

ENTREVISTA



THE MAKING OF THE FEMINIST PRESS: AN INTERVIEW WITH FLORENCE HOWE

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On the evening of September 26, 1985, Florence Howe opened the Conference on Southern Women: Portraits in Diversity at Newcomb College in New Orleans with her keynote address entitled «The Making of a Feminist Teacher». Though her talk dealt specifically with «how her experience as a teacher in Mississippi's Freedom Schools (began in the summer of 1964) led to her efforts to transform the traditional curriculum into one that encompasses white women and minorities», Howe also spoke of the role Women's Studies has to play in modern life. «People in our society are terrified of difference,» she stated, «and the most valuable thing Women's Studies teaches is not only to respect but to value difference. Our major tool, of course, is education, specifically the teaching of history and of literature, but before we can begin to uncover and teach the history and literature of other cultures, we must delve into our own histories; we must be honest with ourselves, and our students as well.»

Howe's review of her own youth in a working-class Jewish ghetto of New York City and her experience «living under siege» as she put it, helped her articulate what she calls her «Five Prescriptions for a Feminist Teacher» or «How to Transform Fear of Difference»:

- 1. Immersion in Difference: You must actively involve yourself in the life of a culture which is very different from your own. Vicarious involvement through study is not enough; participation in the cultural life of a distinct community for an extended period of time is necessary to attain full awareness and appreciation of the difference from yourself.*

2. *Discovery or Rediscovery of Who You Are: Understanding of your own history and family and of what traditions come to bear on your philosophy of life is achieved through extensive self-analysis —writing, feeling, thinking.*
3. *Another Immersion: this time through books which will expand and actively cultivate difference —black, white working-class, African— from your own.*
4. *Openness to New Ways, New Ideas: Be willing to experiment with new material, to take risks. You must listen as well as lecture.*
5. *Teaching from a non-traditional perspective: For example, try placing black women at the center of your analysis and teach from their perspective.*

Florence Howe's dedication to this new vision has culminated in her work as director of The Feminist Press which «through publications and projects... contributes to the rediscovery of the history of women and a more humane society.» At a break during the conference, Ms. Howe spoke to me specifically about the difficulties she encountered in bringing this project into being:

—I think since you're coming in on me in 1985 and not in 1970 when the Women's Studies Movement and The Feminist Press first began, I'll have to give you a little background information. At the time that the Women's Movement first touched the campus in the U.S. (that was in 1969) I was an assistant professor at Goucher College in Baltimore, and I had just been appointed by the president-elect of the Modern Language Association to chair a newly established Commission on the Status in Education of Women for the Modern Language Association. That was really my induction into becoming a feminist formally. I had been teaching about women at Goucher College following my Mississippi experience and really very experimentally. I was not part of the consciousness-raising group, I did not identify with the Women's Liberation Movement, I never joined NOW until the mid-1970s, I was not engaged in anything that resembled a part of the Women's Movement. I still felt very close to the Civil Rights Movement in 1969 which had turned into a Black Power Movement, but nevertheless I retained my own ties to that movement.

—Did you not suffer any antagonism at that moment when it turned into the Black Power Movement?

—Oh, I had a black daughter who didn't want to hear from me, or speak to me, or whatever, unless she needed money. She spent her nineteenth year in 1967 as a Sophomore at Lake Forest College in Illinois, part of the Black Power Movement in Chicago, and she never admitted to

anybody in Chicago that she had a white mother. And she let me know that she didn't want to come home for vacations because she didn't want to come into my white world. We had a different relationship after that year, but that year was gruesome. I was very upset and didn't know quite how to deal with this, because I had many very close friends in the Black Power Movement, and I knew what that meant and I knew that they were not very open about relationships. Even in New York it was very bad for black folks to be seen with white folks. But that was a relatively brief period and I never lost the connection I felt; I never lost the relationships I had. I identified with the Anti-War Movement and I went to jail a couple of times in the late 60s and early 70s. But I never identified with the Women's Movement until after 1969.

—What would you say was crucial in turning your interest to the Women's Movement and away from the Black movements?

—Well, nothing happened that way; I just added one more thing. I mean I went to the Women's Movement with the consciousness that there was a lot of racism there that turned me off right from the start as I entered. I probably wouldn't have entered except that there were Black people, both women and men, who encouraged me. Toni Cade's *The Black Woman* was published in 1970 along with *Sexual Politics*, and Celestine Ware's (another black woman) book *Woman Power*, and Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood is Powerful*. So there were three white books and two black books published in the same year and I did not enter the Movement with the feeling that I was dividing myself. I entered the Movement still with the feeling of hostility toward the white women who had left the Civil Rights Movement to found this movement. I mean I still felt some antipathy to them and I did not want to get so tied up in the Women's Movement that I couldn't do anything else, and that was one of my urgent concerns. Even before 1973 I was talking to black women about doing Black Women's Studies, that book we finally produced in 1982.

—Do you find it a paradox that there has been, perhaps still is, so much racism within the Women's Liberation Movement? Is that contradictory?

—I find that it's to be expected. It was true in the nineteenth century when the Women's Movement grew out of the Abolitionist Movement, and that it contained both the seeds for the transformation of that racist mentality and the racism itself. It seems to me that that is the critical paradox that you have to understand, to work with. Like women in the nineteenth century we carry the seeds within us for transforming the

racism itself. There really isn't an easy way around it because we're the product of history, and without that consciousness we couldn't deal with history, we couldn't deal with anything. That historical and material reality is always there and it's very hard. I spent the morning talking with two Southern white women with whom I find it more difficult to communicate than with black Southern women. Their mental sets both confuse and anger me. I want to ask «Why? Why are you so stubborn, why can't you see what I see?» But what I'm really saying is, «Why are you so racist?» I finally got past that with one white woman for the first time so that I could finally *hear*. I didn't want to hear, because I'm so impatient with their patterns, their socialization. But it is also true that even in 1985, even here in New Orleans where half the population is black, where there is ample opportunity for them to meet, socialize, certainly at the level of academe, it is a very rare occurrence for black and white women to be friends.

—When you finally did become a part of the Women's Movement, what kind of decisions were made to form The Feminist Press?

—I spent from 1964 to 1969 teaching what I called «consciousness». I didn't call it Women's Studies because there was no such thing. By 1969 people were beginning to talk about «Female Studies», because the expression «Women's Studies» didn't exist yet. Later this was called «Feminist Studies» and eventually it got to be «Women's Studies». I knew by 1969 that we were going to need some books if we were going to go on teaching about women, and that they didn't exist. Somewhere I got the idea for a pamphlet series by and about women roughly based on the British book news pamphlets, sort of interesting people writing about other interesting people, the live ones writing about the dead ones, and perhaps writing about a few live ones as well, complete with their works and lives and photographs. Around that time I had been writing long essay reviews of Doris Lessing's works for *The Nation*, and then in 1966, I went to England and interviewed Doris Lessing for a whole day, and published various sections of that interview in various places. So by 1969 two university presses wrote to me to ask whether I would like to write a book about Doris Lessing. I said no, but I used that opportunity to go and visit and say that there was another project I had in mind which I thought might be more interesting and I told both the directors of these publishing houses about my idea for a series of biographical pamphlets. They responded that it was a wonderful idea but that there was no money in it. I received exactly the identical refrain everywhere. Later I went to a meeting of Baltimore Women's Liberation, twenty-five people in the room sitting in a circle, and I told them about the idea of biographical pamphlets. Everybody thought it was a wonderful idea. (That group, by the way, was

involved in producing *Women: A Journal of Liberation* which was one of the first U.S. women's movement magazines.) And I thought that here were people in publishing who could help me do this. Every one of them said, «It's a wonderful idea, but I have no time to work on it.» I left saying I would forget the whole thing, since it was not a project one could do alone.

At the end of July, I went off to Cape Cod with my husband and children and returned at the end of August, having forgotten the whole thing. Our mail was kept for us at the Post office or thrown inside the door, but there was also an old mailbox at the end of the lawn next to the street. When I went to clear it out, to my amazement, it was stuffed! Not with circulars and fliers and so forth, but with envelopes marked «Feminist Press, 5504 Greenspring Ave., Baltimore, Maryland». When opened, they were full of checks for \$2, \$3, \$4, \$5, even some cash and many offers to write books, not only biographies, but children's books.

I began to feel very disturbed. It turned out that the Baltimore Women's Liberation Group had said in their July newsletter, which went all over the country, that this project had been started in Baltimore, gave my address, and listed not only biographies of women, but also non-sexist children's books. Now I knew nothing about children's books; I even disliked children's books. I didn't want to have anything to do with children's books, so I steamed around for a month and then called Baltimore Women's Liberation and asked whose idea this was. Also, I was very busy that fall with many other projects, as well as a full-time teaching job. I was very involved in a new project of teaching my students how to teach. In the high schools I had poetry workshops going. I was overwhelmed with what I had already to do and couldn't begin to think about The Feminist Press project.

But long before November I decided I had to do something about all those checks. So I called a meeting at my house, writing to all those people whose checks I had received. About twenty-five people came, some from Pennsylvania, some from Washington, some from the area sprawled between Baltimore and Washington. Fifteen of them continued to meet monthly that whole next year, and we produced our first children's book during that year, called *The Dragon and the Doctor*.

—Who wrote the book?

—It was written by a student at Goucher College. I gave her a Chinese children's book called *I Want to Be a Doctor*, which somebody had sent me. It had a fat little five-year-old girl carrying a stethoscope, whose younger brother is the nurse, and she practices on his rocking horse which is broken. And she takes out of her bag a saw and some nails and she mends the broken rocking horse. Then she proceeds to mend other toys

that are broken. It's very healthy; they don't practice on each other but on their toys! Well, I gave this to Barbara Danish, who was my student at the time, and *very* creative. She had filled my office with dragons, and I said, «Barbara, please do an American version of this book. No frills, Barbara. I just want the same thing: a little fat girl, and I want nice toys, and a littler fat brother who's the nurse. Just the same book, please. Keep it simple, Barbara.» She came back ten minutes later with *The Dragon and the Doctor...* and she said, «If you don't like it, forget it.» It was darling and I said, «I guess I'll take it.» It took Barbara and her friend Laura Brown eight months to do the separations, but it literally took her ten minutes to write the story and draw the sketches.

—Did you find a market for it?

—Yes, we sold thousands of that book. We sold them for a dollar, having printed 5,000 for \$1,500 and we collected all the money before we printed. We sold at least 10,000 I would say, in the next few years.

—So actually *The Feminist Press* started with a children's book.

—Yes. We did a second children's book, and then we did two or three little biographies, but all of those are now out of print. Tillie Olsen started us something else during the second year of *The Press'* life. She gave me a xerox of an 1861 story that was published anonymously that year in the *Atlantic* by Rebecca Harding called «Life in the Iron Mills». She was from Wheeling, West Virginia, a Southern woman, whose brother fought in the Confederate army. She was a spinster at the age of 30 or 32 when she wrote that story, and she was at home taking care of her father. When the story appeared in the *Atlantic*, Hawthorne wrote to the editor saying, «Who is the author of this story? He is the next genius of the age». And the editor wrote back and gave Hawthorne Rebecca Harding's name and address. Hawthorne wrote her a letter saying that he would like to invite her to come North to visit. That was 1861 or 1862 and she couldn't go until her brother came home from the war in 1865, since women couldn't travel alone in those times.

That story is very moving, an incredible story, the first piece of naturalism ever written by anyone. It's about the life of young Welsh immigrants in the iron mills of Wheeling, West Virginia. How a Quaker, middle-class woman got inside those mills, as well as inside the hovels in which these people lived is extraordinary. I stayed up all night the night I read it, and I wept and could not go back to sleep. I knew the next day that we were really on to something.

Tillie had been working on an essay about Rebecca Harding Davis.

She had spent part of her time at the Radcliffe Institute in the 60s reading all of Rebecca Harding Davis's long fiction, as well as other short stories. So we published «Life in the Iron Mills» along with a biographical afterward by Tillie Olsen. It appeared in 1972. It's not still in print, but for The Press's 15th birthday this year we added two more stories by Rebecca Harding Davis and redesigned the book jacket. I'm very pleased that we have sold about 50,000 copies of that book.

—Have you had that kind of success with everything? Are you generally very pleased with the reception of your work?

—I'm very pleased, though some of the things have not been a success. The biography series never took off, and is still a dream. The children's books really were very difficult for me, because I always felt an amateur, and I don't like to be an amateur at anything I do. We had some successes there, and we have a couple of books that we've kept in print. We did about 15 or 20 children's books, and now, as I look back, they were important to do because they stirred other people. *Ms. Magazine* did «Free to Be you and Me», after we had done two children's books.

—Were you the first to get started on this change of the sexist vision in literature?

—I think we were the second in children's literature. There was a group in North Carolina called «Lollipop Power», still in existence, who have done children's books steadily during this whole period. But we were the first to begin to reprint the lost literature by and about women.

Since then The Feminist Press has continued to reclaim the works of neglected female authors for American literature and for Women's Studies, publishing such powerful novels as Agnes Smedley's Daughter of Earth, Mary Austin's A Woman of Genius, and Dorothy West's The Living is Easy. In true adherence to her doctrine of difference, Howe has published works from the widest possible range of authors. Alice Walkernes Smedley's Daughter of Earth, Mary Austin's A Woman of Genius, and Dorothy West's The Living is Easy. In true adherence to her doctrine of difference, Howe has published works from the widest possible range of authors. Alice Walker chose The Feminist Press for publication of her Zora Neale Hurston reader entitled I Love Myself When I Am Laughing..., and last year Moa Martinson's Women and Appletrees was translated into English from Swedish for the first time. Tillie Olsen has continued to collaborate with Howe and last year published Mother to Daughter, Daughter to Mother: A Daybook and Reader, selections from the poetry and prose of 120 writers (including Louise Bogan, Colette, Simone de Beauvoir, Emily Dickinson, George Eliot, Doris Lessing, Audre Lorde, Paule Marshall, Grace Paley, Olive Schreiner, Gloria Steinem, Alice Walker, Eudora Welty, and Virginia Woolf). Recently published is

an anthology of Spanish and Latin American feminist poets dating from the 15th to the 20th century in the original Spanish with English translation.

In addition to novels and poetry by women, The Feminist Press publishes feminist teaching material and guides for integrating Women's Studies into both the high school and university curricula. For more information write to Florence Howe, The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 311 East 94th Street, New York 10128, U.S.A.