

# UC Santa Cruz

## Cultural History

### Title

Irene Reti and HerBooks Feminist Press

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4wn4458v>

### Author

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### Publication Date

2001-12-05

### Supplemental Material

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4wn4458v#supplemental>

*This interview was conducted by UCSC student Martha Vickers on March 1, 1991, in the HerBooks office at Irene Reti's home in Santa Cruz, California.*

### *Lesbian Words: A Santa Cruz Anthology*

**Reti:** Maybe I should start by giving you some of the history for how I got into this, because then we will have a context for what we are talking about.

I graduated from UC Santa Cruz in 1982 in environmental studies and women's studies. I had spent a lot of time in school writing term papers. I hadn't written anything purely creative, like poetry, since I was a kid. Once I was out of school, I had the time . . . and I was also looking for a job in Santa Cruz, which is a lost cause (laughter) when you are just out of school.

There I was, working for a solar energy company, trying to sell Arco solar collectors over the phone. I saw an ad in the newspaper that Ellen Bass was giving a writing workshop for women. I thought wow, that sounds really great. I went to that and I started writing poetry. I took a number of different workshops from Maude Meehan and Ellen Bass. During the last session of the workshop, Ellen passed around information about how to get published. She gave us a directory of different publishers and talked about the process of getting published . . . like before you send out your whole novel, that you should send out a query letter. Things like that. To make copies of your stuff. It was very useful information. But I felt powerless. I heard these discouraging stories from a number of the women in the class who had been writing for a long time, and were a lot older than I was. At the time I was 21. They were really demoralized. They'd spent years waiting, going to the mailbox, getting rejection letters.

During the following year I got a job working at ASAP Typography as a proofreader. I was trained for that position because I didn't have any background in that. But since I was a writer, the owner thought I could do a good job and took a chance on me. This was a phototypography shop which charged \$40 an hour to typeset your copy on a very expensive computer. It came out beautiful, at high resolution. Of course this was all pre-desktop publishing. There've been a lot of technological changes during the period I've

been in publishing. It's really striking. In the last seven years there has been a complete transformation because of microcomputers. Anyway, I'm sitting at this typography place and all these writers and editors keep bringing in their books to be typeset. For instance, there was Stephen Kessler, who used to publish the weekly newspaper *The Sun* here in Santa Cruz. He also published a series of anthologies of writing from all over the country, mostly poetry. He was sending them back to Michigan to be printed, but he was getting the typesetting done here. There were a couple of other literary magazines, like *Quarry West*. I watched this process and thought, wait a second, I can do this! This isn't so mysterious. They bring in this copy to be typeset and then they proofread it. I knew there were steps in between that and the final book that I didn't know about, but the process didn't seem entirely mysterious to me anymore.

Here in Santa Cruz there were the *Moonjuice* anthologies, published by a local writing group which Maude Meehan was in with a number of other women. They put these four of these out themselves, a really good example of grassroots women's publishing.

I saw those. And there were other literary anthologies and magazines being published. But there was nothing locally that was specifically lesbian. It seemed to me that it was hardest for lesbians to get published because most of these anthologies didn't have anything by lesbians in them. At the time I had been out as a lesbian for five years. Books had been extremely important to me in my process of coming out. I read everything I could find by lesbians. I thought it was very important to create a local forum for lesbians in book form. I never was interested in publishing a newspaper. I wanted to create something permanent. And I don't like the daily deadline pressure of journalism. I don't write well that way.

My friend Sue McCabe had written her senior thesis at UC Santa Cruz on feminist publishing. The two of us decided to publish a lesbian anthology. We put out a call for contributions locally. We made up a little poster, using rub on letters that said, "Lesbian Words: A Santa Cruz Anthology." I got a post office box because I didn't want queries sent to my house; I didn't want anybody showing up on my doorstep. We took about six months to gather the material. Some of it was from people we knew, but a lot of it wasn't.

We went through the whole publishing process. I won't go into every step here because it would take forever. It was a very simple, grassroots kind of book. It wasn't even perfect bound. It had staples, was what in the business is called saddle-stitched. It had a friendly kind of feel.

That was the start of my involvement in publishing. We did a reading and the copies sold out really quickly, mostly at Bookshop Santa Cruz. By the end of the first year they were mostly gone. I have just a few copies left. We only printed five hundred. We printed them at Community Printers here in Santa Cruz. There was a woman who worked there who helped me immensely. She still works there, Terese Armstrong. She is so wonderful. I was intimidated. I thought of myself as someone who couldn't paste anything straight. I was worried the whole book would end up being crooked! I knew I could do the typesetting and the editing. I knew it wouldn't have a ton of typos. But I was really worried about the actual design. I had never done well in art classes. She said, hey it's no big deal. You draw this template. You put it on a light table and place your layout over it so you get the same layout on every page. We did it together late one night, and then she printed it. They were really incredible at Community Printers. They really helped me out the first few years.

**Vickers:** So if you print 500 of these, sell all but just a handful, what kind of a profit do you make on the book?

**Reti:** We just barely broke even. In general my business is pretty much a breakeven kind of situation. I don't make any money. In fact, most of the time I lose money. Some projects, like *The Lesbian in Front of the Classroom*, have done extremely well. The book I just published, *Bubbe Meishehs* by *Shayneh Maidelehs*—the flyer for it is on the refrigerator—is selling. I'm sure we will make money. Poetry most of the time doesn't sell. What you have to do to be a successful publisher is to have some books that are your bread and butter books. Then you can afford to do a few that are not going to sell but that you really love. For instance, I published *To Live with the Weeds* by D.A. Clarke in one run of 250 copies, which I did myself in a printing class I took from Terese Armstrong. Production costs were very cheap because I did all the labor, with the help of

my friends who came and collated the book by walking around and around a big table at Community Printers. It was great fun. Then we published another run of 1000. I think we've only sold 100. That was three or four years ago. That book is never going to do real well. But you can't measure everything by profit.

With *Lesbian Words: A Santa Cruz Anthology* we got our money back and made a couple of hundred dollars to put into the next project. Sue McCabe and I had financed it by each putting in five hundred dollars. Over the years I've talked to a number of women who are interested in starting a press, and they say oh, we're going to go around the country and we're going to find women who have lots of money. We're going to get these endowments. We're not going to start until we have \$500,000, at least, and all these backers. Then they never do it. It would be lovely, I would be overjoyed to find somebody to invest in HerBooks who understands what I am doing, who isn't going to try to interfere, to control it. But I just decided, I'm just going to do it. If I can only do it at a certain level, then I will only do it at a certain level.

It's funny. I never intended to start a press. I wanted to publish local anthologies. I put out *Lesbian Words: A Santa Cruz Anthology*. Then I published a sequel, *Lesbian Words II: Photographs and Writing*. It was a little fancier, perfect bound, had more colors on the cover. I edited that with Terese Armstrong, and Sue McCabe.

### **Starting HerBooks Lesbian Feminist Press**

After I did *To Live with the Weeds* in my printing class, I had three books. People were asking, well are you doing a press? Just what are you doing? I thought well, maybe I should try to distribute these outside of Santa Cruz. These are really nice little books. I had gotten a few orders for them from out of the area already. So I designed a little flyer. But I didn't want to put my name on it. I didn't want to have checks made out to me. It doesn't look very professional. So I made up a press name. Well, it was a totally backwards way of getting into this. I went to the bank. They said, oh you can't just open a checking account under any name you make up. You have to have a fictitious business statement. I said okay, fine. A fictitious business statement. What's that? Well you go to

the county. I went to the county and they told me to fill this form out. Then they ran the notice in the paper three times. They have this little rag you can run it in that no one ever looks at. Then I had to pay \$100 for the business license, which isn't really that much money, not enough that it should stop somebody from doing this, \$100 a year.

So that's how I ended up becoming a press and getting this business license. I had just wanted to print a flyer and cash a few checks.

There's this fantastic trade journal for feminist bookstores, *Feminist Bookstore News*, published by Carol Seajay in San Francisco. They carry all the news about new books, as well as articles related to feminist publishing, to what is called the women in print movement. They've been around quite a long time. They have a mailing list which they sell which includes all the feminist bookstores in the country. They charge twenty dollars for movement presses and forty dollars if you're not a feminist press. I bought that and I sent out a little flyer with my first three or four books to the list of these bookstores. Lo and behold, they started ordering them! It was so exciting. I joked with my friends that this was a great plot to get more mail. It can be very depressing too, when I go to the post office and there's nothing in my box. I have bills to pay and I say, God, doesn't anybody care? Today there was nothing in my box at all and yesterday there were twenty letters. You never know what is going to be in there.

*Remember the Fire* was pretty much of a turning point for the press because I knew that I wanted to distribute it beyond Santa Cruz. It was a pretty inexpensive project. I think the first run was only about four hundred dollars. My mother had received Holocaust restitution money through her parents. When I started college my mother said, "this is some money that your grandmother left you." I found out later that it was reparations money. I wondered if I would have done something different with my education had I known. I don't know if I would have. The last five hundred of that money remained when I got out of school, and that's what I used to publish the first book.

**Vickers:** When I read about that it gave me goosebumps. It was quite precious.

**Reti:** It felt like justice. This was something that should be done with the money.

I take flak from people because I won't compromise just for economics. I won't publish a trashy romance novel just because I could make a lot of money. Trashy lesbian novels, well any trashy novels sell well.

### **Anti-Sadomasochism Politics**

It became clear to me when I wrote *Remember the Fire* that I had strong anti-SM [sado-masochist] politics. That's not particularly popular these days. The prevailing sentiment is to be at least tolerant—let's publish some of this. We may not agree with it but . . . But I announced in my catalog that I would not publish anything pro-SM. I consider it really racist and sexist imagery. I just can't publish something absolutely contrary to what I believe in. I feel sick inside. I believe in taking a strong political and ethical stance.

**Vickers:** You've taken this stance publicly. What has the result been?

**Reti:** I've gotten a lot of positive feedback. For instance, the women's bookstore in Albuquerque, New Mexico wrote me a letter saying they were glad to be selling *Remember the Fire* and wouldn't sell any SM in their store. There are a couple of other bookstores that have said that too. I haven't had anybody really challenge me. Some writers have sent me their poetry and it's been real SM. I write back, I'm sorry, I don't publish this kind of material. I think I make it real clear, don't send your stuff to HerBooks if this is what you write.

I'm not just trying to run a lesbian press. I'm running a feminist press that's also lesbian. Feminism means opposing those kinds of links to dominance, and sexualizing them. Sadomasochism is the absolute antithesis of feminism.

I do worry about attacks from the right-wing. For instance, *The Lesbian in Front of the Classroom* is the only anthology in existence that is written by and about lesbian teachers. The right-wing conservatives target lesbian teachers. They don't want homosexuality in the schools. I think if any book I've done has made it onto their little lists, it's that one. I

worry about it, but I can only worry about it so much. I do try to do things to protect myself, like not have my home address floating around in association with the press. I keep a low profile.

**Vickers:** Have you thought of expanding at any point and then wondered if it would be good for just that reason?

**Reti:** I've thought of expanding, but what's stopped me hasn't been fear of being more visible. I'm pretty visible as it is. Most of the feminist presses distribute the same way I do, through their catalogs and two different book distributors. The one on the East coast called Inland Book Company and the one on the West coast is called Bookpeople. Both specialize in small press titles and distribute many feminist titles. They publish a catalog. Bookstores can order direct, which is a lot easier for them than having to get 14,000 of these little brochures and then paying 14,000 little invoices . . .

### **The Economics of Small Press Publishing**

What's kept me from expanding is economics. I work half-time at the University of California, Santa Cruz. I used to work full-time and it was crazy. I was publishing the schedule of classes for the University. I'd do that all day, come home, eat a sandwich and try to publish books. It was nuts. So I went down to half-time, and I can get by on that, but I live pretty much . . . I get by, that's about it. I'm lucky that I have a half-time job doing something interesting, and I have health insurance. I like that security. I don't know that HerBooks could ever support me. At this point I take \$100 a month from the press. I've only started doing that in the last few months, after seven years of volunteer work. I'm glad. I'm really trying to make that a goal for this year because I spend, probably twenty hours on HerBooks, sometimes more, sometimes a little less, depending on what's going on.

If I had the capital to do a lot of books that would sell, maybe I could grow slightly bigger. But there's only so much one person can do. I do get help from people on most of the projects. I've edited most of the anthologies with someone else. We've worked



together on deciding what pieces are going to be in, editing, copyediting, proofreading, helping plan the reading, publicity.

I've published two books under a co-publishing agreement. I teamed up with this woman who had half the money to publish her book of poetry. I didn't have all the money to publish it. But between us we were able to swing it. We co-invested. That was Lesléa Newman, with her book *Love Me Like You Mean It*. We did the same thing with the latest book, *Bubbe Meisehs* by *Shayneh Maidelehs*, which is an anthology that she edited. We are making money on *Love Me Like You Mean It* at this point. We've gotten all our investment back. It's taken us two years. Now we have three hundred dollars and we still have some more books to sell, so we'll do okay on that one.

It's hard for Lesléa because, unlike me, she doesn't even have a part-time job. She's chosen to completely support herself with writing. She won the Massachusetts Artists Fellowship for 1989. She got \$10,000. She writes poetry and teaches workshops. She's very prolific. At this point I think she's published six books. I've only done two of them. The rest were published by larger feminist publishers.

I think one of your questions was about publishing people with names that are well known. Name recognition definitely helps sell books. Lesléa Newman is becoming well known, and that helps. She's made that happen because she's the kind of writer who will think of everybody in the world who could possibly review her book, who will think of every Jewish feminist publication and send me a list of them and suggest, send flyers to all these. She's a self-promoter. I really like to work with people like that, who take an active part. It's empowering for them too, because they gain skills. Lesléa has gone on to self-publish a children's book, *Heather Has Two Mommies*, pretty much on her own.<sup>1</sup> She worked with another woman who had a typesetting business, but she was the one with the expertise, expertise she had gained working with HerBooks.

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1. *Heather Has Two Mommies* was later published by Alyson Publications and became one of the first, and most controversial children's books written for lesbian or gay families.

My philosophy is I can't possibly publish every feminist book. I put out one book a year, sometimes two. Sometimes it will be one at the very beginning of the year and one at the end. Obviously that's not very many. Some of the large feminist presses might do . . . I think Naiad does twenty or thirty books a year. They are the largest. But even that's nothing compared to a mainstream publisher.

There are six or seven so-called large feminist publishers—Seal Press, Spinsters/Aunt Lute, Naiad, The Feminist Press, Firebrand Books . . . It really doesn't add up to very many. There're are a number of us who publish one book a year. There are a lot of women who self-publish. It's important for people to know that they are not looking at this huge market of feminist publishers out there raking in the bucks. It's a very small little world. Everybody knows everybody else. Once a year, before the American Booksellers Association Conference, they all meet. The American Booksellers Association is the big book industry trade show. I've gotten invited to that meeting but I've never been able to make it. There are around twenty presses invited to that meeting. They are inviting presses who are real small, like HerBooks.

I'd really encourage women to learn the skills of publishing and to do it themselves. The distribution is relatively easy. Name recognition matters, but what matters even more, I think, is the topic. Nobody in *The Lesbian in Front of the Classroom* was well known. They were all almost completely unpublished writers. I think our first run was 1500 copies. We sold that out in six months and then we reprinted 2000 copies and I'm almost sold out. We've made quite a bit of money. There have been groups of lesbian teachers who have started meeting because of that book, support groups. I've had friends who've gone to conferences. There will be a group of lesbian teachers and someone will bring the book and ask, "Have you heard of this?" It's so exciting! To get that kind of feedback is really wonderful.

**Vickers:** That's why you do it.

**Reti:** That's right. That's bottom line why I'm doing it. It's not for the money! It's not for the mailbox (laughter), really. It's for the mailbox when you get the letter that's saying,

this is a great book. It helped me deal with being at work and not being able to say who I am. But that's a topic that's very important. I think that's what people need to think about is—is the book they are doing something people want to read, more so than are they a name?

**Vickers:** When I brought up the subject of money, I was being gently sarcastic. I appreciate that in publishing, until you are talking about mainstream publishers, you are not talking about much money.

**Reti:** No, you're not. It's not a business to be in if you want to make much money. You can make a little money but not compared to what you can make at something else.

**Vickers:** Well there're not a lot of people who are in the enviable position of making any money doing something that they love.

**Reti:** That's right. It says something about this country. When I was at the International Feminist Bookfair in Montreal in 1988 I talked with a Canadian women publisher, who asked, "Well don't you have grants?" The Canadian government will give even a feminist publisher (now this was a few years ago) a grant to work on their press. I see those grants listed in the directories at the library, but they are all in Canada. Or England. Onlywomen Press, a very radical feminist press in England, has gotten subsidies from the government. But I think they may have been cut off recently because of the laws against promoting lesbians and anything "against the family."

**Vickers:** If you were going to be giving someone a talk about how a woman can empower herself through language, do you have an idea of what you would say?

**Reti:** Well you have to decide whether you are doing this as a public act. Do you want to publish this, or is this something that you want to write in your journal because it empowers you, and you feel better, understand your life? Or is this something you want to write for your friends? There is nothing wrong with writing things that aren't for publication.

**Vickers:** But you're in the business of publication, so the woman who would be asking would already have made that decision.

**Reti:** Okay. Well, it depends on what they are publishing. For instance, poetry is extremely difficult to sell. I distribute a couple of women's poetry books. They've published their poetry with their own money, but they have not wanted to do the work of distribution. So I distribute it for them by putting it in my brochure and sending out review copies. One woman, Barbara Ruth, put out over \$2000 to print her book, *Past, Present and Future Passions*. I've done my best. I've put it in every brochure, sent out review copies, taken it to women's conferences. She wants women-only distribution, which is something that a few women want. They only want women to buy it. They don't want men to see it. Most distributors won't work in that way. Inland and Bookpeople won't. I said that was okay. It's very hard to keep complete control of it.

**Vickers:** Why did she want women-only distribution?

**Reti:** Well I can't speak for her. We had a brief conversation and I agreed to do it. I believe that feminism is for women. Because it's a movement of women, it is separatist in that sense. It's culturally focused on women. Just like black movements focus on black people and Jewish movements focus on Jewish people. I think if men want to get something out of it that's fine, but it should be up to women to decide when that access is going to be allowed, when it's appropriate. Because this book has a lot of lesbian material she didn't feel it was relevant to men. You don't want some man reading it and getting off on it in a weird way. You don't know what they're going to think. But I think primarily she felt that this book was written for women, that was her audience. It is a difficult thing to make possible. One of the library distributors wanted a copy and I had to write them and say this is women-only. They wrote back, "What are you talking about?" (laughter) They'd never heard of such a thing. I had to explain.

There was a distribution company called Diaspora Distribution, which I always thought was a great name. It was run by Elana Dykewoman and Dolphin Waletsky. Jewish lesbian feminists. They were doing only women-only distribution, but they gave up

because they couldn't make it economically. There weren't enough people ordering from them. Bookstores wouldn't order from them because they didn't want to promise that they wouldn't sell it to a man who walked in.

It's always a question of markets, of how wide an audience a book has. It comes back to the issue of compromise. For instance, *Bubbe Meishehs* is not a lesbian book. It has lesbian material in it, but most of it's straight, you can't really tell either way. It has a tremendously wide audience compared with some of the other books I've published. I'm sure that's part of the reason it's selling well. I started this press primarily for lesbians. I want to publish books for women too, but I see that there are a lot of publishers doing that, and not so many that are willing to say—I'm a lesbian press. This is what I am doing. Over the years, there has been this tension. A number of people have said to me, if you only did this book for all women then it would sell better. How do you think you're going to make something like this sell if you are only going to publish lesbians? Or, we could give you a grant . . . It's a lot easier to get grants if you are talking about women than if you are talking about lesbians.

That came up for me with my fourth book, *The World Between Women*. It was a book of creative writing. It was the first book I edited that was not completely local. I received a grant from this corporate foundation through somebody I had connections with. If I had been publishing a lesbian book they never would have given us the money. I just said it was a book of creative writing by women. They were fine with that. I had to send them the book at the end. I ended up publishing this collection that I like, but it's much more assimilated than I would have wanted to make it.

**Vickers:** You're feminist, but you are trying to get women who otherwise wouldn't be published into print, and lesbian women have the narrowest market.

**Reti:** Yes. I want to be realistic. I could tell everybody to go out and self-publish. You can get your work out. Go for it! But the reality is, here's somebody who put out over \$2000 of her money. She's disabled. She can't work. She's on SSI. I think we've sold maybe one hundred copies, so maybe she's gotten back five hundred dollars. And it's

been about two years since she published. That's a reality. Basically you have to be willing to take the chance that you'll never see the money again, or you'll only see some of it.

If you're publishing nonfiction it's easier. I had a woman approach me a few months ago who is doing a book on midwives. She's interviewing midwives all over the country. When you're providing information like that, people are willing to put out money, especially if the book is about something that there isn't much about, like with the lesbian teacher book, or even with this Jewish grandmothers book, *Bubbe Meisehs*. This is an amazing case because it is poetry. Lesléa Newman got turned down by almost every feminist press, small press, Jewish press. They all said no way, it's poetry. We're not going to publish this. It won't sell. And here we are. We've almost sold out and we've made money already. It's only been two months, which is amazing. But it's because, well first of all a lot of Jewish people like to buy books. But also because it's on a subject that there's hardly anything about, and there are fifty contributors in it. Anthologies are easier, because each person in the book lives in a different place. They tell their friends, and those friends buy some for their friends. So you are going to do okay. That's how I did okay with the first two *Lesbian Words* books, because people in the books really supported them. It was a collective effort. It was almost like this little family. All the people who are in the book met at the readings and got to know each other. Well in this case there are fifty people across the country so they are not going to get to know each other.

**Vickers:** Is this a new way, or this is a traditional way of publishing?

**Reti:** Well, anthologies have been done for a long time, creative prose kinds of anthologies. But it's traditionally a very feminist way of doing things. If you think of books like *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* or *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*, or *With the Power of Each Breath: A Disabled Woman's Anthology*—there's a tradition of publishing feminist anthologies. They have become the basis for discussion and growth of this movement. I think partly that's for economic reasons, but it's also a certain kind of dialogue. It's not journalism but it's one step

beyond that. For instance, I remember, after *This Bridge Called My Back* came out suddenly everybody was talking about racism in the feminist movement. Of course racism had been around a long time, but suddenly there were all these anthologies coming out . . . There can be a more cynical side to this, which is that you can have a topic every year. This is disabled women's year so we'll do a book on that. But the good side of that is that a lot of books have gotten published that provide consciousness-raising for women who read them.

**Vickers:** When you publish an anthology, do you have a certain group of people in mind, or do they come to you? Is the anthology put together before you publish it?

**Reti:** It's happened both ways. With *Bubbe Meisehs*, Lesléa had already edited the book and she said I have this book and I need a publisher. That's the only time that's happened. Most of the time I've been the editor as well as the publisher. Right now I'm editing a book that's called *Cats (and their Dykes)*.

**Vickers:** That's wonderful! (laughter)

**Reti:** And ever since I've started this book my cats, Wicca and Wizard have been impossible, because they know they're going to be famous. They are being studied for this book.

**Vickers:** Well let's say we have this hypothetical woman who wants to publish. She's a student at UC Santa Cruz. She's publishing in the *Lavender Reader*, an article or two in *City on the Hill Press*, maybe something in *Matrix Women's Newsmagazine*. Is an anthology a good next step?

**Reti:** That's a great way to get better known, because it gets your work out beyond the local market. When you write a letter to a publisher, (and by the way, if you're going to send in some writing, you really shouldn't put your whole poetry manuscript or your whole novel in an envelope and send it) you want to write a letter to the publisher convincing them that this is work that would be appropriate for their press. You want to

come off as somebody who is going to hold up your share of the publishing promotion, convince them that you're not going to be this dead weight, that you have marketing ideas for this book, that you've done a little bit of research about how this book is unique. You are basically selling yourself, when it comes down to it, but it doesn't have to be looked at in such commercial terms. You want to come off sounding professional. One way to do that is to say I've been published in these anthologies, and that indicates to the publisher that you've gotten your work out and that you are a little bit more well known, which goes back to that question of names, but also that you've gotten your work into print, that you've taken responsibility to do that is impressive.

**Vickers:** So we have the woman. She wants to become nationally known. She has published in all of the campus stuff. Now she gets together a group of women who have been exchanging their pieces for a year or so, and they all have worked on their pieces. They decide they are a group and they want to publish. They come to you. I'm interested in hearing what the whole process is to get their anthology published, and then how would they turn around and be able to use that to promote themselves to whatever the next step publisher is besides local. They want to have some publisher that isn't Random House, but is in between.

**Reti:** Okay. I misunderstood your question a little, because I thought you were talking about how do you get your work into an anthology that's already being published. If you read the feminist periodicals, this is an intermediate step, there are calls for contributions, which is what I do with mine, in *off our backs* . . . any of the feminist journals, you look in the back and it will say "call for contributions: a book on women who survived sexual abuse, send your work here, this is what we are looking for, here's the deadline." I have friends in Santa Cruz who do this all the time, who send their work to everything that's relevant, to any book that sounds like they might be able to get their stuff in. My mother writes her own poetry and teaches women's writing workshops. And she started sending her work out. She has this incredible talent for figuring out where they are going to want her work and just sending it. She looks through all the small press . . . she gets literary journals and there will be a little ad: "poetry journal



looking for poems on springtime, or on women going through menopause.” She’s gotten quite a bit published on that. It’s this little business. She has her stuff in the computer and she figures out where it should go and does it.

So you were asking about if they want to put together their own anthology, how they would do that?

**Vickers:** Yes.

**Reti:** Well, there would be different ways of doing that. One way would be to do something like what Lesléa did, to put together the book, put out a call, do a press release establishing the topic, establish a deadline, then go through all the material. I have a friend who is editing a book on fat women right now. She is going through this process. Then after you get all the stuff you have a manuscript. Then you write to all the publishers and say I have this manuscript, this is what it is about, this is the market, etc. Just like you would with any other kind of book.

If they want to publish it themselves, for about 130-page book it is around \$2000, a little bit more if there are a lot of photos. Certainly more if you are not going to do it on the computer. That’s with a Macintosh, typesetting it yourself. You are not paying yourself for your labor. This is just your printing expenses, your expenses for printing it out at Kinko’s on the laserprinter, and maybe a little bit of publicity expenses, things like that. But if you can get that amount of money together, say you each put in \$250, you know you are going to get it back because it’s a good topic. You would start out by getting your manuscript fine-tuned. You have to have a contract with each person who is in the book that specifies what they are going to get. Are they going to get a copy of the book, two copies? The contract says that you have the right to publish their work in this book. I don’t ever take complete copyright. Some publishers say they own the copyright to your book forever and ever and you don’t own it anymore. You’ve given it away. That’s how they make money. Then they own your copyright and they can sell your work to someone else. But I don’t believe in doing that because I don’t think it’s ethical, to own

someone's work. But you do want it in writing that this person gave you their work. And you want to know exactly how they want their name spelled.

So you get that part done. Somebody hopefully has access to a computer, a Macintosh is good because they are really best for publishing. You typeset the manuscript and you have to run it out a couple of times, because you want to proofread it carefully. And you have to decide things like how big is the book, how wide are your margins. What kind of typeface you want. That's a process if you are working with ten women . . . (laughter) Especially deciding about the cover, what's going to be on the cover. Or little things like do you all agree about something like SM? Or you have somebody who really wants to put that in and you get in a huge fight. There're all these things to consider. It can become really quite a process. You feel like you are fighting with everybody sometimes. It can become disillusioning because it can just be over some little thing and it turns into a big war. You have to feel you can work with these people. I would not recommend working with ten women. I think three is about the maximum that works. But if that's what you have and it's ten women who really get along that could be great because it would be less work.

You decide how many copies you want to do. It depends on the book, but 1500 is a good number. It's not so little that you're going to run out right away, but it's not so many that you're going to be broke. You don't want to print more than you can sell in a year or two. You can reprint, although reprinting costs more money per book. You should know this about printing: you are paying for the prep time, people making the plates, and cutting up the paper, but once the press is on it doesn't cost that much more to print more copies. So 2000 copies might cost you only a little bit more than 1500. It's a gambling game, because if you put out another two hundred dollars and you get another five hundred copies you might make a lot of money with those and it could help you print more books later. But on the other hand, do you have that two hundred dollars, and what if they don't sell?

I made a big mistake a couple of years ago with a book of short stories, *Lizards/Los Padres*, that I thought would do really well. I printed two thousand copies and I think I've sold

three hundred. I have all those books over there, almost that whole wall of books. It looks like I am always moving in or moving out. Almost all of those boxes are that book. It's really discouraging to the woman who wrote it. She's a local author. She feels like, oh my book must not be good. But it's very good. I can't figure out what the problem is with this one. It's the first fiction book I've ever published. I've heard that short stories by unknown authors don't sell well. But it's gotten good reviews.

It's really important to me that the books look good. I think women deserve beautiful books.

**Vickers:** Where do I buy this book?

**Reti:** You can buy it here, but Bookshop Santa Cruz has it too.

**Vickers:** Okay. Now the woman has published and distributed the book and she wants to go a little bit bigger time. She wants, one step at a time, to become an Adrienne Rich. She's sold out one printing of the book and the reprint is doing okay. She wants to use this now. How does this help her become a professional writer with aspirations of wider markets?

**Reti:** She can continue to send her work out. It's like a resumé. It gives you more credits. It could help her get published by a larger house. There're all kinds of questions about whether you want to do that. Lesléa Newman is going through this whole dilemma. I told you she got \$10,000 for the Massachusetts Artists Fellowship. She's in this place, like this hypothetical woman you are talking about. Maybe a little beyond that, because she's done a number of books, not just one. She's done six books that have done well. She's not famous but she's more well known. She's at the point where mainstream publishers who are interested in her novel . . . she's just finished a novel about this Jewish grandmother and her daughter. I haven't seen it but it sounds really wonderful. But she's going through this whole dilemma. Should she sell her book to a mainstream? There was a lesbian author, Dorothy Allison, who a few months ago who got a thirty thousand dollar advance from Dutton. She wrote a book called *Trash* about growing up

poor in the south. It was published by a lesbian feminist press called Firebrand Books, a bigger press than Herbooks, but they're not a big press. They are a one-woman press. Nancy Bereano runs it.

**Vickers:** This brings up a different question. Let's assume that somebody catches on to this book in the literature department at the University of Chicago. All of a sudden this takes off. You are the publisher. How is this going to change your life?

**Reti:** Well, that would give me the capital to publish more books.

**Vickers:** So what would you do if you got an order for 50,000?

**Reti:** (laughter) Well this is an interesting question, because this is exactly what happened to The Feminist Press. There was a point a couple of years ago when they decided they wanted their books to get out there, they wanted more sales. So they signed up with this distribution company that is a very mainstream. They did great. They sold tons of books. Suddenly their orders went ka-boom . . . But then they started freaking out because they didn't have the capital to print that many books. If you get an order for fifty thousand books it's going to cost you a lot of money. And the problem with the publishing business is there is a huge lag time. Most of the time I don't see money from the books that sell from my distributors . . . not most of the time, all the time, for at least three months, close to four. So even if I got an order for fifty thousand books tomorrow, from them, I wouldn't see the money for a long time and I'd have to put that money out. That's just the first batch. So that's a problem.

It can become a real curse to grow big too fast. That's a problem with small businesses in general. It's a reason a lot of small businesses fail, they grow too fast. I've really tried to stay at a certain level because I know that's what I can sustain, rather than having my eyes get really big, and going wow, I could do sixteen thousand of these. But if, on a smaller scale, let's say someone like Bettina Aptheker wanted to use *Remember the Fire* in her Introduction to Feminism course, which has five hundred students, and they all bought a copy, that would really help the press. That would be do-able. I could find the

money to print that many and get it back. It's just if it got too big then you have problems that come with that.

### **The Joys of Publishing**

**Vickers:** We don't have a lot of time left. Can I ask you some philosophical questions. How do you get your own sense of empowerment and what do you get from your clients?

**Reti:** Well I get the joy of working with other women creating something. I get the joy of teaching women skills they can use throughout the rest of their lives. I get the joy of doing something that's really concrete. Most of the time social change work is intangible. But when you are creating a book, it's there. You can hand it to someone and say, this is lesbian culture, Jewish culture. Or you meet a lesbian teacher. You can hand her this book and say, this might help you. That's really great.

And I love the process of working with other people in community. You can spend a lot of time with women catching up on each other's lives and talking, and that's great, but it's also great to work together. We don't get the chance very often to work with the women whom we really care about, creating something. Of course there are those moments when you are fighting about the color of the cover and all that kind of stuff, but there are also those moments and you say wow, what did you think? Here's Lesléa, who lives 3000 miles away, in Massachusetts, and we can get excited about what we've created together. And women locally. Before I started doing this I didn't know very many people in Santa Cruz. Now I can always talk to women about HerBooks, about what we're doing. Especially about anthologies because it's so inviting. I can say hey, write something about cats for this book. You get to know all these people. There's always something to talk about.

**Vickers:** What did you feel the first time you walked into a bookstore and walked by the counter and all of a sudden there was one of your books?

**Reti:** It was really exciting, wonderful, a little scary. I felt like I was spying. I wanted to stand there and ask the customer what they thought of my book.

**Vickers:** Where was it?

**Reti:** I guess it was at Bookshop Santa Cruz, because I brought down that very first anthology, and they bought twenty of them. Then I'd go in there and see how many had sold, check it out. (laughter) It's very exciting, too, when people travel and they say, oh I saw your books in a bookstore in Arizona. I saw it in New York City in a window in this gay bookstore. I just go wow! (laughter) It's just amazing how you can be sitting here and your books have these little legs that walk all over the world. You lose control in a certain kind of way. You have to be willing to let them go. It's like kids. You just never know who's going to read it, and what's going to happen out of that. You get really wild letters. Especially for *Remember the Fire*. I got very good letters from that, very passionate, personal letters.

I am a writer too, and I've tried to continue writing in the middle of all this. Sometimes I feel like I've paid a price for this, which is that I don't write as much as I would, because it's just too much. But I have gotten the opportunity to put out my own work, and it's helped my craft to edit other people's work.

**Vickers:** What do you hear from your authors? Do they come back and do you hear about their experiences?

**Reti:** Well, for example with *Lizards/Los Padres*, the author, Bettianne Shoney Sien, went to a conference in Wisconsin and people were really excited about her book. She brought copies with her and sold them. So they get the feeling that their work is getting out there. I'm not in the position to get it out there in the way that a big press could, with lots of exposure. Authors also have a sense of how books are made. I don't know if I talked about this, that it's important to me to work on each phase of a book with the author. A lot of publishing companies will not give the author any control over the cover. With HerBooks, if the author says I absolutely detest blue, and I couldn't stand the thought of

the title being such and such—those things I really try to respect. Sometimes it's difficult because if the author has some kind of outrageous idea that's going to make the book really not sell, or make the book confusing, such as if the title is strange, then we have to talk about that. But it's important to me that by the time an author comes out of doing the book they have a sense of how books are made. They've proofread everything and they've helped get it out.

People sometimes think Herbooks is Herb-Books.

**Vickers:** (laughter) So they call you up for exotic recipes or seeds?

**Reti:** It is a seed catalog; it's just a different kind. This work gives me so much more than a job that I could go to full-time, everyday. This gives me something that is creatively mine. That gives me so much more than any job ever could. It's worth a ton to have that kind of joy.

**Vickers:** Do you feel that you are part of a movement that's going to make it so that a person's sexual preference at some point in our lifetimes will become not so political, but simply the way they are as human beings?

**Reti:** I hope so. I am part of a process that started before me. I started this press when I was 22. There are women like Barbara Grier, who started Naiad Press in the very early 1970s. At that point, when you said you were a lesbian press people just said goodbye, you know. Most of her work was distributed through mail order to lesbians who couldn't go to a bookstore. Now you have over three hundred feminist bookstores across the country, with more opening all the time. There's this real boom happening. I was lucky to come into this at a point when there were predecessors who had already made the way for me much easier. I could just order this mailing list from *Feminist Bookstore News*. This movement is something that we've built collectively. We have to watch out that it doesn't get taken away. Now lesbian writers can sell their work to mainstream publishers who are willing to publish our work this year because it's fashionable and they can make money. But what if next year it's not fashionable any more? By then the

feminist presses may have all folded. We have to have control of our own presses, because otherwise it can all be gone tomorrow. If most of the mainstream publishing companies are anti-choice and you publish a book that's pro-choice . . . They are all owned by corporations, gas companies, RCA, Exxon. We have no guarantees that we are going to be able to say what we want.

**Vickers:** This has just been so fertile, so wonderful.

**Reti:** Thanks.

*This second interview was conducted by UCSC Women's Studies Librarian Jacquelyn Marie in April, 2001.*

**Marie:** I'm with Irene Reti at her house in Santa Cruz, California. Let's talk about the last ten years of your work with HerBooks, since your interview with Martha Vickers in 1991 covered the first seven years. However, I noticed that she didn't ask you when and where you were born.

**Reti:** I was born in Los Angeles, California on April 27, 1961.

**Marie:** What was your basic schooling?

**Reti:** I graduated from Immaculate Heart High School in 1978. I graduated in 1982 from UC Santa Cruz [Kresge College], with a B.A. in environmental studies and a concentration in women's studies.

### *Childless by Choice: A Feminist Anthology*

**Marie:** I have a list of HerBooks publications since 1991. Let's talk about the singularity of each of these books, beginning with *Childless by Choice: A Feminist Anthology*. What was your motivation to publish that book?

**Reti:** I had known from a very young age that I didn't want to have children. But I always felt that this was a taboo and I felt defensive about it. I must hate children, or I



must have some deep psychological problem. This was at a historic time in the lesbian community, and also in the general population, when there was a baby boom taking place. Everyone I knew wanted to have children. Someone needed to be asking, what about those of us who don't want to have children? What are the complexities of feelings around that? It's not a simple choice. Some of the women in the book talk about how this can be an agonizing choice, perhaps one they came to after many years of struggling with infertility, or perhaps they knew from very early in their lives that they didn't want to have children.

I also decided to publish *Childless by Choice* because I came to the political realization that women's choice not to have children at all should be part of a feminist agenda for reproductive rights. I wanted to edit a book that located the choice not to have children in women's reproductive freedom and control over our bodies. This was in the early 1990s, when the right wing attacks on *Roe v. Wade* were coming to the forefront. Of course these attacks are still going on.

At the time I published this title, no book existed on this subject. There were a couple of women working on manuscripts which were published later in the 1990s. It's amazing to realize that this slim anthology published in 1992 was the first book of its kind. I received very heartfelt letters from childless by choice women all over the country, thanking me for being able to see themselves in print in a complex and positive light. Also, there are two national organizations for childless by choice people, and they were both very appreciative of the book, and sold it through their newsletters, and over the internet.

**Marie:** I remember the importance of the book was that women actually made a choice. In the past women said, well it [having children] sort of happened to me . . .

**Reti:** That's true. Historically, women of my generation, or women just a little bit older than me, are the first generation in which having children really *is* a choice.

*Unleashing Feminism: Critiquing Lesbian Sadomasochism in the Gay Nineties*

**Marie:** Then in 1993 you published *Unleashing Feminism: Critiquing Lesbian Sadomasochism in the Gay Nineties*, in the middle of all the controversy about sadomasochism in the lesbian community. I wondered how publishing that book affected you personally, as well as your reputation in the lesbian world and the publishing world?

**Reti:** My opposition to and critique of sadomasochism and pornography, particularly in the lesbian community began in the mid-1980s, when I published *Remember the Fire: Lesbian Sadomasochism in a Post-Nazi Holocaust World*. That essay looked at the issue specifically from the point of a view of a daughter of Holocaust survivors, which is my own background. That essay pamphlet had sold out by the early 1990s. So part of my impetus for creating *Unleashing Feminism* was wanting to reprint that essay. There were a number of other feminist thinkers I knew had been writing about sadomasochism whom I wanted to include. I was not trying to edit the be-all and end-all anthology. I didn't put out a national call for this book. I knew four or five women besides myself who had something to say about it.

It's interesting, because this is one of those experiences where looking back retrospectively I would say very different things about this issue from what I would have said if you had interviewed me at the time the book was published eight years ago. Now I would say I'm tired of the issue. I've centered my life around it so much, did so much of my feminist work around it. But I do feel that it has been a very important contribution of Herbooks, to speak out publicly from a radical feminist point of view on this issue. What does it mean to eroticize domination and submission? How is this feminist? How can it be part of an anti-racist agenda to eroticize slavery? But what I still feel stuck on is, how do we have useful conversations within the community about this, without it becoming trashing, or just so polarized that we go around and around. While the anthology was well-received and widely reviewed in the feminist press, it's always hard to know how much a book changes things. I don't think it surmounted that polarization. We are still going around on that issue.

**Marie:** It was a very pivotal part of your life. How did publishing the book affect you at that time, and now?

**Reti:** I felt strongly that I had no choice but to speak out on this issue. In terms of how it affected my life, I think it became increasingly difficult for me to talk to women who were pro-pornography or pro-sadomasochism, or pro-prostitution, for that matter. I got cemented into a corner. I ended up with this reputation as this rabid person. (laughter) I've met people since then who read the book at that time, or heard about the book, like one of my running partners whom I met just last year said, "Oh my God! I thought you were going to be this ferocious, opinionated, cranky person! God, you are so nice." (laughter)

I think it's always been easier for me to be opinionated and feisty in print. I'm rather mild-mannered in person. I was asked to do things like debate publicly about this issue and I always declined. De Clarke and Kathy Miriam, who are two of the writers in the book, both felt much more comfortable speaking publicly, and did that very effectively. Another contributor, Jamie Lee Evans, has also been a powerful speaker and activist against pornography.

It was a mistake that I typeset the book in such a small point size. I was struggling financially, and I did it in Helvetica Narrow 10 pt. It's already a difficult book to absorb intellectually. It's not light, fun, bedtime reading. On top of that, it looks so formidable. That prevented the book from reaching the audience that it could.

Then, unfortunately, that was the title that got caught in the distribution struggles of the early 1990s. Inland Book Company ordered a large quantity of that book when it first came out. It started selling wildly, four or five hundred copies each month in the first few months. I got all excited. I thought, I have to reprint this book. It's going to go like crazy. I had thought it had a huge market in women's studies, and for a general feminist audience. So I printed another two thousand copies. But then, all of a sudden, the independent bookstores started returning books like mad because they were having a hard time financially. This is when the first super stores were beginning to put

independents out of business. Inland began getting loads of returns. They went belly-up, bankrupt. They returned all of my stock and stopped paying me. I ended up with four thousand copies of this title, which I've been carting around for the past ten years. Finally, Lierre Keith, who publishes a radical feminist journal called *Rain and Thunder*, graciously accepted a large donation of these books. She is distributing them through her journal, and donating them to women in prison and to libraries. I'm very happy about that.

I think that any book I would have published at that time would have gotten caught in that process. It just happened that I invested way too much money in it because I thought I had to reprint it and I didn't. This happened to many feminist presses and other independent presses in those years.

**Marie:** As a women's studies librarian, I have taken *Unleashing Feminism* to individual women, as well as feminist publishers at international conferences. There were German feminists who were very interested in this issue and took it to their libraries. I also wrote a review for an online New Zealand journal.

### *The Second Coming of Joan of Arc and Other Plays by Carolyn Gage*

Well, let's go on to *The Second Coming of Joan of Arc and Other Plays by Carolyn Gage*, published in 1994. Please talk about the significance of that book.

**Reti:** Carolyn Gage is an extremely talented radical feminist playwright. The title play is the most well-known play in the collection. When she approached me with the collection, I had to give it some serious thought. The advice I got from publishing colleagues was, don't publish a book of plays. You'll never sell it. Nobody reads plays. The manuscript had gotten rejected by nearly every feminist press. I was way down the list because I was very small and could not pay her an advance, (even though I do pay her royalties), and my distribution was not that good. But she liked the radical feminist politics of the press.

I decided to take a risk on her book because I could tell that Carolyn was the kind of person who would go out and promote her book. This is the key. You can have a fantastic book but if an author doesn't do anything to promote it, the book won't sell. Carolyn tours nationally giving lectures at universities and performing at theatrical venues. She has her own website. And in fact, the book was a finalist for the Lambda Book Award in 1994. It has sold extremely well and we are now going into our second printing. At this point I am making a small amount of money on it. To do more than break even in this business is to do very well, particularly considering the setbacks in the independent book publishing world in the 1990s.

The title play, "The Second Coming of Joan of Arc" has been translated into Portuguese. It has been produced by a Brazilian director and has grossed a lot of money in Brazil. It's also being considered for an off-Broadway production. It's a vindication to have done so well with a collection of plays.

**Marie:** Have other playwrights come to you and asked you to publish their collections?

**Reti:** That's an interesting question. No one has come to me. There may be a variety of reasons for that. Authors know that HerBooks is very small, and that I have been doing less and less publishing in the last six years. I don't get approached by that many authors, generally.

**Marie:** Well, you are a small publisher, but you have been managing to do a book a year.

**Reti:** Yes, but there is a gap. Between 1995 and 2001 I didn't publish anything. Martha Vickers did her interview with me at the very height of my optimism as a feminist publisher. There were a few years after that where I was publishing a book a year. Everything was going very well. But then the distribution problems changed everything.

### **Working in Community**

**Marie:** We can talk about that more later. I'd like to talk about the most recent three books. You edited two books with Valerie Jean Chase, who was your partner at the time:

*A Transported Life: Memories of Kindertransport, the Oral History of Thea Feliks Eden*, about the Kindertransport program during World War II, and *Garden Variety Dykes: Lesbian Traditions in Gardening*. So my first question would be, how did that working partnership go?

**Reti:** It was fantastic. I had my doubts about how it would work to edit a book with my partner. But I believe in working with friends and lovers. I think that feminist friendship can be a strong basis for doing projects, as long as you have a commitment to integrity and communication. Valerie brought some definite strengths to the projects. Certainly, she was the fanatical gardener, in the case of *Garden Variety Dykes*. I wouldn't have chosen to publish a book on that subject. She was the one who had the knowledge of the field, and I had the experience as a lesbian publisher who knew how to put together a book. It was a wonderful way for us to grow together.

**Marie:** So you learned from each other?

**Reti:** Yes. I would say Valerie had stronger skills in promotion.

**Marie:** You have edited books with other people, too.

**Reti:** I have. Some of my best friends have been Herbooks co-editors. Bettianne Shoney Sien, with whom I edited *Women Runners: Stories of Transformation*, forthcoming from Breakaway Books in just a couple weeks, co-edited *Cats (and their Dykes)* with me in 1991. I think ideally, if we lived in a different kind of world, there would be many more opportunities for working with people who are part of our beloved community—politically, socially, ethically. I consider myself very fortunate to have had so many chances to work in this way.

**Marie:** Well obviously you feel strongly about it, and it must be easy to work with you, as well.

**Reti:** Well, it's not that I have never had any conflict with anybody. I do have strong opinions. Certainly the issue of sadomasochism is one that early in my co-editing career

created conflicts. There were editors who wanted to include pieces in the anthologies which I felt had content that I couldn't support in that respect. But not more recently. I think by that time people knew to stay away!

My ideal of these kinds of partnerships dates back historically to pre-industrial times, in which the couple ran a farm, or a bakery in their house, where there was much less separation between public and private. This is really nothing new, and it works very well.

### *A Transported Life: Memories of Kindertransport*

#### *The Oral History of Thea Feliks Eden*

**Marie:** Could you talk about how you and Valerie Chase were inspired to publish *A Transported Life*?

**Reti:** Valerie is from Santa Barbara. She is a musician and she met Ilana Eden because they were both playing chamber music in Santa Barbara. Ilana introduced her to her mother, Thea Eden. Thea had been a surrogate mom for Valerie in her early twenties. It's always nice to have someone who has an outside perspective on your family dynamics. Thea was also just a lot of fun, and a great conversationalist, very intellectual. Valerie became close to her. One of the things they used to talk about was the fact that Thea was a Holocaust refugee. She had been rescued from Nazi Germany by the Kindertransport, program that saved ten thousand Jewish children from Germany and Austria, and brought them to England. This took place between the *Kristallnacht* pogrom, which was November 9, 1938, and the beginning of World War II, in September, 1939.

Valerie and I started dating in 1988, and she introduced me to Thea. The uncanny serendipity was that my mother was also on Kindertransport, but was not able to talk to me about her experiences. Thea's daughter, Ilana, was not able to listen to her mother's story. This is very common among children of Holocaust survivors. You can have a parent who talks all the time because they are in so much emotional pain. By the time the child is fifteen they can't bear to hear about the Holocaust anymore. Or you can have a

parent at the other end of the spectrum, like mine, who doesn't even tell their child they are Jewish. In some sort of weird scheme of things, Thea and I completely fulfilled each other's desires and needs. I needed someone to tell me the story and she needed someone to witness it.

When I met Thea, I had just started working at the Regional History Project at UCSC. I thought, oh, this woman would make an amazing oral history project. She's so articulate. Beyond just wanting to tell me her story, Thea felt that it was very important that the story of what happened to children during the Holocaust be told.

The book was published in 1995, but I did the interviews in 1989 and 1990. There was a gap between the interview and the publication because Thea got extremely ill. She was afflicted with paralysis, which, after many medical tests, the doctors diagnosed as massive post-traumatic stress syndrome. She became gradually more and more paralyzed. Then she got breast cancer. During those years nothing was happening with the project.

It wasn't until after Thea died that we published the oral history as a HerBooks title. Originally, I was just going to transcribe and edit the interview and donate it to Holocaust studies archives. Then we looked at it, and realized this was a very compelling narrative. At that time there was very little written about Kindertransport. Since then, things have changed. There have been at least two major films, *My Knees were Jumping* by Melissa Hacker, and *Into the Arms of Strangers*, which won the Oscar this year for best documentary. There was also a play, *Kindertransport*, which was on Broadway, and toured the country. And a couple of other books have come out.

But back then I found myself once again taking on an issue that was not well known. This has been a pattern for HerBooks, I think because I am very small and able to take risks, and because I tend to be interested in things that haven't been done before.

I've just been approached by a scholastic book club about rights for *A Transported Life*. There is an incredible need for Holocaust studies educational materials aimed at



children. At the point when she was on Kindertransport, Thea was thirteen. Her narrative begins with her being around nine or ten, and goes through her teen years, so it is very appropriate for kids that age. If such horrible things can ever be appropriate.

**Marie:** So you were able to finish your interview with her before she died?

**Reti:** Oh yes, the interview was finished. She sat in her hospital bed, barely able to write, and scribbled these illegible editing marks. She could only make huge letters. Then we talked about it. She was perfectly able to talk for quite a while.

**Marie:** So she was pleased?

**Reti:** Oh very much so. I would go interview her and I would be completely covered in sweat. It was very intense. It was a healing for her. She needed to tell this story so badly. She had never told anybody how much she missed her mother. She had been separated from her mother on her thirteenth birthday, and never saw her again. Her mother was shot in a massacre in Ukraine a few years later.

Both the oral history and the publishing of it were tremendous accomplishments. It's sad to me that she never lived to see the book come out. One never knows exactly how someone would have felt. There were parts of Thea that were very private. I think she might have been somewhat ambivalent about the exposure this book has gotten. But she also had a lot of trust in me, and she knew that I had a similar background. It's not like I am going out and pushing the book in some crass, sensationalistic way.

**Marie:** This book clearly has a lot of meaning for you as a Jewish woman. Can you talk more about that?

**Reti:** Thea was a lot like my mother. She was a feminist. She had long hair. She wore Birkenstocks. She had Ilana when she was 34 and my mother had me when she was 34. Both of us were our parents' first children. Thea had not wanted to have children, and my mother wasn't that crazy about having children. Thea was a very independent,

intellectual thinker. She loved hiking. There were so many things she had in common with my mother.

I am a member of an organization called the Kindertransport Association of America. I'm what's known as a KT2. That phrase makes me laugh because it sounds like you should be playing with blocks or crayons. (laughter) It means you are a second generation descendent of those who were on Kindertransport. You are the *kinder* of the *kinder*. *Kinder* means children in German. Bringing out that book was my way of being able to contribute to this organization, and to the movement to bring their experiences to the historical record, and to the public's attention.

**Marie:** How did this book affect your relationship with your mother? Did she read it? Did she talk to you about it afterwards?

**Reti:** It was really hard. In the introduction I wrote to the book there is one sentence, in which I referred to the fact that my mother shared some of Thea's history. My mother read that and said, "I am not a Holocaust survivor!" I never said she was a survivor. I said she was a refugee. I mean, one could consider a refugee a survivor, but because my mother was never in a camp she wants to make that distinction. She feels like essentially nothing happened to her because she wasn't in a camp. It is true that being a refugee was a different experience and it is useful to make that distinction. Anyway, that was hard for her, to see in print that she had any connection with this history. Her initial reaction was to want to push away any connection with this, to silence me. I remember having to tell her, I have the right to write about this. This is my voice.

My mother can't remember most of her childhood. It's not like she's going to suddenly open up one day and tell me all about what it was like on Kindertransport. The little bit she can remember of her experience in Kindertransport she thinks of as this time when she was in the English countryside and ate lots of sweets and was well taken care of. That's complicated. It's very complicated. (pause) My mother and her sister were unlike many kids on Kindertransport, in that they were sent to live with an old boyfriend of my grandmother's, who was British. Unlike many people who were on Kindertransport,

who were basically orphans, who lived in large group homes, or became servants in people's homes, my mother and her sister were well received by people who knew them, and who had a lot of money. Nevertheless, I think there were things that were very difficult about it. My aunt has told me that my mother wasn't very quick at learning English and their benefactor threatened to send her back to Germany if she didn't learn more quickly. My aunt, who was four years older, close to sixteen years old, was wildly trying to teach her baby sister English so this wouldn't happen. That had to have been traumatic.

On the other hand, my mother was separated from her mother, with whom she had a somewhat difficult relationship. In some ways she saw that as freedom. When she was reunited with her as a teenager it was difficult. Suddenly she had a mother, and her mother was telling her what to do. It's tremendously psychologically complicated.

### *The Keeper of Memory: A Memoir*

**Marie:** This leads us to the new book, *The Keeper of Memory: A Memoir*, a beautiful book with lovely photos. Maybe you could explain these photos on the cover, who these people are.

**Reti:** The top left photo is my great-grandmother, Regina Moskowitz Grunbaum, who was a redhead, with my grandmother Margit, who lived to be 96, and was a huge influence on my life. My father is the little boy in suspenders. This photograph was taken in Budapest, Hungary, where my father was born. I can't believe my father ever looked that way. He looks so not-American. The photo next to it is my grandmother Margit with me when I am about ten. The bottom left is a portrait of me as a very young girl, with the same pensive expression I have as an adult in the photo on the back cover. The picture on the right is my grandmother Erna Bein, my mother's mother, with me. I questioned whether I should really have so many pictures of me on the book, but people said this is really a book about you.

That realization, that this is a book about me, was something that it took me many years to come to. For a long time, I thought that I was writing the history of my family. I didn't

realize what I was really writing was my own story as a member of this family. That's what memoir is. This is not a genealogy, or a family history saga.

**Marie:** The grandfathers were not around.

**Reti:** There are pictures of the grandfathers on the inside of the book. My mother's father, Max Bein, died in March, 1961. I was born in April, 1961, so my mother didn't go to his funeral because my parents were afraid she would lose the baby. From what I've heard, Max was a very sweet, gentle man. He was the owner of Doll and Company toy train factory in Nuremberg. I would have liked to have known him. Apparently he was quite an optimist. He didn't believe that things were going to get bad in Germany. It was my grandmother, Erna, who kept saying this is terrible. We have to get out of here!

**Marie:** When did they leave?

**Reti:** My mother and her sister left on Kindertransport in May, 1939, from Nuremberg, and went to England. Erna and Max had been trying to get papers to immigrate to the United States for a very long time. In fact, Max had a younger sister who lived in Florida. She had moved there in the 1920s. She and her son were trying to get Max and Erna out. It took forever. The bureaucracy was immense. The miraculous thing is that they did actually get legal papers to immigrate to the United States. If you know anything about immigration quotas for German Jews at that time . . . it is a miracle beyond belief. But it was taking so long that the war actually broke out. They had already sold the factory in a Nazi-arranged, forced sale shortly after *Kristallnacht*. Then they had to sell the house, and they were forced to sell it for very little. They had packed all their stuff in a moving van. The moving van was sitting in their driveway. The war broke out in September, 1939. They decided they had to leave right then, even though they didn't have all their papers in order. So they took a train to the border and then walked across to Holland with only what they could carry on their backs. They came to Pittsburgh because someone in the family was in Pittsburgh. Sometime later they immigrated to Boston. Then they sent for my mother and her sister in 1940. One of the few memories my mother does have is crossing the Atlantic in the middle of the war, and seeing dolls and

chairs floating in the ocean from a passenger ship that had just been bombed and sank into the sea.

**Marie:** So that's what happened to that family.

**Reti:** Yes. They had to leave my great-grandmother Marie behind, and she was murdered in Thereisenstadt. My grandfather and grandmother always felt terrible about that. But you couldn't get older people out. You couldn't get papers for them.

**Marie:** What about your father's side?

**Reti:** My grandfather got a job as a civil engineer in Turkey. He left shortly after the Austrian *anschluss* in March of 1938. About a year later my grandmother and my father converted to Catholicism. They could not leave Hungary, cross Europe, and immigrate to Turkey if they had Jewish papers. My grandmother told me this story about taking this three-week crash course in Catholicism, and weeping through the whole thing, because she didn't want to give up being Jewish. But the priest was this very sweet man, and he said, "Don't worry. The Catholic religion is just the continuation of the Jewish religion. It's the same God." He gave her this solace. There were a lot of these kinds of conversions going on at the time. Priests understood that they were saving people's lives. So they left. My father went to French Catholic boarding school in Istanbul, Turkey. He grew up partially in Turkey. It's a long story.

**Marie:** How did your mother and father accept the book? Has it changed your relationship with them?

**Reti:** They've been remarkably accepting. I went through this whole process with them. I was very concerned that they would just completely freak out. I was also very concerned about my right to have my own voice to publish this, my own autonomy. How could I deal with this? Part of me wanted to just publish the book, not show it to them until it was out. Several friends of mine, including Carolyn Gage, who has become a spiritual counselor for me . . . we have quite an unusual connection at this point, which encompasses our publisher/author relationship, but also a growing friendship. She has

a gift for saying things to me that I need to hear at critical points in my life. She said to me, “You need to publish this book as an adult. You don’t need to be the child cowering in the corner saying, I’m going to get in trouble with mommy and daddy if I publish this, so I’m not going to show it them, so there! They can just deal with it later.” Also, she was pointing out to me, and I agree with her, that there is a responsibility in having the power to publish something. In order to do that with integrity, you need to be responsible for your actions. So I decided, with the help of my therapist, who has been a remarkable guide, that I needed to share the manuscript with them shortly before it was published, and preface that sharing with the comment that I was not looking for their stamp of approval—should I publish this or not? I was not looking for editing feedback, but to say to them, “I want to share this with you out of love and respect for you, because you deserve to get to read it before the rest of the world. And I know this may be difficult for you to read. You don’t have to read it. Or you can read the first five pages and throw it across the room.” They needed to be able to have whatever reactions they felt like having. I tried to write about my parents with compassion and understanding. I should say in this tape-recorded interview, because we haven’t said what this book is about, that they didn’t tell me I was Jewish. I found out when I was seventeen. This book is about me grappling with my identity, with what being Jewish means to me, and piecing together the family’s history from these fragments that have been passed down to me through family stories, particularly from my grandmother, Margit, but also from my mother’s sister, and from books, all the places that you go to try to find out about history.

**Marie:** So you would say that this is the main point of this book, your coming to terms with being Jewish?

**Reti:** Yes, it’s a book about my spiritual journey.

Because this book is the chronicle of my life, I needed to talk about my parents’ divorce. There were some things in there about my father that were very painful. I also know that the divorce itself was very difficult for my father. I thought, I really need to tell him that this could be difficult for him. I made sure both my parents had the support of their partners. They were also invited to read it.

My father read it and sent me an e-mail. He said he was very touched. He made a couple of corrections about Hungarian accent marks, and one little fact about my grandmother's life. But he stayed completely out of saying things like, "you should do this is and this and this," trying to control me.

My brother also read it, and he too was very supportive. He has chosen a very different path. His wife is Methodist and he converted to Methodism. He leads a much more conventional life than I do, and really is not interested in the past. Yet, he appreciated what I did.

**Marie:** Is he younger than you?

**Reti:** Yes, two and a half years younger.

**Marie:** You also took a trip to Hungary and Germany when you were writing this book, with your father and with your partner, Lori. I wondered how much that affected the final writing of the book.

**Reti:** I had thought I was going to end up writing about that trip in the book. It seemed a natural thing. But the book was basically complete before I went on the trip. What I realized about this memoir was that I had to draw an ending point somewhere. My life keeps going on, and if I wasn't careful I would never finish the book. I started working on it in 1993. It was the year 2000, when I went on this trip. I had a completed narrative that I was doing the final polishing on. First I thought, well I'd write an afterword—and say, by the way, I went to Europe, and it was really traumatic. No, I don't think it would have worked to end the book on that note. It was just too tacked-on.

That trip is really its own story. What I figured out is that this is the next book. It's probably going to be poetry, because it seems to be coming out in poetry.

**Marie:** Well, we should really get to how you published this book. The mechanics of it.

**Reti:** Well, I had tried to get this book published. When I first started writing it, there was a big market for memoirs, and there were very few books by people who hadn't known they were Jewish until adulthood. But things change quickly, and the mainstream market swings wildly. What happened was that by the time I was finished, or close to finishing the book, there was a glut of memoirs in the mainstream publishing world. I got some very positive responses from agents and from several medium-sized literary presses. The literary presses said they couldn't take a risk on it because the market was glutted with memoirs. The agents said they couldn't sell it because it was too literary. It's not a pot-boiler or a page-turner in the traditional sense. Additionally, there were several other memoirs and an anthology published by this point which were about people who found out they were Jewish as adults. So I gave up on that idea.

### **Distribution**

I was very reluctant to publish the book myself in the way I had done books in the past. I still have a whole back room full of inventory for books that I can't sell many of because at this point HerBooks only has one distributor. By distributor, I mean distribution companies that take on bringing the work of presses to bookstores. Bookstores don't want to do a hundred little small orders a week getting books from all over the place. Some of the most dedicated will do it, but most stores (and libraries) prefer to do a couple of large orders a week. It can drive you nuts if you try to get every book individually like that. The only distributor I have left is Alamo Square Distribution, a gay distributor in San Francisco. They don't sell very many books, because they are also very small.

Inland Book Company was bought out. They were my major East Coast distributor for years and years. As we discussed earlier, they went bankrupt. There was a long period of time in which all of the feminist publishers were trying to collect from them. I did actually get my money. It wasn't very much, but I did eventually get what they owed me, which was very nice. But they were bought by Login Distributors. LPC Distribution, is what they are called now. And LPC decided that HerBooks was too small to be worth their while. So I don't have that distribution anymore. Inland, I should say, had a catalog



called Womensource, which was fabulous. You could just order everything out of that. They gave free advertising to the publisher. You would get a half a page automatically for each title you published. You could buy additional space if you wanted. You'd have a beautiful cover shot of your book, and a description, everything there. Things sold very well. They did a great job.

Bookpeople, which still exists, is in Oakland. They used to be my West Coast distributor, and they were pretty good. They were never as good as Inland, but they were pretty good. They also decided that they needed to consolidate, and not deal with very small presses. Then I tried to get represented by Consortium, which is an excellent large distributor of literary presses. In fact, they are distributing the running anthology that Breakaway Books is bringing out, which I am very excited about. I am finally getting something into Consortium, even though it is not through HerBooks. But, when I talked to Consortium, they said, oh it's very hard for us to take on anyone whose sales are less than \$100,000 a year. I practically got hysterical on the phone, because my sales at that point were about \$1500 a year!

So basically what's been happening for the last five to six years is that all of my titles are sold through Amazon.com, through special orders to many Barnes and Nobles, and Borders. They call me up and want one at a time, which means that I spend a lot of time running to the post office, and making four or five dollars, because my books are cheap. But I'd still much rather have people get them.

I do have a website now, and I hope that will help this new book. Anyway, the point of this whole story is that I don't have the distribution to keep publishing in the classic way.

### **Print-on-Demand Publishing**

I started hearing about these print-on-demand companies that use a xerographic process to produce books. You submit a file digitally, and they are able to print one book at a time. In offset printing, the economies of scale are such that in order to make it worth your while you have to print at least five hundred, and even a couple of thousand of a

title. With this new process, you can print one book or you can print twenty; you can print one and then go back and get ten more. It gives you complete flexibility.

I discovered this company called Lightning Source, which is in Tennessee, and they are owned by Ingram Book Company, which is a major distributor. When you sign up as a Lightning Source publisher, you can sign an agreement that your title will be available through the Ingram database. Therefore when a bookstore is doing their weekly order they can order one of these, and in forty eight hours they print it, and the book is sent off with the regular order. There is not a big distinction between a regular book and a print-on-demand title.

I am very excited about this. Essentially there is a set-up fee, and I designed the book. This is all done digitally now. I typeset it, scanned the photos, and created a PDF file for them to print from. It's a couple hundred bucks to submit the title and have them set it up. Then, depending upon how many pages are in your book, you pay a certain amount per copy. For this book it's somewhere between four and five dollars. I am charging \$12.95 for the book. If I am selling to individuals, I am going to make money. But through Ingram, the discount is fifty five percent, so I am not going to make a whole lot of money on each book. But it's enough so I can get the book out there, and I don't have to have a lot of capital and sitting inventory. I actually have better distribution than I would otherwise. I never would get into Ingram as just a regular publisher, say for a title like *Childless by Choice*. They would just laugh at me.

**Marie:** Does this company actually look at the manuscript and make a decision about whether they are going to do it?

**Reti:** No, they are a printer. Anybody can hire a printer, although some feminist publishers have had trouble with some book printers. They are not a publisher. The book still has the name HerBooks on the cover. This is different than Xlibris or iUniverse.com, which are two companies that are using print-on-demand technology, but they are actually publishing the books for you. Even they don't go through any selection process, unless you fall under certain of their specialized programs.

You've got to be totally responsible. They don't edit the book. I hired people to copyedit and edit this book. I would be doing that anyway, as I did in the old days when I would hire McNaughton and Gunn, which was my offset book printer located in Michigan. What's very amazing, is that you have the complete capacity to change things. When I got back the first proof I looked at it and said, gosh I wish there were bigger margins on the pages. Also, my writing group found a couple of typos. I called up the printer and asked, how much would it cost to redo this? They said, thirty-six dollars. Just send us a new file. They'd only printed one book, which was the proof. I was able to go back and redesign the entire thing. There's almost complete fluidity in the potential for revision. Now, of course it could mean your memoir is *never* done, because you could just continue to add to it for the rest of your life! (laughter) You've got to have some sense of limits.

**Marie:** So if somebody wants this book they can order it from you?

**Reti:** They can order it from me. As an individual, they cannot order it from Lightning Source or Ingram directly. But they can go to their local bookstore and have them order the book, and the bookstore will have it for them within a week, or they can order it through Amazon.com or other online booksellers. I also have ordered a small stock to sell to people, and for readings I will do in Santa Cruz and in the San Francisco Bay Area. I will continue to have a small amount available, but I won't have to go out and pay for two thousand copies.

**Marie:** And if you ran out of books, you could order more and it would be pretty quick turn-around time.

**Reti:** Yes, I have my own account on the Lightning Source website. I log in and there's a place to place new orders. I click on that, indicate how many I want, and they charge my VISA. I just ordered 150 of them and they were charged to my VISA card.

There are the same problems of promotion. You have to get the book reviewed, and you have to advertise. That has always been the challenge for me. How do I find the time for

promotion? I'm not a big promoter type. What I'm planning to do is to hook into the second generation Holocaust survivors organizations, the Kindertransport Association, and Holocaust studies programs, and Jewish renewal groups. There is quite a bit of publicity that I need to do for this book.

There is one drawback to the print-on-demand process that I can see in terms of the book industry. These books are not returnable. So if a bookstore wants to bring me for a reading and they order thirty copies and they don't sell, they are stuck with them. That's not good. Independent bookstores can't afford to get stuck with the books. They don't have that kind of margin.

Another thing, in terms of being critical of this process, is that the technology does not yet seem to be at the point where the photographs on the text pages are coming out well. I included photographs on the text pages of the book, and they are not anywhere near the quality that photographs in an offset-printed book would be. If someone is interested in doing a book in which the photographs are central, certainly anything involving a professional photographer, I would not recommend it at this point. But this is very new technology. It's only been widely used for about the last three years, and I think that that will improve.

**Marie:** The cover photos are very clear.

**Reti:** The cover is much better than the inside. They told me they use a different process for the cover. It's funny because I brought the proof of this book with me when I recently went on vacation to the East Coast. A friend of mine in Baltimore who works as a printer looked at it, and I told him this is a print-on-demand, xerographically produced cover. He said, "Oh, no way!" He was having a fit. He charged upstairs to get his printer's loop, this little magnifying glass. He looked closely and said, "Oh my God, it really is! This is going to put offset printers out of business." If you really look at this purple cover you can see that there are pixels. But it looks solid to the naked eye.

**Marie:** In terms of distribution, has there been some kind of feminist publishing consortia that would get together to distribute books?

**Reti:** There was the Women's Library Presses Project run by Mev Miller. That's the only one that I have ever heard of. Before my time, in the mid-1970s, there was a feminist book distribution company. When places like Inland and Bookpeople came into being they had the resources to do a great job so feminists felt no need to do this. There's been some talk recently of trying to organize a feminist presses distribution catalog. But most of the feminist presses at this point are really struggling just to stay afloat, and quite a few (Firebrand Books, Papier-Mache Press, Clothespin Fever Press, for example) have gone out of business. No one has the energy or the resources to take on something like that. This is also tied into the fact that there are a far fewer feminist or gay or independent bookstores. You could start a distribution company, but whom would you distribute to? It's all a network that's tied together. Even *Feminist Bookstore News*, the trade journal for the women-in-print movement, recently ceased publication.

**Marie:** Do you get many orders from colleges that are using your books in their courses?

**Reti:** Yes, I do, especially for Carolyn Gage's book. In the last week I just had an order from San Francisco State University, from the University of Mississippi, and from the University of Connecticut for that book. That's the title which has had the biggest course adoption rate. There's a play in the book about Louisa May Alcott, one about Jane Addams, one about Calamity Jane, as well as the one about Joan of Arc. So they have appeal in both women's studies and theater classes. I also get textbook orders for *Childless by Choice*, and for *A Transported Life*. I thought that *Unleashing Feminism* would be widely used in courses, and it has been adopted some as a textbook, but not nearly as much as I had thought it would be. San Francisco State just ordered that book for a summer course.

I could do a lot more to promote the titles. The struggle for me has always been balance. I now work 80% time at UC Santa Cruz. I was writing the memoir for the past seven years. Now, I am beginning work towards my graduate degree in history. For the past

year I have been taking one undergraduate course per quarter at UC Santa Cruz. I am now forty. I don't have the energy I did when I started this press at age twenty two. That is really why I have not continued to put myself out there as a publisher—give me your manuscripts and I will bring them to the world. I don't feel that I can responsibly do that. I don't have the distribution. I don't have the energy and time. I'm not sure what the future holds.

I have a deep passion for making books. I love thinking of ideas for books that have never been done, and seeing them come to fruition. I think that feminist literature and feminist ideas are critically important. I have a sneaking suspicion I'm not done with this kind of work. But I'm not sure. This print-on-demand technology gives me some hope for being able to do this in a way that is not so capital-intensive. That's the other thing—money. The cost of living in Santa Cruz has gone up astronomically since I started this press in 1984, when I was paying \$185 a month for a room in a garage. I used to be able to work half-time and work on the press. I cannot work half-time anymore and survive in Santa Cruz. The cost of printing has also gone up, and the distribution is horrible.

I began HerBooks at the end of an era. In the late 1960s and in the 1970s, and even into the early 1980s, it was possible to be a funky, alternative press and live cheaply. Many alternative, leftist institutions were able to flourish. Now, that's much more challenging. But I do have some hope that I will be able to keep putting out books through things like print-on-demand. Promotion is the area that is the most difficult, but with the Internet . .

**Marie:** I was going to ask you about that.

**Reti:** I just updated my website. I just sent a notice about *The Keeper of Memory* to the man who is the webmaster for the international gay and lesbian children of Holocaust survivors website. I sent him a jpeg file of the cover and the announcement, and he put it up at no charge. He was very kind. Whether or not things like this will generate any sales I don't know, but that kind of publicity doesn't cost anything and could be very effective. So I think there is some hope.

## The Whoo Haas Writing Group

**Marie:** You mentioned your writers group. How long have you been in it, and how much has that influenced your writing and your publishing?

**Reti:** The writer's group I am in is called the Whoo Haas, and it's a writing group that has been meeting in Santa Cruz since the mid-1980s. I feel very honored to be in it. I am one of the newest members. I have only been in the group since 1996. There are a variety of women in the group. Many of them are UC Santa Cruz writing faculty members, and they are extremely talented writers. It has made a tremendous difference to be able to bring the manuscript to the group.

I did not write this book in isolation. There are a number of people who read more than one draft of this book and gave me feedback, starting in 1993. The first few drafts of it were a novel, and then I decided that memoir was a more appropriate form. If you look at the list of acknowledgements, there must be twenty-five people who read this, at least. The writing group was key in the process of generating and shaping the manuscript. There is only one other woman in the group who is Jewish. It's interesting to work with this material in a non-Jewish group. I think it's important to get feedback from people who are sensitive and sympathetic, but not as close to the material. For instance, I wrote, "my mother was born in 1927 and she went to first grade in 1933." And they said, so? I replied, "1933! That's when Hitler came to power." I thought the significance of that date was obvious. I am so obsessed with this history that I think everybody thinks that way.

When I was trying to get an agent, I brought the query letter to my writing group. Even as recently as a few months ago, when I was trying to design the cover, I was bringing versions of the cover, with the photographs, to them. They helped me write the back cover blurb. By that time I was so tired and so close to the manuscript that I couldn't see what was grammatical and what wasn't. They helped me tremendously.

**Marie:** You don't write in a vacuum.

**Reti:** People joke and say that I run my life by committee. I write in community.

I went to two writing colonies at which I wrote this book. The first one was Cottages at Hedgebrook, which is a fabulous, completely free retreat for women writers on Whidbey Island in Puget Sound. That's where I began this book, and there's actually one chapter of the book which has not significantly changed since I wrote it late at night in Oak Cottage, with the bats rustling over my head in the rafters. It's an amazing place. They bring you a hot lunch in a little basket. During the day there is a no-talking rule, so that residents can focus on their own internal voice. In the evening we had lively dinners in the farmhouse, where a chef cooked incredible organic food and we would talk about our writing. After dinner we'd share writing by the fire. There was a wonderful organic garden. That's where I was working on my essay for *Garden Variety Dykes*. I loved Ozzie and Harriet, the two goats. I have very fond memories of that place. Hedgebrook was an early blessing for this book, both for the book itself, and in terms of me believing in myself as a writer. It was such an incredible privilege to be a resident in a place like that for two weeks, to be fed and housed in a beautiful luxurious cabin with handmade blankets, and a rocking chair, and a sleeping loft. There was a whole library of books written by former residents. They publish a literary journal and included an excerpt of my memoir a few years ago. I highly recommend Hedgebrook to all women writers. A few years later I went to Norcroft, a very similar place on the North Shore of Lake Superior in Minnesota, another a retreat for women writers, also fantastic!

### **Santa Cruz, California**

**Marie:** How about living in Santa Cruz, and being a student at UC Santa Cruz? I remember you telling me at one point that you took Bettina Aptheker's class, Introduction to Women's Studies. The people, the writers, the professors, the lesbian community—how has all that affected you in terms of your writing and your publishing?

**Reti:** I probably wouldn't have written my memoir, as either an out lesbian or someone claiming my Jewish identity, if I hadn't lived in Santa Cruz, in a very strong Jewish lesbian community, and now in a Jewish Renewal *havurah*. Santa Cruz is also a very strong place for Jewish Renewal and for progressive Judaism in general. *Kolyanu*, the



local chapter of New Jewish Agenda had a big influence on me in the 1980s. I remember talking to Adrienne Rich at a *Kolyanu* meeting. She had written this poem about being half-Jewish and raised by an assimilated, non-religious father. I felt an immediate bond with her about the pain and confusion of trying to grapple with what it means to be Jewish when you haven't been raised with knowledge or pride about that. I remember having this really intense conversation with her about that.

I was lucky enough to have been in Bettina Aptheker's very first Introduction to Feminism class at UCSC in 1981, when she was not as well-known as she has become. There were thirty five or forty of us. I was just coming out as a lesbian. Bettina was so compelling. I was a feminist already because my mother was a feminist. I came to UCSC as a feminist. But I had no developed critique of race, class, and gender, and was unfamiliar with lesbian issues. It was all new to me and it shaped me. In fact it was in Bettina's class that I wrote my very first piece about finding out I was Jewish.

I think it was around that time that I started meeting other Jewish lesbian feminists, who listened to my story and were blown away. They thought it was important and significant. I found out I was Jewish when I was 17, but I didn't think that much about it until a little bit later. I graduated from high school when I was 17. I left Los Angeles, came to Santa Cruz, came out as a lesbian. Being Jewish was not the first thing on my mind. I was new to Santa Cruz. I was awed by the redwood trees. I loved the ocean. I wasn't sitting around thinking about being Jewish. It wasn't until I started having these friendships a few years later in the feminist community, that it started to seem like a significant thing to think about.

Also, it wasn't until I graduated from college that I started taking writing workshops from Ellen Bass and Maude Meehan. These were non-academic classes. Mostly I was writing poetry at that point, and I was encouraged to write about my personal life. To be in this very rich community of women writers in Santa Cruz county was a huge influence on me. It was the reason I started a press, because I saw that there were all these women who couldn't get published, because there were a limited number of places

to get published. I started as a local press because I wanted to be tied into this community. The first two or three books I did were only local writers.

**Marie:** How does living in Santa Cruz shape you as a Jewish lesbian writer and publisher? And I consider you an activist, too. I don't know if you would consider yourself that way. I consider publishing as activist work.

**Reti:** I agree that it's activist work. I don't think it's activism quite in the same sense that organizing a march or things like that are activist. I have considered publishing to be both my political and artistic work. I think it is important to publish work that has political content, but is also high-quality literary writing. I don't think politics and good literature are mutually exclusive.

It's easy to take being a lesbian for granted at this point in my life. I've never been a lesbian anywhere but Santa Cruz. I've been out for twenty-three years now in this town, and it's been a very supportive place to be a lesbian. At the time that I started the press there were not as many lesbian books as there are now. It's difficult to remember now what that time was like, when you could have read every lesbian book that had been published. There was a time when I could tell which press had published it just by looking at the typeface on the cover. I'm glad that that time has changed.

**Marie:** But from the beginning your press was known as a lesbian press?

**Reti:** That was very important to me, even more so than the feminism. I believed that I was literally constructing a lesbian world by publishing books. Whenever anything happened to me that I was trying to grapple with, I would go find a book about it. Whether it was gardening, or running, or getting a cat, having some kind of health problem. That's probably why I like working in a library. So there I was being a lesbian. Where are the books about being a lesbian? Oh my goodness, there aren't too many books about being a lesbian. Well maybe I should make some.

It was easy for me to be a lesbian here because I worked for the University or for small progressive businesses in town like the Santa Cruz Community Credit Union, where it

was okay to be a lesbian. But it wasn't okay to be a lesbian in front of the classroom. It still isn't okay in many places, but it certainly wasn't okay in the early-1980s in Santa Cruz, or the mid-1980s. That's why I published *The Lesbian in Front of the Classroom*.

**Marie:** Did you always feel comfortable being out as a lesbian at UC Santa Cruz?

**Reti:** I have always been out. I worked for the office of the registrar for a couple of years. There my immediate co-workers were mostly lesbians. The registrar's office is a much more mainstream place than the library. But even there, to be honest, I can't remember having a problem. When I came to work at the library I figured it was useless to be in the closet since the library catalog contained all my titles. My very first week of work, Randall Jarrell, my boss, wrote something about me for the library newsletter, and it had something about HerBooks in there because I had talked about my work with HerBooks at my interview and put it on my resumé. This was fine because I was already very publicly out.

It's important to me to be out. My experience has been generally that when people know you and they find out that you are nice person and don't have pointy teeth, they deal with it and it changes them. Straight people who haven't had contact with lesbians before become more open-minded. Since I do have a job where it's safe for me to be out I'm glad that I can do that and help change the world.

**Marie:** Have you ever had any repercussions in terms of the wider community beyond Santa Cruz? Nationally or internationally?

**Reti:** As a lesbian?

**Marie:** Yes, as a lesbian, particularly in your writing and your publishing.

**Reti:** I think that the repercussions are probably more subtle. I think that if I had been willing to be more mainstream, less lesbian, some of my books might have sold better. Early on I published a book called *The World Between Women*, which was not specifically lesbian, and I got grant money for that. I've never gotten that for anything since. That

book was easier to promote in certain places because it wasn't lesbian. I've had people tell me that if my memoir didn't say lesbian on it that it would be easier to promote to certain portions of the Jewish community and other communities who might be scared off by that. But I am not willing to leave behind half of who I am to sell more books.

I'm pretty careful. I have a post office box. I don't publish my phone number, except in book trade contexts. I don't just throw my phone number all over the web and all over my books. I do screen my calls. I've taken those precautions.

My parents chose to pass as non-Jews, to hide the fact that they are Jewish. Safety is really important to them. I have already chosen to be an out Jewish person even though I am a direct descendent of people who went through the Holocaust. Yes, it's true that someday the world could get so horrendous that we will all be rounded up and killed. But until then, I want to be my whole self in a broken world, as much as is possible. I've watched the world change tremendously over the past twenty years. I never thought I would see the day when UCSC would have domestic partner benefits, even to the limited extent that we have them. Or a day when gay marriage would be the subject of national debate, even though we don't have legalized gay marriage yet. Or even, I don't know if you measure political success by this, having lesbian or gay male characters on television, or characters in movies and books in which someone is lesbian but it isn't the main subject of the entire movie. They just are a lesbian and they appear on screen. The things that have changed in my lesbian lifetime alone are amazing.

**Marie:** What seemed to me the epitome of your worlds coming together in celebration was your marriage to Lori Klein, which was a Jewish ceremony, with a woman rabbi.

**Reti:** That's true. I actually thought of ending the memoir there. Okay. I'll end it with this big, happy wedding. No, I think that might have been a bit trite.

That's a good example of what I am talking about. Our *havurah*, *Chadeish Yameinu*, is primarily straight. There are a few other lesbians, but not very many. The group was wonderfully supportive of our marriage. I don't know that that would have happened

twenty-five years ago. I can't imagine that it would have. It was very touching to have a wedding of over a hundred people at the Pacific Cultural Center. All these people dancing together, including the straight feminist rabbi, who married us. My partner is studying to be a rabbi, and that she can do that as an out lesbian is fabulous.

**Marie:** It's amazing. I had another question. I know that your books have reached an international audience. Have you had any responses from people outside the United States?

**Reti:** Oh sure. I have a whole file in the archive. Particularly about *Remember the Fire*. With that and with the Kindertransport book. There are a number of letters from daughters of Holocaust survivors, from anti-pornography activists overseas. There was one Maori writer, Cathie Dunsford in New Zealand, whom I corresponded with extensively. I've always gotten quite a few orders from Canada. I have to write, U.S. dollars only. If I don't I have to pay a huge bank fee to process a check for \$8.00 and I end up losing money.

I'm going to be going to Berlin this June as part of the Bet Debora, European Women Rabbis, Cantors, Scholars and Activists Conference, to teach a workshop on memoir and oral history as spiritual witnessing. I'm going to be using some of the material from the memoir. It's a completely different context. There, everybody is a child of Holocaust survivors. Talking about that is not their priority. They are more focused on the necessity for Jewish reconstruction and renewal, in creating a Jewish life after the Holocaust. How do we create a Jewish life in the present, without forgetting the Holocaust?

**Marie:** I wanted to end with what you see for the future, in terms of your life as a publisher, and as a writer. Do you see yourself getting into new material as a writer? And what do you see in terms of HerBooks' continuation?

**Reti:** I do see myself writing a book of poetry focused on my trip to Budapest, Nuremberg, and Saraspatak, which is the little town in Northern Hungary where part of

my family was from, in which the Jewish cemetery has just been abandoned in the last year. I have a lot to write about that trip. That feels important to me.

I find myself at a juncture. I'm planning to devote a significant portion of the next decade to getting my graduate degree in history. That's tied in with my job as an oral historian at the Regional History Project at the University Library, to which I am very devoted. It's hard to look beyond the next five to ten years, to see what I would do after that.

I am concerned about balance. Right now, I've got this memoir, which just arrived on my doorstep yesterday. In a week and a half, I will be receiving copies of *Women Runners: Stories of Transformation* which I decided not to publish through HerBooks because I felt that it wouldn't have large enough distribution. I was fortunate enough to find Breakaway Books, which specializes in publishing literary writing about sports. They love the book. So I am going to be working on promoting that. Then I am also taking this UC Santa Cruz history class, *Autobiography and Memoir in the 1960s*. I have a lot of projects at work. I need to figure out how to take care of my health and spirit in all of this. How do we conserve our energy? That seems to always be the question.

I have faith that I am a creative, resourceful, determined person, and that whatever work I end up doing will be worthwhile. I can't predict the future right now.

**Marie:** You mentioned that you were hopeful in terms of feminist publishing.

**Reti:** I am. As Alta said in her interview<sup>1</sup>, feminism isn't dead as long as women are still being raped, as long as all these issues we've been dealing with are still unresolved. People talk about a post-feminist era. It's ridiculous. We still need feminism. We still need writing about women's lives.

I have questions about academia and my place in it. I don't want to be a professor, and I don't want the writing and publishing I do in the history field to just be for academics. That's something that I love about oral history, that it transcends the border between the

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1. *Alta and the History of Shameless Hussy Press, 1969-1989*, Regional History Project, University Library, UC Santa Cruz, 2001.

community and the academy. I have presented portions of my memoir and of the *Kindertransport* book at the Oral History Association (OHA) national conference. I see that as a good omen. My biggest order for the book came from one of my colleagues in oral history at the University of Nevada.

I don't know. It's exciting in some ways not to know what you are going to do, even though it's a little scary.

I've always been interested in the technological aspects of oral history, such as being able to create multimedia oral history presentations, in which the audio in oral history is combined with the transcript and the images. I might end up publishing cd-roms about women's history. I really don't know at this point.

**Marie:** Great. Thank you, Irene.