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Publisher Profile: The Feminist Press

PB 683-03

October 24, 2022

HISTORY & MISSION

Founded in 1970, the Feminist Press — officially known today as the Feminist Press at the City University of New York (CUNY) — was established by literature professor Florence Howe in Baltimore, Maryland. As a woman and educator, Howe was inspired by the women’s rights movement of the 1960s and ’70s during the height of the second wave of feminism in the United States. While putting together teaching materials for her students at Goucher College, a private women’s college until 1986, Howe realized there were barely any texts available for, by, and about women. At this time, the academic field of women’s studies had just barely begun to gain traction, convincing Howe that her students as well as her peers needed to fill this new curriculum. When she approached several university and trade publishers with the idea of publishing a series of feminist biographies, only to be turned down, Howe determined to publish them herself. Thus, with the help of the Baltimore Women’s Liberation raising funds, the Feminist Press began in Howe’s living room as “an educational nonprofit organization . . . to advance women’s rights and amplify feminist perspectives.”¹

Howe’s background plays an integral part in the Feminist Press’ creation, from its humble beginnings to where it now proudly continues its work in New York. Born in Brooklyn on March 17, 1929, Howe cultivated a love for learning early in her life, attending Hunter College to earn her bachelor’s, Smith College for her master’s, and finally the doctoral program at the University of Wisconsin, concentrating in English as the first member of her family to attend college. At the same time, she was acutely aware of the particular challenges she faced as a woman; as she recounts in her memoir *A Life in Motion*, her “childhood battle against [her] mother’s . . . certainty that a woman had to ‘get used to’ living in some measure of misery”

¹ “About FP,” Feminist Press.

contrasted sharply with how she “saw as inspiration for [her] life the motto of Hunter College: *mihi cura futuri*—the care of the future is mine.”² Howe struggled with her mother’s “especially hurtful litany” that compared Howe to her younger brother: “‘Isn’t it a pity,’ she’d say happily, ‘that he has all the looks and she has all the brains?’”³ It was this constant reminder that drove Howe to pursue a career in teaching, soon embracing her intelligence and joining the growing women’s rights movement.

The first book published by the Feminist Press was in 1971, titled *The Dragon and the Doctor*, a children’s book by Barbara Danish, followed by biography *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* by Mary Jane Lupton.⁴ Yet, the trajectory of the Feminist Press changed dramatically when Howe met writer Tillie Olsen, part of the first generation of American feminists. Olsen shared with Howe a copy of Rebecca Harding Davis’ novella *Life in the Iron Mills*, published anonymously in 1861.⁵ From then on, the Feminist Press was committed to reprinting works by women thought lost to time. As described in “Found Her: An Interview with Florence Howe,” the Feminist Press was determined to “[republish] classic work that had gone out of print,” emphasizing that these stories had been forgotten “not because of quality or importance, but because [they were] written by women.”⁶ The *New York Times* even observed that as of 1972, “it [was] the only publisher in the United States devoted entirely to feminist books.”⁷ In addition to *Life in the Iron Mills* by Davis, the Feminist Press published *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Daughters of Earth* by Agnes Smedley, collected writings by Zora Neale Hurston in *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing*,⁸ and more from the ’70s to today — all tales

² Howe, *A Life in Motion*, 12.

³ Howe, *A Life in Motion*, 30.

⁴ Baumgardner, “Found Her,” 5.

⁵ Baumgardner, “Found Her,” 5.

⁶ Baumgardner, “Found Her,” 4.

⁷ Murray, “Feminist Press.”

⁸ Baumgardner, “Found Her,” 4.

from authors that had fallen into obscurity and are now considered an essential part of women's studies.

In 1993, Howe told the *Baltimore Sun*, "I would say we started what has become an avalanche of the rediscovery of women writers."⁹ It was in this same article where she was first referred to as "the mother of women's studies,"¹⁰ having "steadily accrued the institutional apparatus of syllabi, canons" in the women's studies concentration.¹¹ In article "Literacy and Literature," Howe wrote, "Students . . . can [now] talk about racial hostility, about sexism, about class bias" thanks to the curriculum she helped create, where the "hegemony of the white, male, middle-class world . . . never [being] again as it was."¹² It was tragic, then, when Howe passed away at the age of 91 in 2020,¹³ just a few months before the Feminist Press celebrated its 50th anniversary, marking it as "the longest-running feminist press in the world."¹⁴ Yet, the Feminist Press lives on, continuing in its mission to "[publish] books that ignite movements and social transformation," "[furthering] . . . understanding of intersectional feminism" and "[creating] a world where everyone recognizes themselves in a book."¹⁵

CURRENT STRUCTURE & FUNDING

In 2000, Florence Howe retired from the Feminist Press, though she continued to assist until 2008, when she chose to focus on putting together her memoir *A Life in Motion*, released in 2011.¹⁶ She later described her work at the Feminist Press as "[thinking] about publishing in relation to learning and consciousness over the long haul, and what is needed to make something

⁹ Hardin, "Florence Howe."

¹⁰ Hardin, "Florence Howe."

¹¹ Murray, "Academic Feminist Publishing," 97.

¹² Howe, "Literacy and Literature," 439.

¹³ Wertheim, "Florence Howe, 91."

¹⁴ Baumgardner, "Found Her," 4.

¹⁵ "Mission," Feminist Press.

¹⁶ Thompson, "Florence Howe."

that represents more accurately the world we live in.”¹⁷ Since then, the Feminist Press carries on the work she started back in her living room, hiring activists and writers like Gloria Jacobs, a former *Ms.* magazine editor, and Jennifer Baumgardner, founder of Soapbox Inc.¹⁸ In 2020, *Publisher’s Weekly* spoke with then-director and publisher Jamia Wilson, asking how the Feminist Press has maintained its momentum: “With some corporate presses publishing feminist books . . . focusing . . . on what works in the market, we have been able to publish the books that bring up the conversations that need to be had.”¹⁹ Indeed, the Feminist Press has exceeded expectations as it breaks the mold, combatting industry norms like how “85% of editorial staff working in publishing identify as white.”²⁰ As Wilson surmised, “You can’t really change an industry when you don’t have enough people represented. . . . You have to push for it.”²¹

As of 2022, Margot Atwell leads the Feminist Press as executive director and publisher, “[building] on the . . . mission of centering marginalized voices by lifting up stories from BIPOC and LGBTQ+ authors.”²² Groups like the Ford Foundation and Carnegie Corporation have provided funding to help the Feminist Press create book series and teaching guides in the women’s studies field. Beyond the world of publishing, the Feminist Press has hosted conferences and special events, including 2008 presidential candidate Hillary Clinton speaking at their 38th anniversary gala.²³ In 2016, the Feminist Press began Amethyst Editions, a queer imprint founded by author Michelle Tea, in addition to establishing the Louise Meriwether First Book Prize to “highlight debut work by women and nonbinary writers of color.”²⁴ Overall, the

¹⁷ Thompson, “Florence Howe.”

¹⁸ Thompson, “Florence Howe.”

¹⁹ Barron, “Verso, Feminist Press Turn 50.”

²⁰ Barron, “Verso, Feminist Press Turn 50.”

²¹ Barron, “Verso, Feminist Press Turn 50.”

²² “Meet Margot Atwell,” Feminist Press.

²³ “About FP,” Feminist Press.

²⁴ “Mission,” Feminist Press.

Feminist Press “publishes twelve to fifteen books a year,” specializing in a wide variety of genres, such as “fiction, activist nonfiction, literature in translation, hybrid memoirs, [and] children’s books” while also dabbling in “feminist dystopia, environmental justice, and immigration stories.”²⁵

THE LISTS

According to article “On Florence Howe,” since its conception in 1970, the Feminist Press has been dedicated to publishing “biographies and autobiographies” by and about women — fulfilling Florence Howe’s original mission — as well as reprints, “recovering and contextualizing texts that the past had wrongly buried.”²⁶ It was this newfound purpose that, in 1972, led to the creation of the Reprints Advisory Board. As mentioned earlier, “three of the first reprints” — *Life in the Iron Mills* by Rebecca Harding Davis, *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and *Daughter of Earth* by Agnes Smedley — served as a turning point for the Feminist Press, “all three [being] about women’s minds, identities, and bodies that circumstances seek to suffocate.”²⁷ These texts would soon become the literary building blocks of the curriculum for women’s studies. The Feminist Press further strengthened itself as a source for women’s studies when, in 1979, writer and activist Alice Walker put together several works by Zora Neale Hurston to create the anthology *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing*. Thus, the Feminist Press became the quintessential company for “[publishing] . . . landmark books about race, sexuality, women’s lives, and women’s work,” something that continues to this day.²⁸

²⁵ “Mission,” Feminist Press.

²⁶ Stimpson, “On Florence Howe,” 46.

²⁷ Stimpson, “On Florence Howe,” 46.

²⁸ Stimpson, “On Florence Howe,” 46.

Starting in 1980, the Feminist Press branched outside the United States, “[becoming] a global publisher.”²⁹ This led to the exemplary “two-volume *Women Writing in India*” and “four-volume *Women Writing Africa*,” being labors of love that required “the finding of texts, the translations from scores of languages, the . . . introductions that provide historical and cultural frameworks, and the passionate resolve to avoid . . . colonial biases.”³⁰ Additionally, the Feminist Press began publishing a “peer-reviewed interdisciplinary journal,” originally titled the *Women’s Studies Newsletter* in 1972 before being renamed the *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, or *WSQ*, in 1981: “Its thematic issues focus on . . . psychoanalytic, legal, queer, cultural, technological, and historical work to present the most exciting new scholarship on ideas that engage popular and academic readers alike.”³¹ Including *WSQ* releases, the Feminist Press has published 382 titles, with another handful already slated to come out in 2023,³² such as essay collection *Body Horror: Capitalism, Fear, Misogyny, Jokes* by Anne Elizabeth Moore in April 2023; speculative fiction *Happy Stories, Mostly* by Norman Erikson Pasaribu in June 2023; and memoir *Head Above Water: Reflections on Illness* by Shahd Alshammari in July 2023, all in paperback format with prices ranging from \$15 to \$20.³³

Most recently, in August 2022, the Feminist Press released paperback *Enjoy Me Among My Ruins* by Juniper Fitzgerald at \$15.95, an “experimental manifesto” that archives Fitzgerald’s “experiences as a queer sex-working mother,” “ultimately rejecting a capitalist system that demands . . . purity and submission over . . . survival.”³⁴ For the spring/summer 2022 edition of *WSQ*, and its 50th volume, the Feminist Press published *Black Love* in paperback at \$25,

²⁹ Stimpson, “On Florence Howe,” 46.

³⁰ Stimpson, “On Florence Howe,” 46.

³¹ “WSQ,” Feminist Press.

³² “All Titles,” Feminist Press.

³³ “Forthcoming Releases,” Feminist Press.

³⁴ “Enjoy Me Among My Ruins,” Feminist Press.

“[seeking] to imagine justice if love were centered at the heart of politics.”³⁵ Lastly, to celebrate October, the Feminist Press came out with paperback *It Came From the Closet: Queer Reflections on Horror* at \$25.95, with twenty-five essays edited by Joe Vallese, studying horror films that “deepened, amplified, and illuminated” the experiences of “queer and trans writers.”³⁶ Additionally, the Feminist Press’ queer imprint Amethyst Editions introduced *Panpocalypse* by Carley Moore in paperback at \$17.95, released in April 2022 but set in the summer of 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, where “a queer disabled woman bikes through a locked-down NYC for the ex-girlfriend who broke her heart.”³⁷

As a big fan of the mystery genre, I am personally interested in Margot Atwell’s recommendation of *Margaret and the Mystery of the Missing Body*, written by Megan Milks and released by the Feminist Press in September 2021 as a paperback at \$17.95, which “reimagines nineties adolescence—mashing up girl group series, choose-your-own-adventures, and chronicles of anorexia—in a queer and trans coming-of-age tale.”³⁸ I am also looking forward to reading Alice Hatrick’s *Ill Feelings*, issued by the Feminist Press in May 2022 as a paperback at \$17.95, denoted as “an intrepid, galvanizing meditation on illness, disability, feminism, and what it means to be alive”: “*Ill Feelings* blends memoir, medical history, biography, and literary nonfiction” in exploring “the records of ill health that women have written about in diaries and letters,” including accounts from poet Emily Dickinson, author Virginia Woolf, artist Louise Bourgeois, and even nurse Florence Nightingale.³⁹ Before starting on those two, however, I will be finishing Howe’s memoir *A Life in Motion*, published by the Feminist Press in 2011 and

³⁵ “WSQ: Black Love,” Feminist Press.

³⁶ “It Came From the Closet,” Feminist Press.

³⁷ “Panpocalypse,” Feminist Press.

³⁸ “Margaret and the Mystery,” Feminist Press.

³⁹ “Ill Feelings,” Feminist Press.

something I originally purchased as an eBook at \$11.99 for profile research, only to be completely sucked into Howe's life as she reflected on her childhood, family, education, and transformation into a feminist. Without Howe, after all, the "mother of women's studies,"⁴⁰ we might have never established the women's studies concentration, which I minored in during undergrad, or enjoyed the wide variety of stories from the Feminist Press, with the publishing company already looking forward to celebrating its 100th anniversary in 2070.⁴¹



Florence Howe, center, with staff members of the Feminist Press in 1972: Robert M. Klein⁴²

⁴⁰ Hardin, "Florence Howe."

⁴¹ "Mission," Feminist Press.

⁴² MacNicol, "Feminist Press."

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