

Feminist Book Fortnight: A Short History

BY ELEANOR CARELESS

with

The Business of Women's Words:
Purpose and Profit in Feminist Publishing
University of Sussex

FICTION

Lisa Alther

Other Women

From the best-selling author of *Kinflicks* and *Original Sins*: a magnificent new novel that cuts to the heart of the female predicament.

Viking. £8.95 hb. 670 80067 8

Hilary Bailey

Hannie Richards or The Intrepid Adventures of a Restless Wife

A rollicking adventure yarn with a difference: the feminist answer to the swashbuckling worlds of John Buchan and Rider Haggard. By the author of *All the Days of My Life*.

Virago. £8.95 hb. 86068 346 X. £3.95 pb. 86068 351 6

Toni Cade Bambara

The Seabirds Are Still Alive

Vivid stories set in Black America from the brilliant author of *The Salt Eaters* and *Gorilla My Love*, about conflict, growth of understanding and the spirit that wins through.

The Women's Press. £3.95 pb. 7043 3944 7

Djuna Barnes

Smoke and Other Early Stories

Tales of the lovers and loners, dreamers and schemers of Bohemian New York, by one of the most colourful and influential Modernist writers, the legendary author of *Nightwood*. First UK publication.

Virago. £2.95 pb. 86068 586 1

Sarah Baylis

Vila

An Adventure Story for Girls

When Masha and Nina fall into the river their families give them up for dead, but the young women find themselves at the start of a perilous and exciting journey...

Brilliance. £8.95 hb. 946189 90 0. £3.95 pb. 946189 95 1

Eliot Bliss

Luminous Isle

Set in Jamaica in the 1920s, a haunting autobiographical novel by the friend and compatriot of Jean Rhys. 'The exceptional quality of the novel is evident from the opening page.' *Standard*
Virago £3.95 pb. 86068 581 0

Elizabeth Bowen

The Hotel

Elizabeth Bowen probes the small world of semi retirement on the Italian Riviera, a stifling enclosure full of anxious women, eager for adventure, afraid to dare.

Penguin. £2.50 pb. 14000 449 1

Elizabeth Bowen

To the North

Through the romantic entanglements of two young women, Elizabeth Bowen reveals her insight into the obscure motives that dictate human behaviour and explores the emotional chasm between men and women.

Penguin. £2.95 pb. 14000 534 X

Gwyneth Branfoot

Men Have All the Fun

Author of the highly successful *The Wife Wants a Child*, Gwyneth Branfoot now turns her attention to the battleground of everyday life in a book that is funny, daring and devastatingly accurate.

Methuen. £8.95 hb. 41657 610 8

Gerd Brantenberg

The Daughters of Egalia

This is the story of Egalia, where women have the power. Men wear penis holders and look after the children. A hilarious satire which is already a bestseller in Germany and Scandinavia.

Journeyman Press. £4.95 pb. 904526 74 7

Rebecca Brown

The Evolution of Darkness

Everybody's nightmares and everybody's daydreams find focus in these stories that unravel the slightest of incidents into disturbing and familiar patterns. Essential reading for anyone interested in the imagination.

Brilliance. £7.95 hb. 946189 80 3

Katherine Burdekin

Swastika Night

Burdekin's novel is an astonishing exposé of the cult of masculinity. She reveals the connection between political power and gender, and anticipates modern feminist science fiction.

Lawrence and Wishart. Approx. £3.95 pb. 85315 640 9

Angela Carter

Nights at the Circus

Fevvers, New Woman, a six-foot-two Mae West with wings, is the coarsely lively and lovely heroine of this mistresspiece. Angela Carter's first novel for seven years.

Chatto & Windus. £8.95 hb. 70113 932 3

Françoise Chandernager

The King's Way

The story line of *The King's Way* is nothing short of sensational. A complex, and inscrutable character—a designing, supremely ambitious woman, extraordinarily attractive, coldly calculating, but passionate, an out-and-out adventuress... *Washington Post*

Collins. £8.95 hb. 00 222860 2

Jan Clausen

Sinking Stealing

A brilliant first novel from the author of *Mother Sister Daughter Lover*. Ten-year-old Ericka is on the run from her father with Josie, her mother's lover.

The Women's Press. £3.95 pb. 7043 3953 6

Judith Cook

The Waste Remains

Janet, a librarian in a sleepy Suffolk town, walks into a nightmare when a young journalist she is involved with is found dead on a beach owned by the ministry of defence.

Pluto. £2.50 pb. 76104 779 6

Maureen Duffy

Londoners

An extraordinarily vivid and event-packed narrative of the struggles of a solitary individual rubbing shoulders literally with hundreds and by extension with millions of solitary and outcast city dwellers.

Methuen. £2.95 pb. 41354 660 8

Gisela Elsner

Offside

Hailed as a modern counterpart of Madame Bovary, an unsparing portrait of a woman's life in middle-class Germany that blends comedy with trenchant social observation.

Virago. £9.95 hb. 86068 530 6. £3.95 pb. 86068 535 7

Buchi Emecheta

Double Yoke

A new novel by Buchi Emecheta, who was selected as one of 1983's Best Young British Writers and the winner of several literature prizes including the *New Statesman* Jock Campbell Award.

Fontana. £1.50 pb. 00616 887 6

Zoë Fairbairns

Here Today

A 'whodunnit' which asks a whole range of questions facing women in the late 1980s. 'Witty, provocative, ironic and above all lots of fun.' Sara Maitland, *New Statesman*

Methuen. £1.95 pb. 41357 930 1

Frankie Finn

Out on the Plain

A genuinely new voice in fiction, born of the 'walking with, the talking to, and the reading of women', this novel concerns the developing links among four women.

The Women's Press. £7.95 hb. 7043 2853 4. £3.50 pb. 7043 3942 0

Introduction: FBF 2018

In 2018, Feminist Book Fortnight (FBF) was held in the UK and abroad for the first time in twenty-seven years. Veteran bookseller Jane Anger and Five Leaves radical bookshop in Nottingham led the revival of the Fortnight in response to the frustration they felt at the lack of advances in feminist publishing since the 1980s. '[We felt] we were having to revisit the same issues some of us campaigned about in the 1980s', **Anger told *The Bookseller***. 'The 2016 **VIDA statistics** showed the continuing bias in reviews; the fact that women writers were finding they were published/reviewed more often if they had a male protagonist; the absolute lack of diversity in children's books.'

The Fortnight aims to make an intervention in the conversation around diversity and to do so from outside of London. Some 52 independent booksellers and five feminist libraries across the country took part, plus two bookshops in Italy.

JANE ANGER, INTERVIEW WITH MARGARETTA JOLLY, 2021

'It's difficult to see now because so much has changed now since 2017. In 2017 there were almost no feminist books being published, publishers would say there was no market, there was really no diversity in children's books at all, there were very few Black writers or Black British writers being published at all. So even having that conversation, why are we back where we started, and why does it feel like we're back where we started – and alongside that people in publishing are having a conversation about diversity of employment within publishing and how that was affecting publishing output. So we wanted to intervene in that conversation, we wanted to intervene from outside London.'

Following the success of the 2018 event – ***The Bookseller* announced** a 'strong start for Feminist Book Fortnight' – the Fortnight ran again in 2019.

fbf feminist book fortnight

"I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own."
Audre Lorde

**Saturday 16th June to
Saturday 30th June 2018**

**A celebration of feminist
publishing, from
independent bookshops**

"I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is. I only know that people call me a feminist when I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat."
Rebecca West

Facebook: @feministbookfortnight
Twitter: @FeministBkFt18
#FBF2018
feministbookfortnight.wordpress.com

"We must tell girls their voices are important."
Malala Yousafzai

Figure 1 FBF poster, 2018 © Jane Anger, by kind permission of Jane Anger



Figure 2 Journalist and writer Cathy Newman (left) at 2019 FBF event at Rogan's Books in Bedford © Jane Anger, by kind permission of Jane Anger

Alongside book signings and launches, the Fortnight hosts readings, workshops, discussions, screenings, and performances. Participating authors include such luminaries as the feminist scholar Lynne Segal, journalist Cathy Newman, and novelists Deborah Levy and Bernadine Evaristo, and venues range from **Housmans Bookshop** in London, **News from Nowhere** in Liverpool, **Lighthouse Bookshop** in Edinburgh and **Glasgow Women's Library** to **Libreria Marco Polo** in Venice.



Figure 3 Bernadine Evaristo at News from Nowhere, 2019 © Jane Anger, by kind permission of Jane Anger

Where did the idea to hold a 'Feminist Book Fortnight' come from? The original Fortnight, which ran from 1984-1991, was an annual British book trade promotion which grew out of the flourishing women's movements of the time. It was first held in 1984 in tandem with its sister-event, the first International Feminist Book Fair. Initially known as 'Feminist Book Week', its immediate success saw the event expand in its second year to 'Feminist Book Fortnight'. Its key aim, as set out in the inaugural Book Week catalogue, was to 'put feminism, feminist writers, books and publishers squarely and firmly in the mainstream marketplace, onto the educational curriculum and on library shelves'.

During the Fortnight, bookshops and public libraries across the country hosted book launches and signings, readings, workshops and discussions, and featured international writers such as Maya Angelou, Marge Piercy, Nawal El-Saadawi, Buchi Emecheta and Margaret Atwood alongside community groups from local performance poets in Plymouth to the Huddersfield Women's Studies Group. To accompany these events, the organising group produced a catalogue which listed hundreds of new feminist titles and chose an annual 'Selected Twenty' titles intended to publicise the 'range and strength' of feminist writing and publishing (*Spare Rib* 155: 43).



Figure 4 FBF listing 1984, *Spare Rib* 143



Figure 5 Marge Piercy in Britain, FBF 1987, *Spare Rib* 179



Figure 6 First International Feminist Book Fair 1984 © Jenny Matthews, by kind permission of Jenny Matthews

The Fortnight was a wide-ranging and highly successful event which steadily grew in size. In 1985, the first year the Fortnight ran independently of the Feminist Book Fair, 55 publishers took part; by 1986, 80 publishers were involved (*Spare Rib* 167: 22). By 1988, four years into its run, more than 500 bookshops, 355 public libraries and 82 educational bodies had a presence, with 97 ‘locally organised events’ in 23 towns across Britain and Ireland (*Spare Rib* 191: 26). Its triple achievements were commercial success – The Bookseller described the Fortnight in 1990 as ‘one of the UK’s most successful book trade promotions’ – its regional outreach, with Fortnight events taking

place in all corners of the UK, from Stirling to Londonderry, and from Swansea to Deal, and its support for the feminist creative economy and social justice campaigns. As veteran Fortnight author Zoe Fairbairns put it, during a talk on feminist publishing given at Five Leaves bookshop Nottingham in 2017:

You may ask: was this a genuinely radical movement, or was it just the mainstream capitalist publishing industry spotting a gap in the market and cashing in?

It was both.

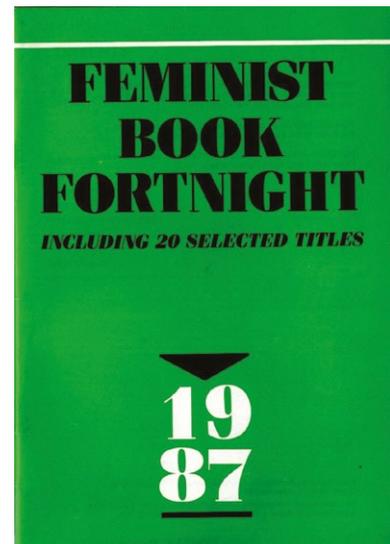


Figure 7 FBF catalogue 1987 © FBF Group, reproduced with their kind permission

The Feminist Literary Marketplace in the 1980s

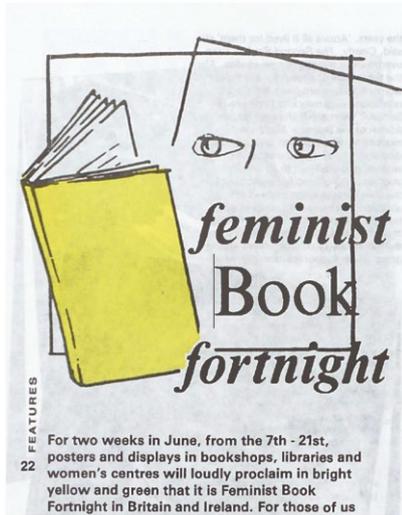


Figure 8 'Behind the scenes of FBF' by Grace Evans, *Spare Rib* 167, June 1986

The first Feminist Book Week marked an important moment in feminist publishing and literature. In the early 1980s, women's presses were thriving – in 1984, Onlywomen Press was ten years old, Virago eleven, Sheba and The Women's Press, four. The cooperative publisher Black

Womantalk was launched in the same year, as was the legendary feminist bookshop Silver Moon on London's Charing Cross Road. The high profile feminist bookshop Sisterwrite in Islington, London, was six. Feminist Book Week (soon to become Feminist Book Fortnight), alongside the Feminist Book Fair, supported the expansion of the feminist book trade still further. By 1988, an article in the *Observer* could claim that 'the British feminist press is alive and proliferating and unequalled in the world' (Sunday 8 May 1988).

The organisers of the first Feminist Book Fair recognised that this flourishing of feminist publishing took place against a backdrop of political struggle and economic hardship, writing in the inaugural catalogue that 'it is indicative of the power of the movement that 1984, that most pessimistic of years, sees the IFFB: an event that has the confidence, strength and *audacity* to call for a celebration.'

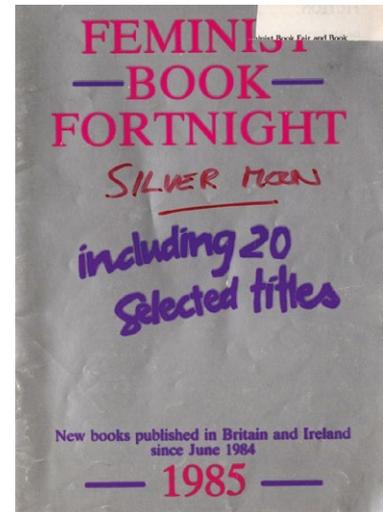


Figure 9 BFB catalogue 1985 © BFB Group, reproduced with their kind permission

In the early 1980s, the bookselling landscape in the UK was very different. Chain booksellers were virtually unknown in Britain, with the exception of WH Smith. Radical bookselling was at its height: the hugely successful International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third



Figure 10 Silver Moon Women's Bookshop © Jane Cholmeley, by kind permission of Jane Cholmeley

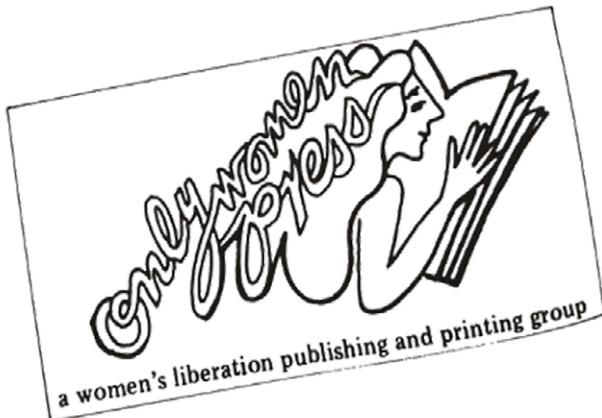


Figure 11 Onlywomen Press logo © Lilian Mohin, by kind permission of Anna Wilson



Figure 12 Virago Press badge with classic apple design, c. 1977 © Virago Press, by kind permission of Virago Press



Figure 13 Sheba logo, *Spare Rib* 165, reproduced by kind permission of Sue O'Sullivan



Figure 14 Women browsing in Sisterwrite Bookshop, London, 1986
© Jenny Matthews, by kind permission of Jenny Matthews



Figure 15 The Women's Press, *Spare Rib* 189 © Jenny Matthews,
by kind permission of Jenny Matthews

World Books, organised by Jessica Huntley and John La Rose, had been established in 1982 and the Federation of Radical Booksellers co-ordinated over 100 radical bookshops across the country. These radical bookshops often hosted FBF events and, in turn, they were listed in the Fortnight's annual catalogue.

The Fortnight was an early adopter of new ways of marketing literature, such as author events and book signings. Radical Black booksellers were at the forefront of this innovation within the book trade. **Eric Huntley, of Bogle L'Ouverture, remembers** that book launches were novel in the 1970s – many people 'had never met an author' – but co-founder Jessica

Huntley pioneered author events at the bookshop. Gay Jones of In Other Words Books in Plymouth, and a regional Fortnight organiser, recalls that 'any radical bookshop... worth its salt... held numerous author book launches or readings' (Radical Bookselling History newsletter, Issue 2).

Another important development in the early 1980s was an increasing awareness of racial politics within mainstream Britain (partly due to Black protests against racism) and closer connections between Black and white/mixed women's movements. Historian Natalie Thomlinson has written of the 'mainstreaming' of debates around race in feminist periodicals in Britain in the 1980s.

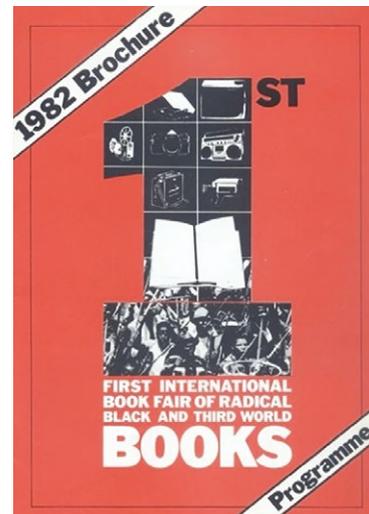


Figure 16 Brochure, for First International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books (1982).
Huntley Archives, London Metropolitan Archives.
Reference LMA/4462/M/03/001. Reproduced with thanks to the Friends of the Huntley Archives at LMA

In parallel, colonial and post-colonial inequalities were highlighted. This growing awareness is reflected in one of the key aims of the IBBF, as stated in the 1984 catalogue, 'to move the spotlight of attention from Europe and North America, to search out and draw in feminists from around the world'. Although the Fair was determinedly international and metropolitan in its focus, aspects of this internationalism were hotly contested (*Spare Rib* 145: 48). The biennial Book Fair travelled abroad but got no further than Western cities: Oslo, Montreal, Barcelona, Amsterdam and Melbourne (there was an unsuccessful attempt to hold the Book Fair in Delhi). Meanwhile, Feminist Book Fortnight continued to be held yearly in towns and cities across the UK.

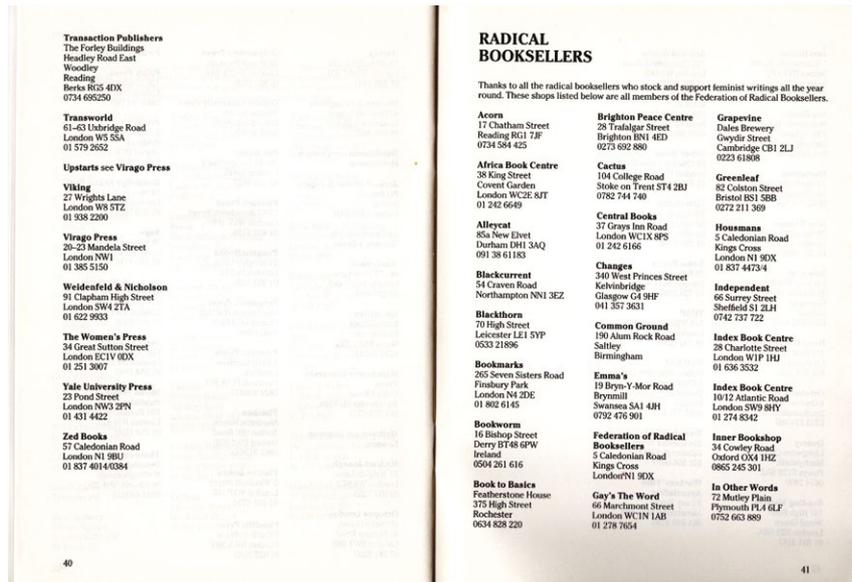


Figure 17 FBF catalogue 1989 © FBF Group, reproduced with their kind permission

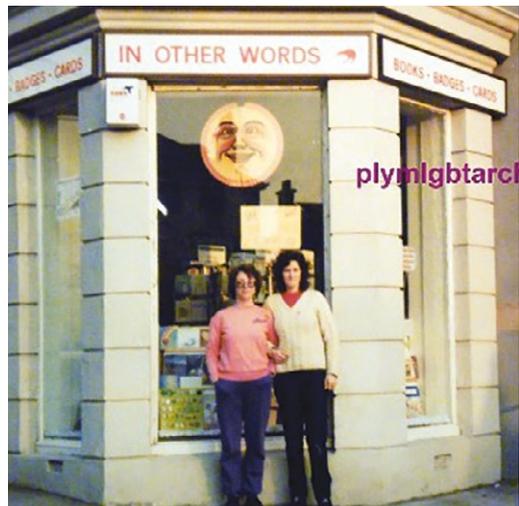


Figure 18 In Other Words, © Gay Jones, by kind permission of Gay Jones

Beyond the Metropolis: FBF's Geographical Reach

One of the Fortnight's most distinctive features was its regional organisation. An energetic network of regional organisers, initially co-ordinated by Gail Chester, hosted literary events in parts of the country which did not otherwise have access to feminist literary spaces. No fewer than 40 autonomous groups were involved in this organisation. From the very beginning, the Fortnight aimed to shift the movement's centre of gravity away from London and into the regions. Following the 'resounding success' of the first bookfair and accompanying book week, a *Spare Rib* listing announced that 'the demand for some sort of follow up promotion from booksellers, libraries and local groups was too great to ignore and so a group of publishers and booksellers have organised Feminist Book Fortnight '85' (*Spare Rib* 155: 42). The second and subsequent Fortnights were designed to meet a specifically local demand.

One of those regional organisers, Jane Watts of York Community Bookshop, memorably describes the physical labour required to organise Fortnight events – from

putting up posters around a town or city to organising the printing of those posters and visiting venues in order to book them for an event – as 'footslogging':

JANE WATTS, INTERVIEW WITH ELEANOR CARELESS, 2021

Everything was physical, there was nothing virtual, nothing digital, nothing, and it's so hard to even imagine that now, but getting that across to readers when they're reading a historic piece about that history is just so important, to remember the physicality of it. And that marketing, for example, was physical. And that everything you did had to be on a piece of paper. And that meant footslogging. So to get information out about the week and the events meant going to all the places in York that would put up

your posters. And you having designed those posters and got them printed up at the radical local printing press. And then got that information out, so the lead time for anything is longer as Jane [Anger] said earlier on, but then you had to footslog around and get that stuff organised and you had to physically go to somewhere to book it as a venue and you had to go to the extent of writing cheques and everything you had to do was extremely labour intensive in a physical way.

In Watts' words, 'everything was physical – nothing was virtual' and events took time as well as energy to organise. Regional organisers started preparing for the Fortnight five or six months in advance, and everything was coordinated by post and telephone. Participating booksellers remember feeling exhausted by the end of the Fortnight, having run the promotion on top of the day-to-day work of running a bookshop. Co-ordinator Gail Chester recalls making enormous charts of dates, places and

authors to keep track of the first Book Week's participants and events.

Writing in *Spare Rib* in 1986, collective member Grace Evans defines the Fortnight's greatest strength as that of outreach beyond the metropolitan centres to those women who 'usually have to search high and low for feminist reading material' (*Spare Rib* 167: 22). To give one example of the form this outreach could take: in July of that year, the Black British author Barbara

Burford gave an interview to *Spare Rib* in which she says that she will tour the country with her book *The Threshing Floor* during Feminist Book Fortnight and adds that 'I think it is very important to reach women outside London, particularly black women' (*Spare Rib* 168: 36). *The Threshing Floor* is itself about the challenging experience of moving to the countryside as a Black woman – specifically, to a village in Kent.

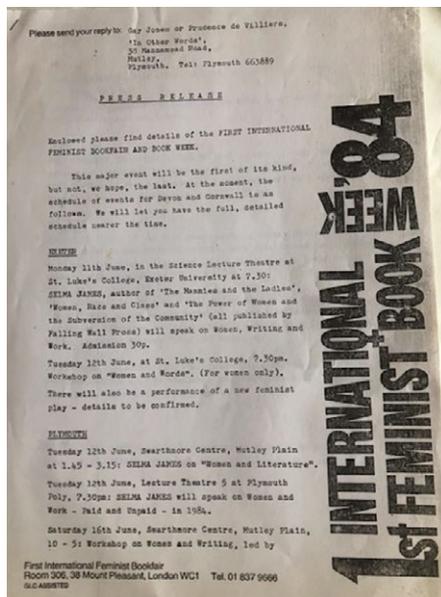


Figure 19 Feminist Book Week press release, 1984
© Gay Jones, by kind permission of Gay Jones

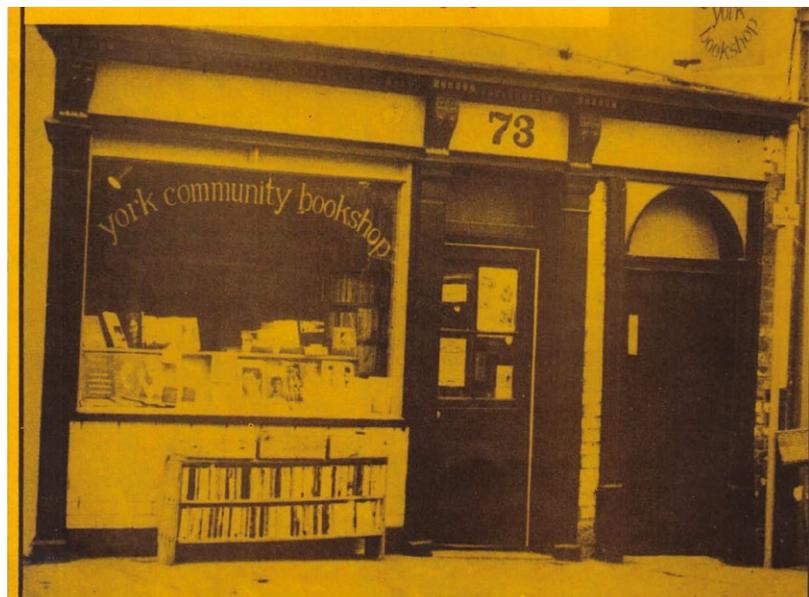


Figure 20 York Community Bookshop catalogue, by kind permission of Jane Watts on behalf of York Community Bookshop

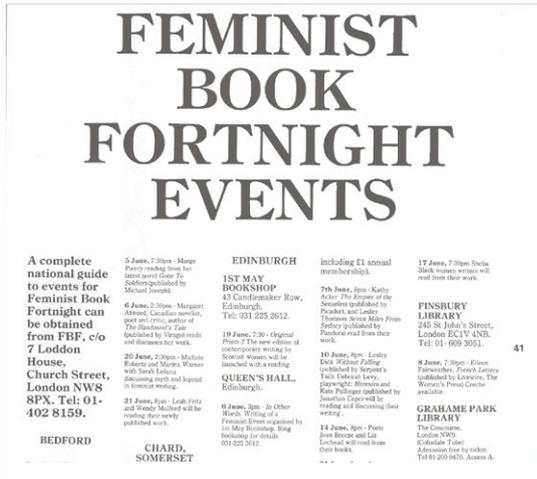


Figure 21 Spare Rib 179

Every year, the June issue of *Spare Rib* devoted several page spreads to Feminist Book Fortnight's nationwide listings, and ran features and interviews related to FBF and its 'Selected Twenty' authors. At its height, the FBF listings occupied five pages of *Spare Rib* – an unrivalled amount of magazine space given over to one event or item. Lesbian and Gay Pride listings, by way of comparison and another annual June event, typically took up one or two pages of *Spare Rib* and no more. As listings for FBF events in the pages of *Spare Rib* show, while some FBF events were hosted by existing feminist and/or radical bookshops, many more

were hosted by arts centres, public libraries, theatres, and community centres up and down the country. As Jane Anger explains, speaking out of

JANE ANGER, INTERVIEW WITH MARGARETTA JOLLY, 2021

Lots of the writers, say, who were being published by Women's Press were saying – our books are not in the place where our readers are – we want our books not just to be in the radical shops, we want them to be accessible... If people don't see their books

her experience of working at Silver Moon Bookshop, 'place' was of utmost importance to feminist publishers and booksellers in the 1980s:

in Smiths, they don't know they're there... getting those books on the shelves for FBF was key... especially for working class writers... FBF in the 80s was about much about distribution and placement as it was about publishing.

YOUNGER READERS

Antonia Barber and Errol Le Cain
The Embroider's Daughter
A magnificently illustrated fable which uses classic 'lairy tale' themes to explore a daughter's search for her mother and hence for her own identity and also her special relationship with her strange environment.
Jonathan Cape. £5.95 hb. 0 224 02289 3

Maeve Casey
Over the Water
Fourteen year old Mary feels she doesn't belong anywhere. At school she's teased with anti-Irish jokes, and her mother refers to her forward English ways. But a family holiday in Ireland turns out to be different.
Llewellyn. £2.95 pb. 0 7045 4955 1

Robette Cole
Princess Smartypants
Princess Smartypants does not want to get married! She enjoys being a girl because she is pretty and rich. This hilarious tale says with a difference describes how Princess Smartypants gets over her independence.
Picture Lions. £1.95 pb. 009 662798 6

Robette Cole
Princess Cleopatra
The traditional tale of Cleopatra is turned completely upside down by a disgruntled fairy in this delightful, easy follow-up to Princess Smartypants.
Hansel Heinemann. £5.95 hb. 0 917 1238 8

Ace Conklin and Robyn Stone (eds)
Dead Poets! from the Secret Way
Young Women Playwrights
A vibrant and exciting collection of contemporary plays, one-act pieces and monologues, full of humour and sharp observation from a new generation of young British playwrights.
Llewellyn. £2.95 pb. 0 7045 4998 6

Caroline B. Cooney
I'm Not Your Other Half
When Fraser and Annie both find boyfriends, they look set to make the perfect teenage couple. But Fraser feels that gaining a boyfriend means losing her independence – trying to fit Michael in with everything she else wants to do proves difficult.
Torus. £1.95 pb. 0 416 06342 3
£1.95 hb. 0 416 78369 6

Beate Doberty
Granny Was a Butler Girl
An exceptionally moving novel capturing the complex interweaving of emotion and experience through three generations of one family.
Lions. £1.95. 000 672792 1

Mary Dorcey, Merv Kelly, Joni Crane et al
Mad and Bad Fairies: Fairytales for Females
Fight writers bring their unique and authorial style to develop new concepts of fairytales. They break with tradition and its stereotype categorising of women, and explore the world of fantasy.
Alic Press. £3.50 pb. 0 948211 40 X

Nancy Gardner
Amide on My Mind
This funny bitter-sweet tale of romance between two seventeen year old girls from opposite sides of New York was chosen by The American Library as one of the Best Books for Young Adults.
Dupertax. £3.95 pb. 0 80669 271 4

Carole Hayman
All the Best, Kim
Kim is down from the North staying in distant Lashburn with her own in search of love, life and a job. Here is the delightful collection of her letters home.
Griffin. £2.75 pb. 0 286 07964 7

Geraldine Gray
A Breath of Fresh Air
Amy, broken and back, becomes so involved in a class project on Tintal and

the Shabby Connection' that she slips heavily, but agonisingly back into the post.
Aldis Paperback. £3.50 pb. 0 228 39167 2

Norma Klein
Older Men
Compelling story of sixteen year old Ellie torn between her successful father and her seemingly weak mother. Ellie must break with her father when her mother is committed to hospital with a breakdown.
Llewellyn. £3.50 pb. 0 7042 4128 X

Jean Litland
The Golly Party
A topical novel focusing on young teens, forced to make some very difficult choices when the embargo upon a determined struggle to oppose the building of a nuclear power station.
Hannah Hamilton. £8.95 hb. 0 241 12081 0

Margaret Malby
Memory
A moving teenage novel which tackles the alarming subject of senile dementia with characteristic understanding and a very gentle humour. Winner of the Observer Teenage Fiction Prize.
JM Dent. £2.95 pb. 0 460 92067 7

Millie Murray
Kinako
Fourteen year old Kinako is a girl with spirit and determination and more than her fair share of wit, but faced with her parents' divorce, and a loving but rather old fashioned American grandfather.
Llewellyn. £2.95 pb. 0 7045 4128 8

Lynne Reid Banks
The Farthest Away Mountains
(The Grange) Farthest Away Mountains no matter how far you walk, the mountains seem to get further away. One morning the mountain calls to Dahn, so she sets off on an adventure to break the spell which that surrounds the mountains.
Lions. £1.95 pb. 000 672808 3

Jean Richardson (author)
Alice Englander (artist)
Tail Braid
Joanne is the shortest member of her class. She considers her worries about being so small to lobby, the street clown who seems to have the longest legs in the world, and gets a reply that gives a welcome boost to her confidence.
Methuen Children's Books. £4.95 hb. 0 416 01212 9

Wendy Robertson
Lizza
Lizza is forced to lead for herself in the girl's world, overwhelmed by men's violence and deprivation. Lizza is determined to survive. A turbulent story set in north-eastern England in the 1920s.
Jawoll & Soughton. £1.95 pb. 0 348 41217 9

Bill Rosen
Andy's War
Winner of the 1987 Faber Guardian/Jackson's Children's Writers Competition. A fresh and genuine portrayal of real life, with real America! (Stephanie Newton, Children's Literary Editor, The Guardian).
Faber and Faber. £5.95 hb. 0 571 03141 2

Dyan Sheldon and Helen Cusack
Alison and the Prince
Alison dreamed the Prince. She saw herself dressed like a princess and dancing in his arms. But although Alison's dreams come true she gets a surprise when she goes to The Ball.
Methuen Children's Books. £4.95 hb. 0 416 01427 6

Rosemary Stoen
Loving Encounters: A Book for Teenagers about Sex
There has been no new sex education books for about eight years – during those years much has changed. Rosemary Stoen discusses emotional and bodily changes, sexual responsibility and activities and interests in ALL aspects of sex.
Piccadilly Press. £3.95 hb. 1 85340 005 X



Figure 23 Spare Rib map © British Library

The **Spare Rib digital map**, launched by the **Business of Women's Words** (BOWW) project in partnership with the British Library in 2020, visualises the wide regional distribution of local Fortnight events across the country. The map was developed by the BOWW team, led by Professor Margaretta Jolly, Dr Lucy Delap and Dr Polly Russell. Simon Wibberly was the technical developer and Dr Zoe Strimpel and Dr Eleanor Careless

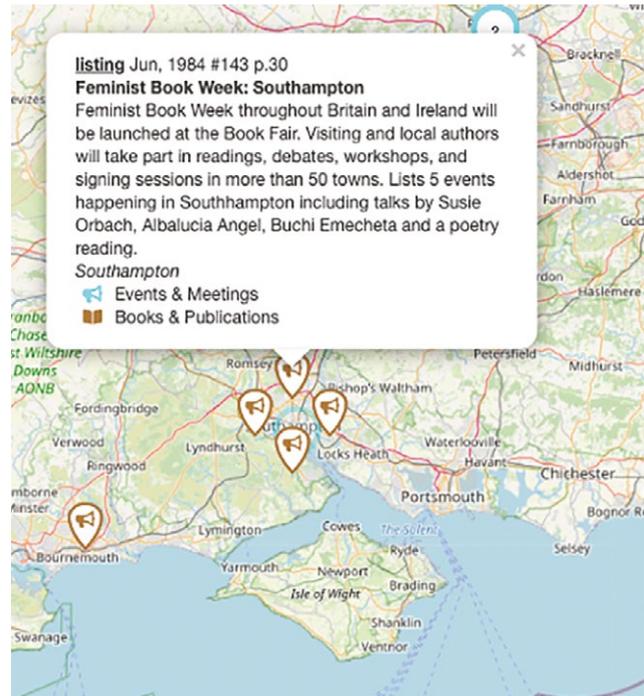


Figure 24 Spare Rib map © British Library

conceptualised, cleaned and curated the data. Search for 'Feminist Book Fortnight' in the keyword search bar to the top right of the map image to explore this visualisation of the Fortnight yourself.

Although the map is based on only a sample of *Spare Rib* listings, because data was pulled from every June edition (the month when the Fortnight took place) a keyword

search for 'Feminist Book Fortnight' will show the entire run of *Spare Rib* listings for Feminist Book Fortnight. However, this should not be read as a comprehensive list of every Fortnight event, in large part due to the long lead times for printing which meant many listings were not confirmed in time to be included in *Spare Rib*. There are clear clusters of Fortnight events, for example, in the North West and South West, as well as in London:

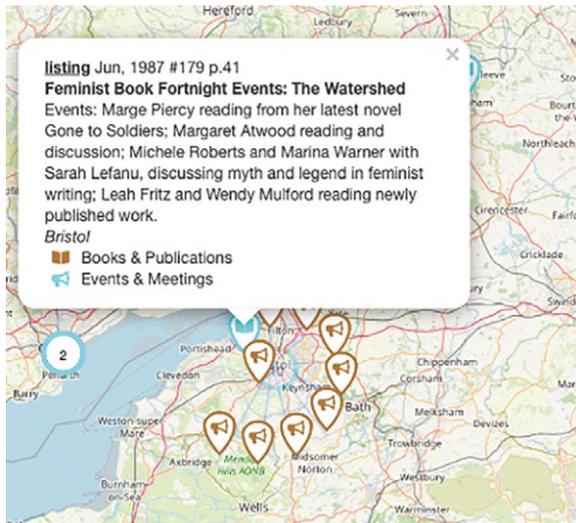


Figure 25 Spare Rib map © British Library

The cities of Dublin, Edinburgh, Bristol, Manchester and Plymouth stand out as hubs of feminist literary activity. While at first glance the map shows clusters of local activity, the description attached to each datapoint reveals the extent of the cultural travelling taking place across the UK. For example, in Southampton in 1984 the line-up of speakers for what was then ‘Feminist Book Week’ included Nigerian-born (but British-based) writer Buchi Emecheta and the well-known British women’s health activist and therapist Susie Orbach alongside ‘local authors’. In 1987, The Watershed in Bristol boasted a truly star-studded line-up with

American writer Marge Piercy reading from *Gone to Soldiers*, a Margaret Atwood reading, British historian Marina Warner in discussion with Michele Roberts and Sarah Lefanu, and Welsh and American poets Wendy Mulford and Leah Fritz giving a poetry reading.

In Dublin, Fortnight events included a poetry reading with American and Irish poets Marilyn Hacker and Eavan Boland; events with Janice Raymond, an American radical feminist, in 1986; and presentations by local writers’ groups. Manchester hosted Carol Ann Duffy, long before she became poet laureate, and South African (but

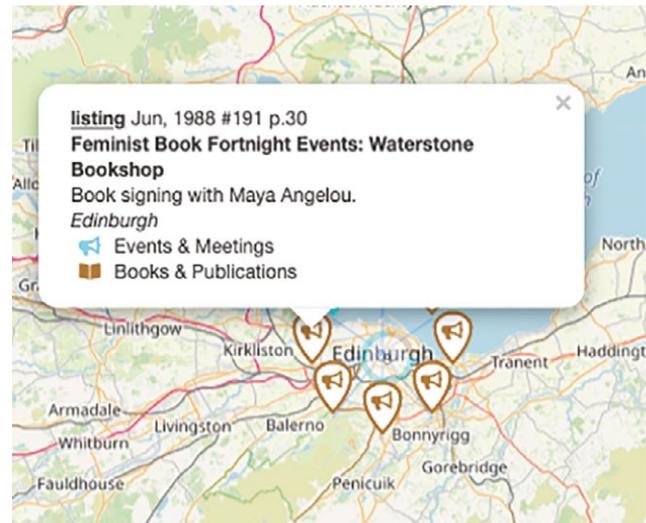


Figure 26 Spare Rib map © British Library

British-based) novelist Gillian Slovo in 1989; Plymouth hosted American British-based feminist Selma James, Australian author Pearlie McNeill, and Jill Rakusen, the co-author of the UK edition of the feminist bestseller *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1979), although these three latter writers do not appear on the *Spare Rib* map. Historical records of the Fortnight are patchy, but the records of the listings that do exist show how the Fortnight brought together local and international feminist networks and indicate some of the ‘hotspots’ of regional feminist organising in the 1980s.

Between the Margins and the Mainstream: FBF's Economics and the Selected Twenty

In terms of its approach to commerce and the mainstream, the Fortnight was significantly more pragmatic in its approach than many other feminist projects of the era – closer to a ‘Virago’ than a ‘Spare Rib’ economic model.¹ Its commercial success was built upon savvy marketing and voluntary labour, rather than funding or capital resources. In 1988, Carole Spedding, one of the Fortnight’s key organisers, described how:

Feminist publishers and writers in the UK have long felt held-back by resistant retailers who constantly declared ‘Feminist books don’t sell’. We knew that more and more people wanted to read what feminists were writing and publishing and.... a conscious decision was taken then to approach the problem from a strong commercial and business viewpoint (*Spare Rib* 191: 26)

The FBF was co-ordinated by a group of part-time organisers on a mainly voluntary basis (*Spare Rib* 167: 22). The first International Feminist Book Fair, like many other feminist projects in the 1980s, was partly funded by Greater London Council (GLC), and the Arts Council. Fortnight events were supported in part by grants from regional arts councils across the country, but most participating booksellers aimed to cover their own costs through sales of books, tickets and local funding. In their first year, the Fair and Fortnight received the backing not only of mainstream publishers but also of WH Smith and the Publishers Association of Great Britain, a development that *Spare Rib* described as ‘mildly astounding’ (*Spare Rib* 143: 21).

The Fortnight produced its own promotional catalogue, using funds provided by participating publishers, and with the support of WH Smith. In 1986, WH Smith printed 15,000 copies of the FBF catalogue at its own expense, stocked many of the 300 or so titles chosen by the book fair committee as representative of the women’s publishing industry and placed displays of feminist books in 150 of their shops during the fortnight. At the time, WH Smith was the largest chain bookseller in Britain, with a virtual monopoly on booksales in smaller towns. Many activists and booksellers felt at the time that WH Smith’s motives were cynical: as Zoe Fairbairns has suggested, ‘word went round the book trade in the early ‘80s that “the only two growth areas are computers and feminists”’ (*Everywoman* June 1990: 13). But as

¹ While *Virago*, the longest-running and still in business ‘women’s movement’ publishing house, has moved between mergers and independence over the years, *Spare Rib* was far less compromising in its prioritisation of politics over profit, but barely kept itself afloat and eventually ran out of resources altogether.

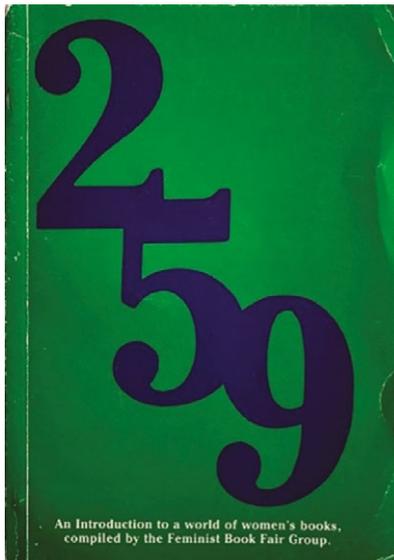
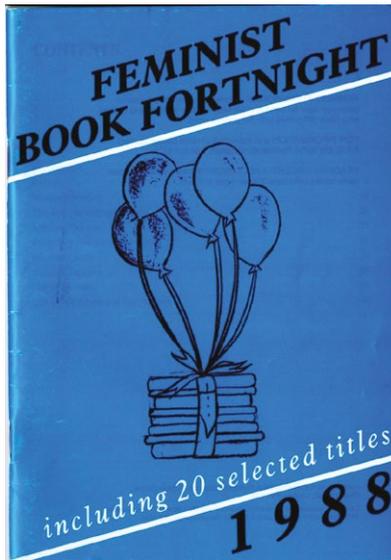


Figure 27 Feminist Book Week catalogue, 1984
© FBF Group, reproduced with their kind permission

Lilian Mohin of Onlywomen Press put it: 'we need commerce to survive, and to publish the more radical politics that we espouse' (*Everywoman* June 1990: 13).

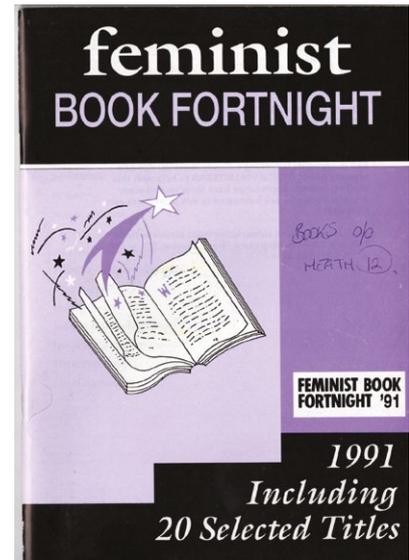
The catalogue listed every feminist title published in the previous year which were submitted by participating publishers. In 1984, the catalogue was titled '259', after the number of recommended feminist titles it listed. In 1984, 20,000 copies of the catalogue were printed; by 1988, the Fortnight's catalogue



Figures 28, 29 copies of 1988 and 1991 FBF catalogues © FBF Group, reproduced with their kind permission

records that demand for copies of the catalogue exceeded 100,000. The Fortnight offered a sliding scale of charges in recognition of the financial struggles faced by small independent publishers (*Spare Rib* 167: 22), meaning that inclusion in the FBF catalogue was a promotion opportunity partly funded by much bigger multinational publishers such as Routledge and CVBC (the Chatto, Virago, Bodley Head and Cape Group).

In addition, FBF marketed itself extensively in mainstream media



outlets, with announcements and articles in almost all of the 'glossy' women's magazines. By advertising in magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, the Fortnight's organisers aimed, in Anger's words, to 'get these [feminist] books into the hands of women who wouldn't go to a radical bookshop'. The Fortnight was also advertised, of course, in the feminist press – most notably, *Spare Rib*, which ran a striking 'Women Writing' issue in June 1984 to mark the first International Feminist Book Fair and Feminist Book Week.

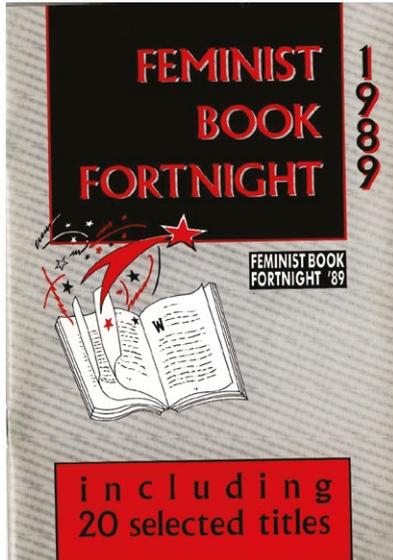


Figure 30 FBF catalogue 1989 © FBF Group, reproduced with their kind permission

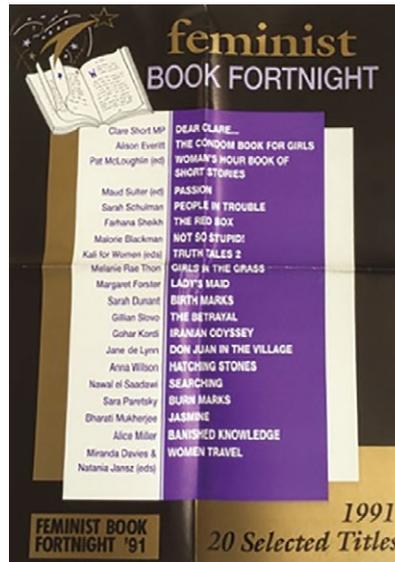


Figure 31 FBF poster 1991 © FBF Group, reproduced with their kind permission

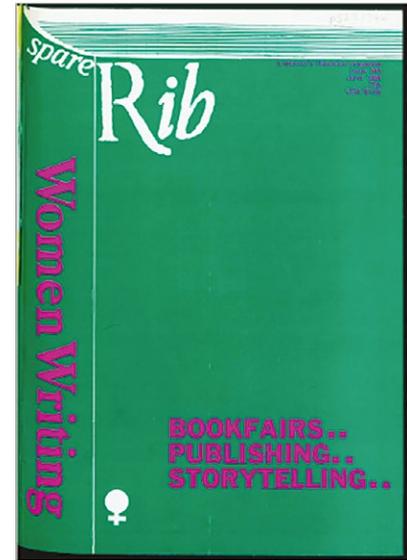


Figure 32 Spare Rib 143, reproduced by kind permission of Sue O'Sullivan

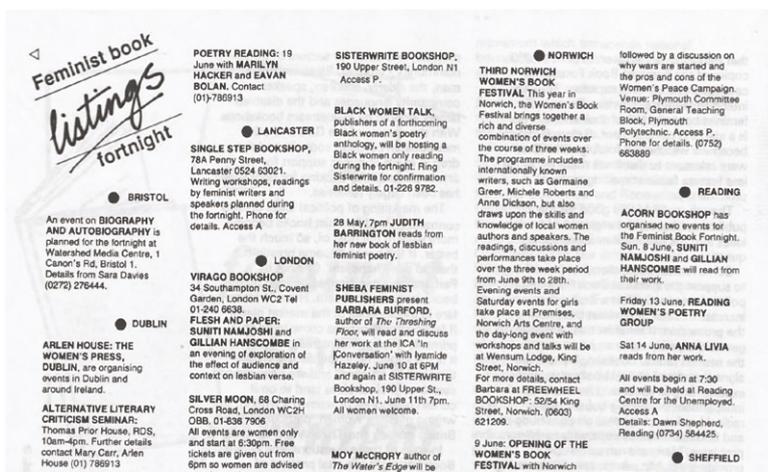


Figure 33 Spare Rib 167

The Fortnight was also reviewed and advertised by international feminist publications. In 1988, the American feminist booksellers' newsletter Feminist Bookstore News feted the British FBF for providing 'an amazing amount of publicity for feminist titles' and applauded the Fortnight's success at keeping 'an entire nation's attention [...] focussed, for two weeks at least, on women's writing.'

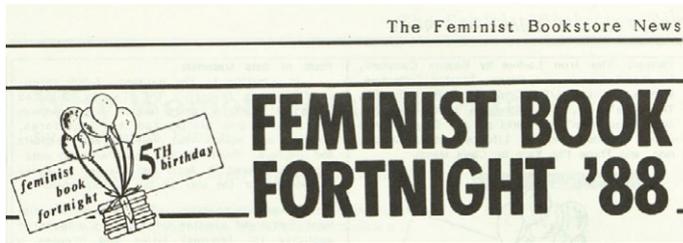


Figure 34 *Feminist Bookstore News* 11.1, reproduced under Creative Commons license CC BY-NC



Figure 35



Figure 36

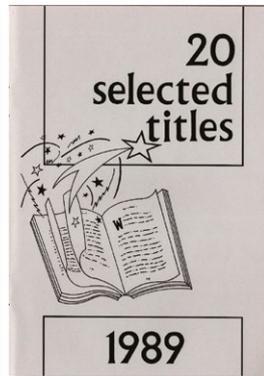


Figure 37

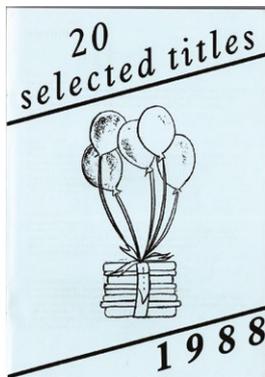


Figure 38



Figure 39

20 selected titles © FBF Group, reproduced with their kind permission

The Selected Twenty

The 'Selected Twenty' were another distinctive feature of the Fortnight. Every year, the 'Selected Twenty' were chosen by an independent panel of booksellers and librarians from among the submitted titles in the FBF catalogue as those 'which best represent the range and strength of feminist books' published in a given year (*Spare Rib* 155: 43). These titles were given special prominence in the publicity for FBF and featured a range of fiction and non-fiction including, in different years, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (Chatto and Windus, 1988), Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* (Bloomsbury, 1989), June Jordan's *Moving Towards Home: Political Essays* (Virago, 1989), Phyllis Chesler's *Sacred Bond: Motherhood Under Siege* (Virago, 1990) and the anthology *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women* (Sheba, 1988).

These twenty titles were intended, very practically, as a guide for shops and retailers who did not usually stock feminist titles. Although the 'Selected Twenty' promotion was clearly successful, there is some evidence of feminist discomfort even on the part of the Fortnight's organisers and supporters with



Figure 40 '20 selected titles 1989', Spare Rib 202

the 'Selected Twenty' concept. In 1990, the August issue of *Feminist Bookstore News* qualifies its description of the 'Selected Twenty' as not representing "the best" feminist books published; but rather a platform celebration of the many excellent books written and produced by women during the last year'.

Through its events, its catalogue, its marketing and promotions such as the 'Selected Twenty', the Fortnight helped support the mainstreaming of feminist literature in the 1980s. Bookseller Jane Anger describes this as a 'revolution from within', a consequence of increasingly embedded networks of feminist bookselling, custodianship, publishing and the commercial booktrade. At this time women editors were establishing feminist lists at mainstream publishers such as RKP and MacMillan, as Anger remembers:

ELEANOR CARELESS, INTERVIEW WITH JANE ANGER, 2021

Although it was vastly unequal in the publishing industry and men made most of the decisions... the women editors who were beginning to be in place... made the case within their own companies that this [feminist literature] was something good to publish... so there was some mainstreaming despite the fact that... most reps and editors and sales directors were men and didn't have a clue about feminism.

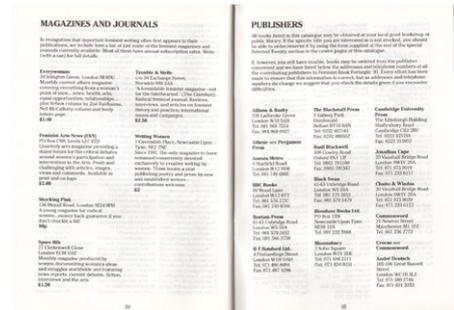


Figure 41 FBF catalogue 1991 © FBF Group, reproduced with their kind permission

This mainstreaming was enabled by mutually supportive feminist literary networks, including organisations such as **Women in Publishing**, whose free training courses were instrumental in supporting women within the publishing industry; the establishment of Feminist and Women's Studies in universities and the emergence of feminist lists at academic presses; and by the devolution of buying powers at local libraries, which allowed individual librarians to decide what titles to stock. Feminist bookseller Jane Watts remembers libraries buying up all of the Fortnight's 'Selected Twenty' feminist titles. The Fortnight brought together these networks of feminist bookselling, custodianship, publishing and the commercial booktrade.

Reviving FBF for the Twenty-First Century

By 1991, the end of the Fortnight's initial run, the radical book trade was in serious decline. The period over which FBF took place was characterised by the entrenchment of Thatcherism, with its advocacy of free-market economics and cuts to public bodies including the Greater London Council (GLC) and a recession in the early 1990s spelled the end for many feminist presses. Some feminist booksellers, such as Ferha Farooqui of Sisterwrite, felt that as 'women's literature was taken up by the mainstream publishing and bookselling world' the increase in competition meant that running a feminist bookshop was no longer economically viable (**interview with the Feminist Library**, 2020). Additionally, the growth of new retail chains led in 1994 to the collapse of the Net Book Agreement, which had allowed publishers to set the retail price of books, and irrevocably altered the structures of the British book trade. A decline in independent bookshops followed, only a few years

after the end of the first Fortnight, **when 1,894 independent bookshops were recorded in the UK.**

The recent revival of the Fortnight faces new challenges: the literary marketplace is now a crowded promotional space and the economic climate is not friendly to local, independent enterprise. Yet the advent of the internet has seen a proliferation of micropublics which progressive booksellers can more easily find; there is an increasing and hungry market for feminist books; and despite recent challenges, **there are now 967 independent bookshops in the UK**, up from 890 shops in 2019 and 868 in 2017. The number of feminist presses, libraries and bookshops has also grown, with new additions including the London-based **Silver Press** and **Second Shelf Bookshop**, Brighton's **The Feminist Bookshop** and **Afrori Books** for Black authors, two new annual feminist literary festivals, **New Suns** and Suffolk-based **Primadonna Festival**,

and the expansion of the **Feminist Library**, now housed in Peckham, South London.

There are important differences between the original and today's Feminist Fortnight: the revival is decentralised, with no central organising group or 'Selected Twenty' promotion. Each shop organises its own events and promotes titles of its choosing, with Five Leaves providing posters for each shop and posting event listings on a dedicated website. While the original Fortnight relied on support from mainstream booksellers like WH Smith, the revived Fortnight is deliberately aimed at independent booksellers.

The tension between the commercial and political aspects of the Fortnight has always been present. But the rise of global retailers such as Amazon, which threaten the very existence of independent booksellers, has driven feminist booksellers to do what is necessary to bring feminist books

to a wide audience. One resource is Bookshop.org, a B-corp dedicated to supporting local bookshops, which is an easy one-stop shop and can be **a useful partner**, but there are other ways to bring audiences back to feminist literature, as we have seen.

The revived Fortnight lets us talk together about what's important, from global finance to intersectionality. One especially pertinent event was in 2018 with leading feminist economist Ann Pettifor, on **how to break the power of the bankers**. And the conversation about the book business

as a cornerstone of social justice movements continues – from 1989's discussion of 'Women's Writing: Into the Mainstream' with author Nicci Gerrard and Sarah Lefanu, a senior editor of The Women's Press, to 2019 when Eishar Kaur and Wei Ming Kam, contributors to *Can We All Be Feminists?*, along with Virago's Sarah Savitt continued the debate.

Since 2017, when Anger and Five Leaves started thinking about reviving the Fortnight, campaigns such as #MeToo have seen a worldwide resurgence of feminist activism – and,

consequently, of feminist publishing. While the Fortnight's revival stemmed from a frustration around the lack of diversity in publishing, it also celebrates the upsurge of new feminist publishing in recent years with its book displays and live events. In 2020-21, the global pandemic prevented the Fortnight from taking place, but it will continue its campaign to keep feminism, feminist writers, books and publishers 'squarely and firmly', as the Fortnight's original organisers intended, in the literary marketplace.



Figure 42 *Can We All Be Feminists?* Debate at Pages of Hackney bookshop 2019 © Jane Anger, by kind permission of Jane Anger



Figure 43 Feminist Library logo, reproduced with their kind permission



Figure 44 The revived FBF logo © Jane Anger, by kind permission of Jane Anger

Oral interviews

Interview with Jane Anger and Jane Watts by Eleanor Careless, February 2021, *The Business of Women's Words* project, track 1 © University of Sussex

Interview with Jane Anger by Margaretta Jolly, June 2021, *The Business of Women's Words project*, track 1 © University of Sussex

The Spare Rib map and British Library resources

The *Spare Rib* map makes visible the extensive network of 'second-wave' feminist activity that took place across the UK from the 1970s-1990s. The map is based on a data sample of letters and listings taken from *Spare Rib* (1972-1993), Britain's longest-running feminist magazine and highlights publishing and booktrade activities. Freely available at: <https://www.bl.uk/spare-rib/map>

The British Library also hosts a range of wonderful articles about the magazine here: <https://www.bl.uk/spare-rib> and a free schools' workshop here: <https://www.bl.uk/events/mapping-feminist-media-spare-rib-magazine>

Further Reading

For a longer account of the history of the Fortnight, see Eleanor Careless, Mapping Feminist Book Fortnight: Navigating the Commercial Geographies of 1980s Feminist Print Culture in Britain (forthcoming).

For an account of the 'mainstreaming' of debates around race in the women's movements of the 1980s, see Natalie Thomlinson (2016) 'Second-wave' black feminist periodicals in Britain', *Women: a cultural review*, 27: 4, pp. 432-445; also see Thomlinson (2016) *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement in England, 1968-93*. Basingstoke, Palgrave.

For details of WH Smith's stocking of the Fortnight catalogue, see Bonnie. J Morris and D-M Withers (2018) *The feminist revolution: the struggle for women's liberation 1966-1988* London, Virago/Smithsonian, pp. 150-151.

For an overview of the UK feminist/women's publishing scene then and now, see 'Purpose, Power and Profit in Feminist Publishing', Special Issue of *Women: A Cultural Review*, Vol 32, Issue 3-4, 2021.

For contemporary reviews of the original Fortnight, see:

- Cathy Loeb, 'Women in Print', *Feminist Collections: Women's Studies Library Resources in Wisconsin*, ed. Susan Searing and Catherine Loeb, Fall 1984 vol. 6 no. 1, pp. 17-18. Accessed August 30, 2021. <https://minds.wisconsin.edu/handle/1793/21561>
- Helaine Harris et al (1984) *Feminist Bookstore News* 7, no. 3, pp. 14-16. Accessed 30 August 2021. <https://jstor.org/stable/10.2307/community.28036302>.
- Carol Seajay, et al (1988) *Feminist Bookstore News* 11, no. 1, pp. 9-11. Accessed 30 August 2021. <https://jstor.org/stable/10.2307/community.28036320>.
- Ruth Gottstein et al (1990) *Feminist Bookstore News* 13, no. 2, pp. 47-49. Accessed 30 August 2021. <https://jstor.org/stable/10.2307/community.28036333>.

For Gay Jones' history of In Other Words bookshop, Plymouth, see: *Radical Bookselling History - Newsletter*, Issue 2 (April 2021), pp. 15-24. Accessed 30 August 2021.

<https://www.leftontheshelfbooks.co.uk/pdf/Radical-Bookselling-History-Newsletter-Issue-2-April-2021.pdf>

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Figure 45 News from Nowhere, Liverpool, which celebrated FBF in 2019 © Peter Erik Forsberg/Alamy



Figure 46 The Feminist Bookshop, Brighton, which celebrated FBF in 2020 © Dominic Dean/Alamy

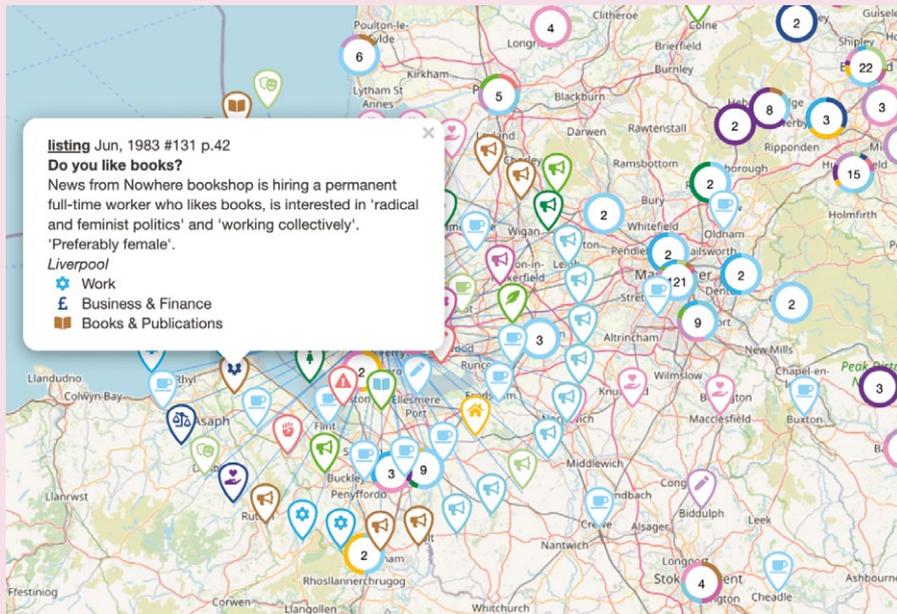


Figure 47 Do you like books? News from Nowhere bookshop is hiring! Job notice from Spare Rib, 1983, Spare Rib map © British Library



Figure 48 Feminist Book Fortnight table display 2019, Five Leaves Bookshop Nottingham © Five Leaves Bookshop

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