women’s imprint in the world,” “[retained] its vitality as a ‘feminist publisher’”?⁶³ Arguably, yes, using “the power and potential it still holds” to continue “[engaging] in the battle for equality in literature and culture,” “[marking] out the difference of a female perspective on the world,” and “[insisting] that this perspective is important.”⁶⁴ It is important to see that Virago’s history was a difficult one, and its future could be similarly tumultuous, but — as put best by Callil herself — “sometimes, you have to be difficult if you want to change the world.”⁶⁵

⁵⁸ “Virago,” ZoomInfo.

⁵⁹ Devlin, “Polly Devlin Remembers Her Friend.”

⁶⁰ Goodings, “Virago Founder Carmen Callil.”

⁶¹ Riley, 94.

⁶² Rosalsky, “Women Now Dominate the Book Business.”

⁶³ Riley, 139.

⁶⁴ Riley, 160.

⁶⁵ Green, “Carmen Callil, Founder of the Feminist Press Virago.”



Carmen Callil of the publishing house Virago in 1983. Peter Morris, Fairfax Media.

CONTENT

After five decades, Virago Press continues marching forward. For their birthday, they kicked off celebrations by re-releasing “a groundbreaking title from each of [their] decades:” *The Sadeian Woman* by Angela Carter from 1978, *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* by Grace Nicols from 1984, *Tipping the Velvet* by Sarah Waters from 1998, *Living Dolls* by Natasha Walter from 2009, and *The Friend* by Sigrid Nunez from 2018.⁶⁶ Then, in September, Virago published *Furies: Stories of the Wicked, Wild, and Untamed*, “a collection of new short stories” by fifteen award-winning authors, including Margaret Atwood, Eleanor Crewes, Kamila Shamsie, Chibundu Onuzo, and Helen Oyeyemi, with an introduction from activist Sandi Toksvig, co-founder of the 2015 Women’s Equality Party (WEP) in the United Kingdom.⁶⁷ Also included was Annie Hodson, “a queer writer and playwright from York,” and her short story “Banshee,” winner of Virago’s accompanying competition, “[offering] one unpublished writer from an underrepresented background” the opportunity to be signed and mentored. Fittingly, the theme of the contest “was the same as the one set for Virago’s *Furies* authors: to write an original, feminist short story inspired by the synonym for ‘virago.’”⁶⁸

Right now, we are experiencing the fourth wave of feminism, with a focus on intersectionality, started around 2016. Virago has made new strides with this “upswing in feminist publishing,” carefully optimistic but determined all the same: “Whether it feels boom or bust for feminism, because we have been going for 50 years, it doesn’t bother us,” said Savitt. “We still feel Virago is necessary and that there are writers who have been marginalized or dismissed or silenced who deserve a bigger platform.”⁶⁹ Fourth-wave feminism asks the “very

⁶⁶ “Virago Books’ History in the 2020s,” Virago Press.

⁶⁷ Page, “Virago Looks Forward After Full Five Decades.”

⁶⁸ Brown, “Hodson Wins the Virago 50th *Furies* Short Story Competition.”

⁶⁹ Page, “Virago Looks Forward.”

current, ideologically fraught, question of what a woman is,” and Virago showed its eagerness to explore these new perspectives with an update to their submissions language in 2021: “as part of its commitment to an inclusive feminism, [Virago] welcomes submissions from people of ‘underrepresented genders.’” By bringing gender-critical feminism into their roster, Savitt acknowledged, “Some of our writers . . . have complicated relationships with feminism,” but showcasing such a “broad spectrum of beliefs” is just another “part of its commitment to an inclusive feminism.”⁷⁰

Yet, reflecting on why Virago “has never sought to define feminism,” I cannot help but wonder how Callil would respond to this quote from Savitt: “[Virago is] a publishing company, not a political party, campaign group, charity, or museum.”⁷¹ It stands contrary to Virago’s radical origins, exemplified by a quote from Sheila Rowbotham’s 1972 *Women, Resistance, & Revolution* and favored by Callil: “It is only when women start to organize in large numbers that we become a political force, and begin to move towards the possibility of a truly democratic society.”⁷² Virago has evolved, as was necessary to survive, and charges fearlessly toward the future, but there is a question of if today’s Virago Press is genuine; “both feminist activism and commercial publishing” created Virago, but Virago’s “refusal to be defined or contained by either” — and still meet great success in a patriarchal society — demands it not be neutral.⁷³ Before her passing, Callil wrote, “I always believed that books change lives, that writers change lives, and I still believe it.”⁷⁴ As the fourth wave of feminism threatens to recede, it is essential

⁷⁰ Page, “Virago Looks Forward.”

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Chamberlain, 1078.

⁷³ Murray, 33.

⁷⁴ Callil, “The Stories of Our Lives.”

Virago advocate such change, serving not only as a feminist press and a political declaration but also as a vital platform for amplifying unheard voices.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Studying the Virago Press a year after having studied the Feminist Press was enthralling. It made for a fascinating look into how the second wave of feminism changed the world, reflected in the razor's edge of alternative writing and women's literature, equally championed by both houses. Yet, despite sharing the goal of highlighting marginalized creators while dismantling inequitable gender issues, Virago and the Feminist Press went in their own unique trajectories in publishing and exist today with greatly differing potential. This is due to two distinct differences: business model and location.

In 1970, Florence Howe started the Feminist Press in her living room in Baltimore. Her idea came from wanting an academic curriculum centered on feminist representation: works for, by, and about women that would educate and inspire future generations *especially* as more women went into higher levels of education. In 1973, Carmen Callil began Virago in her flat in London. She set out to prove feminist publishing could not only exist as a business but succeed: works by and about women for *anyone*, bridging feminism's countercultural elements with mainstream popularity. Both began with the idea to amplify women and other marginalized creators, but Howe came from academia while Callil had been in marketing and publicity. More simply, Howe was a professor and Callil was a businesswoman.

These origins influenced the way their alternative presses evolved. Howe began the Feminist Press as a nonprofit organization with an educational focus on women's studies, operating out of the State University of New York (today City University of New York). Meanwhile, Callil started Virago as a limited company, funded with her publicist background,

registering as director once independent and commercial. The Feminist Press was a collective while Virago was run more through a hierarchy of leadership, with Callil definitely the boss. Lastly, the Feminist Press continues today, championing inclusive literature under the weight of changing ideologies in the United States, significant as academic curriculums are under scrutiny. Virago, too, carries on, publishing diverse pieces more curated to contemporary audiences, still walking that “impossible line” of being a feminist press in the mainstream.⁷⁵ They can both be seen as relics from the global Women’s Liberation Movement, struggling to adjust to feminist beliefs today, but are still taunting critics by the fact they are indeed still here.

Location also played a part in how Virago and the Feminist Press developed. Notably, the second wave of feminism found its start in the United States, triggered by activist Betty Friedan when she released *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, “[rebuking] the pervasive . . . belief that stipulated women would find the greatest fulfillment in the routine of domestic life, performing chores, and taking care of children.”⁷⁶ Feminist movements did not truly begin in Europe until the late 1960s. Thus, when Callil started Virago, Howe and the Feminist Press had already been active for several years. Similarly, in 1978, when Callil formed Virago Modern Classics, the “highly successful” Feminist Press Reprint series had already been circulating; even the firsts of their lists — the Feminist Press’ *Life in the Iron Mills* by Rebecca Harding Davis and Virago’s *Frost in May* by Antonia White — hold parallels. Howe made a point to note “[they] were the first to begin to reprint the lost literature by and about women,” but in reflecting on the two meeting in the early 1970s, Howe was still struck by Callil’s determination: “When asked how

⁷⁵ Murray, 26.

⁷⁶ Muñoz, “The Powerful, Complicated Legacy of Betty Friedan.”

many books [Callil] planned to publish in the first year, she said, ‘Twenty-eight.’ When asked, ‘Which twenty-eight?’ she replied, ‘The first twenty-eight I find.’”⁷⁷

Ultimately, Callil and Howe occupied different spaces of literary activism under the same banner of feminism, and thus Virago and the Feminist Press filled the gaps in different ways. Each expanded the publishing landscape, making room for narratives otherwise overlooked and forgotten all because they were written by women; in resurrecting these stories, they have also changed how representation of women and other marginalized groups is seen in literature, inspiring broader conversations about gender, equality, and social change. Even though they went into two distinctive directions, Callil and Howe pervaded their respective areas of male dominance — trade publishing and academia — through the best means they knew how — writings for and by women. So long as Virago Press and the Feminist Press continue to adapt will they continue to change history, one word at a time.

⁷⁷ Murray, 48.



“The act of publishing is . . . an inherently political act and . . . women, recognizing this fact, must intervene . . . to ensure that women’s voices are made audible.”⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Murray, 2.

Bibliography

- Brown, Lauren. "Hodson Wins the Virago 50th *Furies* Short Story Competition." *The Bookseller*, 3 October 2023. <https://www.thebookseller.com/news/hodson-wins-the-virago-50th-furies-short-story-competition>.
- Callil, Carmen. "The Stories of Our Lives." *The Guardian*, 25 April 2008. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/apr/26/featuresreviews.guardianreview2>.
- Chamberlain, Mary. "Carmen Callil (1938–2022): An Appreciation." *Women's History Review* 31, no. 7, November 2022, pp. 1075-9. *Taylor & Francis Online*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2022.2144002>.
- Delap, Lucy. "Feminist Bookshops, Reading Cultures, and the Women's Liberation Movement in Great Britain, c. 1974-2000." *History Workshop Journal*, no. 81, 2016, pp. 171–96. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43917364>.
- Devlin, Polly. "Polly Devlin Remembers Her Friend, Legendary Feminist Publisher Carmen Callil." *The Gloss*, 2023. <https://thegloss.ie/polly-devlin-remembers-her-friend-legendary-feminist-publisher-carmen-callil>.
- Denman, Zac. "To Call Margaret Thatcher a Feminist is to Discredit the Whole Movement." *The Egalitarian*, 12 January 2020. <https://www.theegalitarian.co.uk/post/to-call-margaret-thatcher-a-feminist-is-to-discredit-the-whole-movement>.
- Goodings, Lennie. "My Hero: Maya Angelou By Her Publisher Lennie Goodings." *The Guardian*, 29 May 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/may/29/my-hero-maya-angelou-by-lennie-goodings>.
- . "Virago Founder Carmen Callil Was a Powerhouse Who Changed the Publishing World for the Better." *The Guardian*, 18 October 2022.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/oct/18/virago-founder-carmen-callil-was-a-powerhouse-who-changed-the-publishing-world-for-the-better>.

Green, Penelope. "Carmen Callil, Founder of the Feminist Press Virago, Dies at 84." *New York Times*, 29 October 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/29/books/carmen-callil-dead.html>.

Hutton, Belle. "The Five Most Radical Underground Publications of the 1960s." *AnOther Magazine*, 18 October 2017. <https://www.anothermanmag.com/life-culture/10035/the-five-most-radical-underground-publications-of-the-1960s>.

Jolly, Margaretta. "Print, Purpose and Profit: Women in Publishing." *British Library*, 23 October 2020. <https://www.bl.uk/womens-rights/articles/print-purpose-and-profit-women-in-publishing>.

Mary Chamberlain Books. "Non-Fiction." 2015. <https://marychamberlainbooks.com/non-fiction>.

Muñoz, Jacob. "The Powerful, Complicated Legacy of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*." *Smithsonian Magazine*, 4 February 2021. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/powerful-complicated-legacy-betty-friedans-feminine-mystique-180976931>.

Murray, Simone. *Mixed Media: Feminist Presses and Publishing Politics*. London: Pluto Press, 2004.

Orr, Judith. "The Struggles and Retreats of the 1980s." *Socialist Worker*, 11 March 2008. <https://socialistworker.co.uk/features/the-struggles-and-retreats-of-the-1980s>.

Page, Benedicte. "Virago Looks Forward After Full Five Decades." *The Bookseller*, 13 February 2023. <https://www.thebookseller.com/features/virago-looks-forward-after-full-five-decades>.

Riley, Catherine. *The Virago Story: Assessing the Impact of a Feminist Publishing Phenomenon*. Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2018.

Rosalsky, Greg. "Women Now Dominate the Book Business. Why There and Not Other Creative Industries?" *NPR: Planet Money*, 4 April 2023. <https://www.npr.org/sections/money/2023/04/04/1164109676/women-now-dominate-the-book-business-why-there-and-not-other-creative-industries>.

Rowe, Marsha. "Spare Rib and the Underground Press." *British Library*, 2023. <https://www.bl.uk/spare-rib/articles/spare-rib-and-the-underground-press>.

Smith, Ann Kennedy. "Testaments of Twentieth-Century Writers." *The Cambridge Ladies' Dining Society*, 27 May 2023. <https://akennedysmith.com/2023/05/27/testaments-of-twentieth-century-writers>.

Smith, Harrison. "Carmen Callil: Pioneering Feminist Publisher Behind Virago Press." *The Independent*, 30 October 2022. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/carmen-callil-virago-press-books-b2212820.html>.

Sullivan, Jane. "Turning Pages: In Celebration of Feminist Publishing." *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 November 2016. <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/turning-pages-in-celebration-of-feminist-publishing-20161110-gsmi79.html>.

Virago Press. "About Virago." 2023. <https://www.virago.co.uk/imprint/lbbg/virago/page/about-virago>.

---. "Virago Books' History in the 2020s." 2023. <https://www.virago.co.uk/imprint/lbbg/virago/page/virago-timeline-2020s>.

---. "Virago Timeline." 2023. <https://www.virago.co.uk/imprint/lbbg/virago/page/virago-timeline>.

Withers, D-M. "Green Spines, Back Story: Delving into the Early History of Virago Reprints and Modern Classics." *The London School of Economics and Political Science*, 18 June 2021. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseviewofbooks/2021/06/18/green-spines-back-story-delving-into-the-early-history-of-virago-reprints-and-modern-classics>.

ZoomInfo. "Virago." 2024. <https://www.zoominfo.com/c/virago/54051183>.