



Gay and Lesbian Bookstores

by Ruth M. Pettis

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2007 glbtq, Inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

A network of independent gay and lesbian bookstores arose concurrently with the flourishing of gay and feminist literature in the 1970s. While many of them offered gay-related erotica, they differed markedly from older sexually-oriented adult bookstores and magazine shops in their focus on political and gay-positive literature.

By providing venues through which glbtq authors and publishers could market their work, these bookstores served as incubators for the literary and cultural development of the modern gay rights movement in the United States and abroad.

Independent booksellers have always played an important role in cultural movements. In Paris Sylvia Beach's store Shakespeare & Company supported the works of Lost Generation writers in the 1920s. In San Francisco Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights bookshop served as a hub for Beat Generation poets. His championing of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* won a crucial First Amendment case in the 1950s.

The earliest self-styled gay and lesbian bookstore was the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop in New York, founded by activist Craig Rodwell in 1967. Rodwell (who was one of the organizers of the first Gay Pride march three years later) displayed a sign proclaiming it as "a bookshop for the homophile movement" and featured a "Gay is Good" sticker in the window. Because he refused to stock pornography, at first his entire inventory comprised only about 25 titles.

That situation soon changed as independent gay presses and lesbian-feminist publishers formed and started generating new work as well as reissues of out-of-print classics.

Rodwell's shop became the model for similar businesses such as Giovanni's Room in Philadelphia (opened 1973) and Lambda Rising in Washington, D.C. (1974). By 1994 there were at least 45 such venues in the United States, Canada, and Europe. Notable among these were Walt Whitman Bookstore in San Francisco; Glad Day, with stores in Toronto and Boston; Lambda Rising, which expanded into a four-store chain on the East Coast; Faubourg Marigny Bookstore in New Orleans; People Like Us in Chicago; and A Different Light, which had outlets on both coasts.

Functioning as virtual community centers, these stores were comfortable places for many in the first steps of coming out. As public spaces they provided a much needed alternative to gay bars and porn shops. Bulletin boards, newsletters from gay organizations, and ads from gay-owned businesses helped build a sense of community.

Gay men and lesbians from small towns trekked to these outlets for information unavailable at home. Because many of these bookstores had mail order departments, they also served glbtq customers who lived in rural or culturally isolated areas.

They served other functions as well. Giovanni's Room, for example, acted as consultant for its local school

board regarding library materials and for a children's hospital on literature for diversity training. In 1984 A Different Light initiated author appearances through their Lesbian Writers Series, followed by a similar series for gay male writers. In addition, book signings became a prominent feature of gay and lesbian bookstores.

Feminist Bookstores

An important parallel development to the rise of gay and lesbian bookstores was the rise of feminist bookstores during the same era. Some of the feminist bookstores were founded by lesbians and virtually all of them were lesbian-friendly. They stocked seminal feminist literature, classics by female authors, new nonfiction inspired by emerging Women's Studies programs, radical-feminist tracts, and, of course, poetry, lesbian romance, and mystery fiction.

The inventory of lesbian titles at this time typically comprised works by Judy Grahn, Jane Rule, Rita Mae Brown, Ti-Grace Atkinson, and Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon. As with gay male literature, however, the number of titles mushroomed as publishers like Naiad and Daughters, Inc. got underway.

The earliest of these stores was the Amazon Bookstore Cooperative in Minneapolis, founded about 1970. Still in operation as of 2007, it is the oldest independent feminist bookstore in North America. In 1999 it brought suit against Amazon.com for trademark infringement, but reached an out of court agreement with the online giant to share use of the name.

Among other early stores were Sisterhood Bookstore in Los Angeles (opened 1972), Lammas in Washington, D.C. (1973), and New Words in Cambridge, Massachusetts (1974). By the late 1980s the number of feminist bookstores in North America had swelled to 120.

In addition to nurturing feminist and lesbian communities, these spaces also provided early venues for women writers of color, disability activists, and other grassroots spokeswomen to present their work.

Censorship

Although most gay and lesbian bookstores in the United States were established after the battles for freedom of expression in print were won, and most of them were located in gay and lesbian ghettos, some nevertheless faced harassment from city officials and neighbors. They also sometimes had to fight attempts at censorship.

The situation abroad was worse. Perhaps most shockingly, the Thatcher government in the United Kingdom targeted gay bookstores in the mid-1980s. For example, on April 10, 1984, Customs and Excise agents raided Gay's the Word, London's only gay bookstore, and confiscated thirty percent of its stock. Police held the store's directors and manager for questioning without access to lawyers. Later that same month, a similar raid was conducted in Edinburgh against Lavender Menace, then Scotland's only gay bookstore.

In November, the eight directors and the assistant manager of Gay's the Word were indicted for conspiracy to distribute obscene material, despite the fact that virtually all the titles submitted in evidence were also available in mainstream bookstores. Only after a highly-publicized campaign by civil liberties groups were the charges dropped.

Similarly, Glad Day bookstore in Toronto was repeatedly harassed and raided during the early 1980s. Canada Customs made a practice of confiscating Glad Day's stock of books and magazines imported from abroad even when they were freely available in mainstream bookstores.

Little Sister's versus The Queen

Gay book retailers in Vancouver, British Columbia, also became the object of Canada Customs' discriminatory enforcement of Canadian obscenity legislation. The result was a long-standing legal battle. In 1988 Little Sister's bookstore challenged Canada Customs' practice of seizing publications sent from the U.S. that the agency deemed pornographic. Among items routinely seized were issues of *The Advocate*, *Deneuve*, and works of authors as diverse as Jane Rule and Pat Califia.

Even though Little Sister's asserted that the core issue was Canada Customs' discriminatory policy against gay businesses, the agency insisted on arbitrarily enforcing its own definition of pornography. This included anything referring to "anal penetration," by which it justified its seizures of AIDS education materials.

In December of 2000 the Supreme Court of Canada determined that Customs had discriminated against the store and imposed restrictions on the agency's seizure practices, but failed to address the larger issue of what constituted obscenity under Canadian law. The lawsuit is the subject of Aerlyn Weissman's 2002 documentary *Little Sister's vs. Big Brother*.

Similar disputes over gay imports also arose in New Zealand.

European bookstores, such as Vrolijk in Amsterdam, Les Mots à la Bouche in Paris, and Pan Bogcafé in Copenhagen, have operated in more benign climates and have experienced little harassment.

An Uncertain Future

Ironically, the growing acceptance of queer culture in the mainstream has had mixed results for gay and lesbian bookstores. In the early 1990s organizations such as the Publishing Triangle, a network of gay-oriented publishers, advocated for inclusion of their products in mainstream distributors' catalogs. They initiated marketing drives such as the National Lesbian and Gay Book Month in June of 1992.

By the turn of the century such efforts had given rise to "gay and lesbian" sections in general interest bookstores. Moreover, the growing power of national chains and online marketing also affected gay and lesbian bookstores negatively. Like other independent retailers, many of the pioneering gay and lesbian bookstores found themselves unable to compete against the chains and were forced to close. Similarly, by 2002 the network of feminist bookstores was down to 60.

The decline of the number of gay and lesbian bookstores has spurred an effort to raise awareness about the need to support gay-owned businesses.

Gay and lesbian bookstores have responded to the crisis affecting independent booksellers by attempting to be more responsive to community organizations. They have also moved to stock general interest titles alongside titles of special interest to glbtq customers. Said Paul Rehme, proprietor of We Think the World of You Bookstore in Boston in 2002, "I knew we were on the right path when a heavily tattooed and pierced biker-type from Maine bought every S & M book and every Martha Stewart title we stocked."

Other stores have completely reinvented their purpose. In 2002 the former New Words Bookstore in Cambridge became the non-profit Center for New Words to further the use of written and spoken media to empower women's causes. A Room of One's Own in Madison, Wisconsin added a coffeehouse in 1997 and started a non-profit foundation in 2006.

In 2003 the Oscar Wilde shop almost became a casualty. Just before going out of business it was bought by Lambda Rising owner Deacon McCubbin who told the *New York Times*, "We think this store is way too important to let it close. It is more than a store; it is a part of our history."

Gay and lesbian bookstores that have survived into the twenty-first century face an uncertain future as publications pertinent to glbtq culture continue to permeate mainstream retail trade.

To survive, many have expanded their inventory beyond books to hard-to-find DVDs and CDs by independent artists, one of a kind items such as autographed photos and posters, mementos, rare editions, experimental works, and specialized erotica too outré for chain store shelves. For example, in 2003, the Faubourg Marigny Bookstore became FAB, the Faubourg Marigny Art and Books store, reflecting both new owner Otis Fennel's interest in art and the need to diversify.

Successful proprietors also emphasize the knowledgeable and welcoming customer service that big box outlets cannot provide to glbtq clientele. The other side of that formula, however, will require the ongoing support of a loyal and appreciative customer base if gay and lesbian bookstores are to carry their unique role forward.

Bibliography

Buchanan, Beki, and Maxwell Powell. "The Queer Bookstore: A Study in Nurturing Community." *OIA [Out in Asheville]* (October 2007): 16; http://www.outinashville.com/issues/october2007/queer_bookstore.html

Bindon, Shelley. "E-commerce Conflict." *Lambda Book Report* 7.6 (January 1999): 12.

Danford, Natalie. "Shelf Talkers." *Publishers Weekly* 251.35 (August 30, 2004): 24.

Hull, Dana. "Bookstore Chain Thrives by Helping Build Gay Culture." *The Washington Post* (September 30, 1996): F10.

Howell, Kevin. "Difficult Times at A Different Light." *Publishers Weekly* 246.30 (July 26, 1999): 21.

Kirch, Claire. "Brotherly (and Sisterly) Love: Philadelphia's 30-year-old Giovanni's Room Is Thriving in the Rough Tides of GLBT Bookselling." *Publishers Weekly* 251.4 (January 26, 2004): 108-110.

Mann, William J. "The Gay and Lesbian Publishing Boom." *The Harvard Gay & Lesbian Review* 2.2 (April 30, 1995): 24.

Pela, Robert L. "A Different Fight." *The Advocate* (August 17, 1999): 117.

Rehme, Paul S. "Gay Bookstores [letter]." *New York Times* (June 27, 2002): A28.

Rotello, Gabriel. "Get Back to Gay Bookstores." *The Advocate* 834 (March 27, 2001): 72.

Santora, Marc. "Hard Words for a Bookshop: The End." *New York Times* (January 7, 2003): B3.

_____. "Plot Twist for a Gay Bookstore: The Last Chapter Actually Isn't." *New York Times* (February 4, 2003): B3.

Summer, Bob. "A Niche Market Comes of Age." *Publishers Weekly* 239.29 (June 29, 1992): 36-40.

_____. "Bookselling as Cultural Politics: Twenty-five years after Stonewall, Gay and Lesbian Bookstores Are a Mainstay of the Movement." *Publishers Weekly* 241.26 (June 27, 1994): 29-31.

About the Author

Ruth M. Pettis is the Oral History Project manager for the Northwest Lesbian and Gay History Museum

Project in Seattle and editor of *Mosaic 1: Life Stories*, a collection of stories from the project's oral history collection. She has contributed articles and fiction to a number of gay and women's publications. She has an A.B. in anthropology from Indiana University and an M.L.S. from Simmons College in Boston.