

“Sisterhood is Powerful”:
Sisters Publishing and Book Club in Australia,
 1978–85

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In Australia since the 1970s, more than a dozen feminist presses emerged in response to the Australian Women's Liberation Movement. These included the Women's Movement Children's Literature Cooperative later known as Sugar & Snails Press (1974–91), Hecate Press (1975–), Pinchgut Press (1975–),¹ Everywoman Press (1976–80), Sybylla Cooperative Press (1976–2003), Sisters Publishing (1978–85), Sydney Women Writers' Workshop later known as No Regrets (1978–88), Labrys Press (1983–86), Women's Redress Press (1983–96), Tantrum Press (1987–94), Spinifex Press (1991–), Artemis Publishing (1992–) and ASP House (1993–c.2000). Unlike the high-profile British feminist publishing houses Virago Press and Women's Press, most of Australia's feminist presses were politically and culturally motivated rather than market-led. Some were forums for self-expression, some were non-profit ventures, while a few, including Sisters Publishing, attempted to balance political, cultural, and commercial imperatives.

In addition, several independent (Australian-owned) presses also fulfilled a critical role in establishing a “female presence” in fiction and non-fiction in Australia in the 1970s and 1980s.² Such presses included Outback Press (1973–80), Greenhouse Publications (1975–87), McPhee Gribble Publishing (1975–89), Sea Cruise Books (1976–97), Hale & Iremonger (1977–), and the University of Queensland Press (1948–).³ Renowned as the innovators and nurturers of excellence in Australian publishing, the independent publishing sector often published groundbreaking work. Sometimes, too, those independent presses that were women-owned were caricatured as feminist by the media, or mistakenly identified, then and now, as feminist presses;⁴ most, however, identified as fiercely independent.

This article concentrates on the feminist enterprise Sisters Publishing and Book Club (1978–85),⁵ and examines its role in publishing, publicising, and selling books “by, for and about women.” The article emerges from a larger study that aims to recover a history of a continuum of Australian feminist presses, critique the publishing imperatives of feminist, independent and multinational publishers of feminist and other books for women, and to demonstrate that in feminist publishing (as distinct from mainstream publishing), feminist activism is linked with publishing at the site of cultural production.

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Several critical questions highlight the fundamental challenges faced by Australia's feminist presses, both during the feminist 1970s and 1980s, and since: Is commerce compatible with feminist cultural production? How can competing political and business imperatives be resolved? Can a commercially motivated feminist press retain autonomy in a marketplace in which multinational corporations dominate the terms of trade? And how has the bigger picture of Australian publishing politics impacted on what Australian feminist presses could achieve?

At the heart of feminist publishing outside of the corporate publishing world, is the conviction that process — that is, *how* the books are acquired, edited, designed and produced — is as important as the books themselves. Indeed, radical feminist publishing politics have often reflected “a refusal to separate the publishing process from the output.”⁶ This connection, fundamental to the publishing politics of many Australian feminist presses, often prompted the adoption of feminist organisational models, such as collectives or cooperatives, and feminist decision-making models, such as consensus.

Australia's feminist presses also promoted supportive and empowering environments for their authors. Importantly, too, a feminist publishing house's perception of its role in creating cultural space for female experience was, and still is, fundamental to its feminist agency. However, as Chris Weedon reminds us, publishing writers who are women does not guarantee texts that challenge dominant norms or “employ a different, resistant, and specifically female discourse.”⁷

Australia's feminist presses have adopted a range of relationships to working conditions: some have prioritised award wages and occupational health for press workers, while others have prioritised payment of authors. Voluntary work has also featured as an aspect of some Australian feminist presses. For the directors of Sisters Publishing, operating a feminist publishing and a mail-order business was a political and cultural commitment over and above their full-time business commitments elsewhere in the Australian book trade.

Sisters Publishing (1978–85)

Motivated by the first Women and Labour Conference in Sydney in May 1978⁸ and drawing on their combined publishing experience, five independent Australian publishers — Diana Gribble, Hilary McPhee, Sally Milner, Joyce Nicholson and Anne O'Donovan — established Sisters Publishing Pty Ltd to publish across the entire spectrum of writing of interest to feminists, “especially in areas badly served by current Australian publishing.”⁹ Early on, they identified these areas as poetry, short stories, literary fiction and radical ideas.¹⁰

The founders of Sisters recognised that women were ignored by mainstream publishers, and were motivated to ensure that “anything worthwhile written by

women would not be overlooked."¹¹ All five founders also owned and operated their own independent publishing ventures (all but one in establishment phases), several of them had worked together previously to produce the Women's Electoral Lobby – Victoria papers,¹² and all were keen to "provide an outlet for the best in women's writing."¹³

Sisters Publishing was created out of an optimism and enthusiasm that was hard to match:

We met over lunch, over drinks, around crowded tables in outdoor restaurants, in small littered offices, euphoric about what we were planning, our ideas punctuated with gales of laughter.¹⁴

Fortunately, "long and sound book trade experience"¹⁵ and a thorough knowledge of the potential pitfalls of independent publishing complemented their vision. Joyce Thorpe Nicholson had worked for many years (since 1936) at the family firm, D. W. Thorpe, and had been its Managing Director since 1968. Anne O'Donovan had acquired both publicity and editorial experience at Jacaranda Press (1962–66) and Penguin Australia (1971–78). Hilary McPhee, who had started her publishing career at *Meanjin* in 1969, had gained editorial experience at Penguin Australia, McKinsey, and Heinemann before founding McPhee Gribble in 1975 with architect and designer, Diana Gribble. Sally Milner had commenced her publishing career in editorial at Lansdowne in 1972, before establishing Greenhouse Publications in 1975.

The five women considered forming a cooperative but found they didn't meet the criteria. Nor did they wish to accommodate delays that could arise from the need for all contracts to be approved by the registrar of cooperatives.¹⁶ They therefore registered Sisters Publishing in 1978 as "a company limited by guarantee" incorporated in Victoria.¹⁷ Each of the women became a director and shareholder, with provision for more women to be involved without undue complexity at a future date.¹⁸ Sisters would be "a very low budget operation" that would "finance small-run specialist books with the proceeds from more popular titles."¹⁹

The Sisters directors, well aware that one of the fatal flaws of independent publishing was distribution, decided to address this head-on. They resolved to go directly to their market and keep book prices down by operating a mail-order service — Sisters Book Club — in order to reach a reliable group of subscribers. In return for a small, once-only subscription fee, the Sisters Book Club would provide subscribers with a quarterly newsletter; each newsletter would offer six books in total: two Sisters titles plus four of the best feminist titles that the directors could buy in from other publishing houses. A gradual increase in subscribers was anticipated, and it was agreed that a salaried coordinator should be employed on a part-time basis; the directors themselves would provide all other labour after hours.

Minimal bookshop distribution was offered to Pat Woolley of the Sydney-based distribution business, Allbooks.²⁰ The directors then arranged a "\$5,000 guaranteed bank overdraft" to finance the venture and appointed Margaret Barca as the inaugural part-time coordinator.²¹ Their next priority was to reach a point of solvency where they could take on a full-time paid director.²²

In order to promote the venture, Sisters Publishing invited thirty high-profile feminists to form an Editorial Board. In appointing Board members, Sisters actively sought "women who [were] strongly committed to the [women's] movement [with] a spread of expertise."²³ The Board comprised a roll call of Australian feminist activists, publishers, writers, and bureaucrats of the late 1970s: Faith Bandler, Suzanne Bellamy, Carmen Callil, Eva Cox, Helen Garner, Dorothy Hewett, Deborah McCulloch, Drusilla Modjeska, Edna Ryan, Anne Summers, and twenty others responded in the affirmative to Sisters' request that they serve on the Board.²⁴ In her note of acceptance, Helen Garner declared "I think it is a valiant idea", while Dorothy Hewett remarked: "Maybe if you'd existed [before] I wouldn't still be struggling ... to get it all down before it's too late."²⁵

The Editorial Board enhanced the new press' credibility and extended its networks. But, as Sisters' correspondence to the Board of Editors attests, these high-profile women were approached most frequently to promote the mail-order book club and recruit new subscribers:

We have almost 1700 members ... we're sending six copies of *Sisters News*, can you pass them on? (6 February 1980.)

We enclose four copies of our latest brochure. Once again we ask you to pass on the word about Sisters. We are delighted that the membership has reached 1800, but it is essential that it continues to grow. (2 May 1980.)²⁶

As an initial plan for the purchase of Sisters Book Club titles, the directors agreed on an approach to Virago Press and Women's Press,²⁷ and ultimately many of the titles promoted by Sisters Book Club came from these sources. Sisters also made enquiries of several other publishing companies, including Penguin and Fontana. Women's Press publisher Stephanie Dowrick offered Women's Press books at fifty-five per cent discount off RRP, while Carmen Callil of Virago Press, who had become a personal friend when she purchased rights to Helen Garner's *Monkey Grip* from McPhee Gribble, offered fifty-five per cent off RRP for fewer than three hundred copies, and up to sixty-five per cent discount for more than five hundred books, though only on the basis of firm sale. Storage space was rented from the Women's Cultural Palace for five dollars per week, enabling Sisters to maintain a connection with the "more radical sector of the women's movement" in Melbourne.²⁸

Thirty thousand copies of the inaugural Sisters Book Club newsletter — *Sisters News 1* — were printed and despatched in Spring 1979 to publicly launch the publishing and bookselling enterprise.²⁹ The newsletter explained Sisters' aims: Sisters would publish "for women, by women, about women" and "across the full range of feminist writing: creative, academic, polemic and general." Sisters had sought addresses for as many potential subscribers as possible, and had successfully acquired access to the mailing lists of numerous feminist journals, as well as lists from women's studies programs and educational institutions such as the University of Adelaide, and Preston Institute of TAFE Bookshops.³⁰ Finances precluded computerising the mailing list, so the new coordinator Margaret Barca undertook its development; typists were employed to assist with addressing envelopes.³¹

Sisters News 1 offered Sisters' inaugural titles, which had been commissioned in the preceding year. These were a poetry anthology comprising four new poets, *Sisters Poets 1* (1979), edited by Rosemary Dobson; Jean Bedford's collection of short stories *Country Girl Again* (1979); and a set of radical discussion papers from the Working Women's Centre, Melbourne entitled *Working Women* (1979). Four additional titles also were offered at discounted prices: two from the independent Outback Press — Sandra Zurbo (ed.), *Stories of Her Life: An Anthology of Short Stories by Australian Women* (Outback Press, 1979) and Shere Hite (ed.), *Sexual Honesty*, (Outback Press, 1977); two from multinational publishing houses — Paula Weideger, *Menstruation and Menopause*, (Penguin, 1977); and Marilyn French, *The Women's Room*, (Sphere, 1978).

The public response to the invitation to join Sisters Book Club was overwhelmingly positive. Enthusiastic replies were received from women all over the country, and the fledgling feminist publishing house received extensive media coverage. However, in addition to the much-needed subscriptions, manuscripts "flooded in." The effect was almost overwhelming, as Joyce Nicholson explains: "every woman who had ever written anything got it out of her bottom drawer and sent it to us. Then our problems began. The first was exhaustion."³²

Determined to give "a fair reading to every manuscript that came in," the publishers' workload intensified, especially as they were committed to giving critical feedback and encouragement to each and every author who had submitted a manuscript:

Any normal publisher can judge a manuscript as suitable or not in less than an hour, will usually reject it quickly, and generally send a formal standard letter advising the author. Not Sisters. We agonised over both the manuscripts and the way we rejected them. We wanted to encourage women to write.³³

From the outset, Sisters prioritised their editorial role, and this became a distinctive aspect of their protocol. Sisters' editorial practice underlined two funda-

mental aspects of feminist publishing: firstly, it was informed by their recognition of emerging women writers' critical need for encouragement; and secondly, by a commitment to collaborative author-publisher relationships.

Financial challenges soon emerged. In late 1979, Anne O'Donovan presented a cost analysis for 1979 and 1980 to a meeting of the directors, which showed that it was almost impossible to make enough of a profit margin on paperbacks. She recommended that Sisters consider selling hardbacks to carry the cost of paperbacks. O'Donovan also was of the view that all titles in *Sisters News 1* should have been one dollar higher in price. However, Sisters remained committed to keeping overheads low. Moreover, although the publishing venture was often assisted by small grants, its financial position was further diminished by the lack of a book bounty for small print runs.³⁴ Sisters print runs often were as low as one thousand or five hundred, and prohibitive economies of scale did not allow larger print runs. In an attempt to make the figures work, Sisters sought higher discounts from other publishers for their Book Club titles, but rarely achieved discounts greater than fifty-five or sixty percent.³⁵

At the end of 1979, income was "higher than was expected" but inefficiencies were exacerbated by practical difficulties: a lack of a central office and telephone.³⁶ A small room in the Melbourne Times Building in Carlton was leased temporarily to address this issue, but then there was the dilemma of the directors' "uneven workload."³⁷ Just one year into the venture, it was agreed that the salaried coordinator's position should be increased — to three days a week — and that specific responsibilities should be allocated to each director. Joyce Nicholson would manage the cashbooks and the mailing list, expanding the mailing list each quarter; Diana Gribble would take responsibility for typesetting and production; Anne O'Donovan would select and order stock from other publishers for the Book Club. Editorial was deemed "the most unwieldy, constant and essential task."³⁸ To this end, Hilary McPhee would continue reading and reporting on fiction, which comprised the bulk of manuscripts, while Sally Milner would report on non-fiction, as well as liaise with bookshops and manage the budget. In addition, packing and despatching book orders — a shared responsibility though often undertaken by Diana Gribble on weekends — was time consuming, and it was suggested that an employee for this task would be a sound investment.³⁹ Discussion of potential resignations was already happening, highlighting the pressures under which each of the directors worked. Each, while managing the multiple commitments of running her own publishing business, was also keeping Sisters afloat.

Over the next three years, from 1980 until 1982, Sisters sent out four newsletters per year in which they offered eight to ten new books per newsletter. Of these, three or four titles were Sisters publications and four to six titles were books

from other publishers. The editorial role remained onerous, however, so Claire O'Brien was employed one day a week to assist with editing.

In late 1980, Sisters invited former Heinemann director, Pat Healy, to join their board of directors. Recently employed at the Literature Board of the Australia Council, Pat Healy also possessed editing skills. Sally Milner had been relieving Hilary McPhee of some of the fiction editing and other manuscript work, but when Pat Healy joined Sisters, she took on a share of the manuscript assessment load. In 1980, also, Claire O'Brien replaced Margaret Barca as the paid coordinator but soon was "equally overworked and overburdened."⁴⁰ Then, on 4 March 1981, despite the protests of her colleagues, Anne O'Donovan resigned due to her other commitments. At this time, too, in response to the coordinator's heavy workload, a job-share arrangement was introduced, but in 1982 when co-worker Vicki O'Meara died tragically in an accident, the arrangement was converted to a single full-time position. For most of this period Sisters leased a small room at the premises of McPhee Gribble at 203 Drummond Street, Carlton, moving with them in 1983 to new premises in Cecil Street, Fitzroy.

Early on, it had been decided that the Sisters directors would not make use of the Sisters Book Club to market books that they had written or published themselves, but in April 1980 this policy was reconsidered, and it was agreed that they would promote some of their own titles via the Book Club.⁴¹ Accordingly, Evelyn Billings' book on natural family planning, *The Billings Method*, (Anne O'Donovan, 1980) which ultimately became an international best seller, was advertised to subscribers in *Sisters News* 5. Janine Burke's *Australian Women Artists* (Greenhouse, 1980) was promoted in *Sisters News* 6 and Joyce Nicholson's *What Society Does to Girls* (Virago, 1980) was promoted in *Sisters News* 7.

A review of Sisters Book Club titles offers a valuable insight into the reading of Australian women in the early 1980s. Although, as Anne Summers has argued, the Australian Women's Liberation Movement was receiving "an American view of women and an American context for political action,"⁴² Sisters' subscribers also had access to a range of British and Australian book titles. Moreover, responses to a questionnaire in *Sisters News* 3 revealed that Sisters subscribers included a high number of fiction readers, and that many also were keen on social history.⁴³ In the field of non-fiction, Sisters' subscribers wanted biographies about women, particularly Australian writers or painters.⁴⁴ Art books became a strong focus for the Sisters Book Club, and books on Australian artists Dorrit Black and Mirka Mora sold well.⁴⁵

Sisters' own titles also were well received and widely reviewed.⁴⁶ Cover design was simple yet elegant, and three early Sisters titles won prestigious jacket design awards. Notably, Sisters provided important publishing opportunities for both new

and established poets, and Sisters' poetry titles sold surprisingly well. Nonetheless, Hilary McPhee remained concerned that too much good poetry was "slipping through the net."⁴⁷ Sisters' inaugural novel was Beverley Farmer's critically acclaimed *Alone* (1980), a "haunting record of a young woman's anguish alone with the pain of rejection by her [woman] lover."⁴⁸ Once again, the jacket design was simple, signifying a low-cost approach to design and production. *Alone* went on to become one of Sisters' best-selling titles; eighteen years later, former UQP fiction publisher D'Arcy Randall still recalled its impact: "*Alone* had me teary-eyed for days."⁴⁹ By 1981, emerging writers Beverley Farmer and Jean Bedford had both received literary awards.⁵⁰

The next three Sisters titles, released in 1981 and 1982, were carefully crafted poetry collections, including *Winter Driving* by Jennifer Strauss and *Song of the Humpback Whales* by Jill Hellyer. An anthology of established poets edited by Fay Zwicky also was published, followed by a biography of three generations, *Three of a Kind*, by established writer, Barbara Jefferis.

Some of Sisters' projects did not achieve publication. For example, a proposed series on women in Indonesia, and a collection of short stories to be edited by Elizabeth Riddell did not secure development grants from the Literature Board of the Australia Council, and were dropped from the publishing program. Another project, Susan Whiting's prose poem "Ayyalah," was lost to a University of Queensland Press (UQP) anthology. Even when Sisters was unsuccessful in securing this title for its Book Club, they recommended it warmly to subscribers: "buy it, it's marvellous."⁵¹ As this example illustrates, Sisters maintained an overt policy of complementing rather than competing with commercial publishers. This approach was first articulated in 1978 by Diana Gribble:

Sisters doesn't wish to usurp the role of the commercial publishing houses as they can obviously give better distribution to material they see a buck in.⁵²

Sisters Book Club titles comprised a diverse selection of women's fiction, together with non-fiction titles on a range of topics including social history, art, women's health, writing and gardening. In total, over one hundred titles were offered to Sisters subscribers, including a significant number of high-profile feminist non-fiction titles, including Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology*, Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*, Sylvia Plath *Collected Poems*, and Susie Orbach's *Fat is a Feminist Issue*. Australian non-fiction titles were also strongly represented: Anne Summers' *Damned Whores and God's Police*, Drusilla Modjeska's *Exiles at Home: Australian Women Writers 1925-1945*, Janine Burke's *Australian Women Artists and Joy Hester*, and Beverley Kingston's *My Wife, My Daughter and Poor Mary Anne*. Overseas-originated fiction included Marilyn French, *The Women's Room*, Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of*

Time, and Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing*. Classic Australian fiction promoted by Sisters Book Club included Dymphna Cusack and Florence James' *Come in Spinner*, Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Working Bullocks*, Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children*, and Barbara Baynton's *Bush Studies*. A few Australian feminist press titles were also promoted by Sisters Book Club, most notably Sybylla Cooperative Press' inaugural title, *Frictions* (eds, Anna Gibbs and Alison Tilson), and the No Regrets anthology, *No Regrets 2*.

Cost analyses continued to highlight the financial burden of selling paperbacks. Revenue from book sales did not cover the cost of the newsletter mail-outs. But instead of cutting back on paperbacks, Sisters persisted in offering the cheaper format because many of their subscribers would not otherwise be in a position to order from the newsletter. Instead, Sisters offered books in both higher and lower price brackets. Responses to each mail-out were about twenty per cent, which according to Sally Milner "compared favourably with the two-per-cent success rate of most mail-outs."⁵³ But even as Sisters Book Club subscriptions exceeded three thousand in mid-1982, book sales did not increase.

In mid-1982, in the face of "rapidly dwindling" capital and inadequate cash flow, several emergency strategies were adopted. Firstly, the Sisters Book Club membership joining fee was raised from ten dollars to twenty dollars. Secondly, subscribers were required to order from at least one newsletter each year. Thirdly, a book clearance in December 1982⁵⁴ cleared much-needed storage space and recouped some expenditure.⁵⁵ An interesting fourth strategy also was implemented. Sisters established a second mail-order book club, the "Golden Book Club" for *The Australian Pensioner*. This resulted in an effective means of generating cash flow "without spending a cent on promotion."⁵⁶ With increased volume, Sisters could justify requests for higher discounts on book purchases from other publishers. Joyce Nicholson successfully negotiated sixty per cent discount from over eight Australian publishers for the Golden Book Club, and these discounts were passed on to Sisters subscribers.⁵⁷ Joyce Nicholson and Sally Milner took responsibility for the selection of Golden Book Club titles for promotion in *The Australian Pensioner*, and it was agreed that there would be no public connection of the Golden Book Club with Sisters Publishing and Book Club.

In 1982, even though Hilary McPhee was taking a break from her Sisters responsibilities, Sisters continued to consider new manuscripts. An important manuscript, Emily Hope's *The Legend of Pope Joan*, was edited by Yvonne Rousseau on a freelance basis and was published in 1983. This book contained two parts; the first a fictional account of Pope Joan; the second a historical essay providing evidence for the legend. Emily Hope, a silversmith and painter (and daughter of poet A.D. Hope) also had illustrated her manuscript, but she had only completed a dozen or so sketches for the work before she died. Significantly, *The Legend of*

Pope Joan is an example of a title that should be (and perhaps only would be) published by a feminist press. Its subject matter was significant, it was well written, and it was unlikely to be published elsewhere as it offered little chance of commercial success. Sisters attempted to locate a co-publisher for *The Legend of Pope Joan* but was unsuccessful. Nonetheless, the project did receive a sizeable grant from the Literature Board.⁵⁸ The decision to publish Emily Hope's book was vindicated — it received critical acclaim and "sold extremely well."⁵⁹

In late 1982 and 1983, Sisters published two more poetry collections: Judith Rodriguez's *Witch Heart* (1982) and *Mrs Noah and the Minoan Queen* (1983) edited by Judith Rodriguez, which included poems by Jennifer Strauss, Fay Zwicky, Antigone Kefala, Judith Rodriguez, J.S. Harry, and Jennifer Rankine. In 1983, Sisters also published *Exploring Women's Past: Essays in Social History*, a social history edited by Western Australian academic, Patricia Crawford. Finances were seriously declining at this point so the University of Western Australia was asked to underwrite production expenses, to which it agreed.⁶⁰

By 1983, exhaustion had prevailed and it was decided to pass on the Sisters Book Club and all stock to the Murphy Sisters Bookshop in Adelaide. Murphy Sisters, a feminist bookshop founded and operated by Gail Mahon and Fij Miller, already conducted "an efficient and impressive mail-order operation." Murphy Sisters also had been Sisters' largest customer.⁶¹ Sisters would scale down its publishing program after releasing *Mrs Noah and the Minoan Queen*. The directors could now focus their energies on their own presses in the knowledge that they had succeeded in one of their goals: mainstream publishers were now taking up many more books by, for and about women.

In their final newsletter — *Sisters News 17* — the directors reported that their commitment to Sisters remained "undimmed" but that they battled to find the time and energy to build the Sisters list and manage the Sisters Book Club.⁶² Founding director, Joyce Nicholson has since commented: "We never lost our enthusiasm, we couldn't keep it up."⁶³

For almost six years, evenings and weekends had been spent in the storeroom packing books for dispatch, or catching up on overdue manuscripts, correspondence and the mailing list; during the week the directors were working a double shift.

Sisters News 17 included the usual high-quality selection of titles that subscribers had come to expect. It also advised subscribers that the Sisters Book Club would now be operated by Murphy Sisters Bookshop and requested their continued support.⁶⁴

As negotiated, Murphy Sisters took over all stock. In return, Sisters Publishing provided Murphy Sisters with its three thousand-plus mailing list (now held on

computer by Datamail) on the understanding that Murphy Sisters continue to service the mailing list.⁶⁵ Sisters ceased publishing, but only temporarily they hoped. Attempts were made to attract a group of women to continue the Sisters publishing program, and the Editorial Board members, in particular, were urged to consider adopting the publishing venture. Sisters Publishing retained its option to publish in the hope that they could do more at a later date, but they "never did."⁶⁶ Instead, they "quietly closed the list and celebrated with a Paterson's cake iced with Sisterhood is Powerful in big letters."⁶⁷ Sisters Publishing formally ceased trading in 1985 and wound up the company in January 1986. Murphy Sisters continued the Sisters Book Club until September 1988 when that arrangement was also formally finalised.⁶⁸

Conclusion

Sisters Publishing and Book Club was both a feminist press and mail-order business that provided its subscribers with a much-needed, high-quality source of women's literature and non-fiction from the late 1970s until the mid-late 1980s. Sisters had quickly gained a reputation for high editorial and production standards in its own list as well as for a carefully vetted and affordable selection of titles available via its book club. By the 1980s, many women, Australia-wide, had come to depend on Sisters Book Club recommendations for both their leisure and professional reading.

Ultimately, though, Sisters was an endeavour that was both precarious and exhilarating, and the juggling act became unsustainable.⁶⁹ The workload involved in managing both a feminist list and a book club, together with the policy of offering books to subscribers at discounted prices meant that Sisters had little chance of long-term survival. But if, as it has been claimed in Britain, publishing houses have been 'among feminism's best allies,' the attempt had been an important one.⁷⁰ Several important Australian authors, too, most notably Beverley Farmer and Jean Bedford, owed the launch of their literary careers to Sisters.

Although Sisters was "quite a publishing phenomenon,"⁷¹ it was also, by necessity, "very much a part-time organization."⁷² Indeed, many of Sisters' letters to authors about their manuscripts included this phrase, often in explanation for a delay in reply. Despite this, Sisters was inundated with unsolicited manuscripts, which underlines that the publishing initiative was timely and met a significant need. Throughout the life of Sisters, but especially in its early years, the directors' collective vision and optimism shone through. The Sisters minutes record a number of ambitious ideas and plans, as exemplified by the notation: "Could we penetrate the Chinese market i.e. translate Sisters titles, perhaps with Elizabeth Riddell's collection?"⁷³

The Sisters list comprised a total of twelve titles and the Sisters Book Club marketed more than a hundred titles from other publishers. Moreover, at any one time, Sisters was considering five new manuscripts and eighteen published titles as possibilities for its book club. Yet its influence was greater than a tally of its titles. Sisters Publishing was unique in the Australian context as a feminist press with a strong editorial culture and it provided an important publishing opportunity for many poets and other writers. In addition, Sisters Book Club adopted a proven promotional and sales strategy to provide Australian women with access to a diverse selection of quality books at affordable prices, and at a time when books "by, for and about women" were not readily or cheaply available elsewhere in Australia. In this way, Sisters Publishing and Book Club not only responded to but also helped shape the political views and literary reading tastes of thousands of Australian women.

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Endnotes

¹ Pinchgut Press was founded in 1947 and ceased operation in 1960; in 1975, it was revived with feminist imperatives.

² D'Arcy Randall, "Fiction Fast Forward" in *UQP: The Writers Press 1948-1998*, (St Lucia: UQP, 1998), 119.

³ Outback Press (1973-80) was founded by Morry Schwartz, Alfred Milgrom, Mark Gillespie and Colin Talbot; Greenhouse Publications (1975-87) was founded and operated by Sally Milner until it was sold to Australian Consolidated Press; McPhee Gribble (1975-89) was founded and operated by Diana Gribble and Hilary McPhee until sold to Penguin Books (Australia), Sea Cruise Books (1976-97) was founded by Ken Bolton and Anna Couani, and from 1980 operated solely by Couani; Hale & Iremonger (1977-) was founded by Sylvia Hale and John Iremonger, and from 1980 operated solely by Hale.

⁴ Hilary McPhee, *Other People's Words*, (Sydney: Picador, 2001), 243.

⁵ Note that Sisters Publishing and Book Club was established in 1978, before *Sisters News* was launched in 1979. The Book Club was handed over to Murphy Sisters Bookshop in 1983 as the final issue of *Sisters News* was published. Sisters Publishing was closed in 1985, although the company wasn't formally wound up until January 1986.

⁶ Louise Poland, "Printing Presses and Protest Banners: Feminist Presses in Australia" in *Lilith: A Feminist History Journal*, n. 10, 2001, 133.

⁷ Chris Weedon, *Feminist Analysis and Poststructuralist Theory*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 170.

⁸ Joyce Nicholson, "Successful Sisters, Sisters Publishing: Problems of a Feminist Publishing House", *Refractory Girl Writes*, October 1982, 77-78.

⁹ *Sisters News 1*, Spring 1979.

¹⁰ Box S0005, Sisters Archive, University of Melbourne Archives (hereafter referred to as Sisters Archive); Nicholson, 77-78;

- ¹¹ Nicholson, 77–78.
- ¹² Joyce Nicholson, interview with author, Australian Book Fair, Sydney, June 2000.
- ¹³ *Sisters News* 1, 1979.
- ¹⁴ Nicholson, 77–78.
- ¹⁵ Nicholson, 77–78.
- ¹⁶ Letter to Anne Summers from Di Gribble, 1978, Box S0005, Sisters Archive.
- ¹⁷ Box S0005, Sisters Archive.
- ¹⁸ Box S0005, Sisters Archive.
- ¹⁹ Box S0005, Sisters Archive.
- ²⁰ Allbooks was operated by Wild & Woolley in association with Boobook Publications.
- ²¹ Sisters Archive; Margaret Barca was also employed by Sally Milner's Greenhouse Publications.
- ²² Draft letter to prospective Editorial Board members from Hilary McPhee, 29 November 1978. Box S0005, Sisters Archive.
- ²³ Letter to Anne Summers from Di Gribble, 1978, Box S0005, Sisters Archive.
- ²⁴ The members of the Editorial Board were listed in each issue of *Sisters News* 1–17. With one exception, the board members remained consistent throughout.
- ²⁵ Editorial Board, Box S0005, Sisters Archive.
- ²⁶ Editorial Board, Box S0005, Sisters Archive.
- ²⁷ For an analysis of these British feminist presses, see Simone Murray, *Mixed Media: Feminist Presses and Publishing Politics* (London: Pluto, 2004).
- ²⁸ Minutes, 23 July 1979, Sisters Archive.
- ²⁹ Minutes of meetings 1978–82, Box S0023, Sisters Archive.
- ³⁰ Box S0022, Sisters Archive. Journals approached for mailing lists: *Hecate; Refractory Girl; Mabel; Luna; Vashli's Voice; Womanspeak, NSW; Scarlet Woman; Cauldron: A Feminist Journal; Sibyl, Journal of Politics Sex Sexuality and Class; LIP; Right to Choose* (abortion campaign); *Bluestocking*.
- ³¹ Box S0022, Sisters Archive.
- ³² Nicholson, 77.
- ³³ Nicholson, 78.
- ³⁴ The Book Bounty was a federal government rebate to Australian-based publishers for manufacturing costs associated with typesetting, printing and binding, which were incurred in Australia. Print runs of less than one thousand copies were ineligible.
- ³⁵ Minutes, 7 September 1979, Box S0023, Sisters Archive.
- ³⁶ Box S0023, Sisters Archive.
- ³⁷ Box S0023, Sisters Archive.
- ³⁸ Box S0023, Sisters Archive.
- ³⁹ Minutes, 12 December 1979, Box S0023, Sisters Archive.
- ⁴⁰ Nicholson, 78.
- ⁴¹ Minutes, 2 April 1980, Sisters Archive.
- ⁴² Anne Summers, *Ducks on the Pond*, (Melbourne: Penguin, 2000), p. 371.
- ⁴³ Minutes, 16 April 1980, Sisters Archive.
- ⁴⁴ Nicholson, 78.
- ⁴⁵ Ian North, *The Art of Dorrit Black*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, Vic., and S.A. Art Gallery, Adelaide, 1979; Ulli Beier, *Mirka*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, Vic., 1980.
- ⁴⁶ *Sisters News* 3, *Autumn 1980*.
- ⁴⁷ Minutes, Box S0023, Sisters Archive.
- ⁴⁸ Cover text, Beverley Farmer, *Along*, (Melbourne: Sisters Publishing, 1981).
- ⁴⁹ Randall, 119.
- ⁵⁰ *Sisters News* 7; *Sisters News* 12.
- ⁵¹ *Sisters News* 5.
- ⁵² Letter from Di Gribble to Anne Summers, 1978, Sisters Archive.
- ⁵³ Letter from Sally Milner to Suzanne Bellamy, n.d., Sisters Archive.

⁵⁴ Nicholson, 78.

⁵⁵ Coordinator's report, 22 November–17 December 1982, Box S0005, Sisters Archive.

⁵⁶ Minutes, Box S0023, Sisters Archive.

⁵⁷ Minutes, 2 August 1982 and 10 September 1982 and notes of meeting with *The Australian Pensioner*, Sisters Archive.

⁵⁸ Literature Board subsidies, Box S0006, Sisters Archive.

⁵⁹ *Sisters News* 17.

⁶⁰ Minutes, Box S0023, Sisters Archive.

⁶¹ *Sisters News* 17.

⁶² *Sisters News* 17.

⁶³ Nicholson, interview with author, June 2000.

⁶⁴ *Sisters News* 17.

⁶⁵ Correspondence to Murphy Sisters from Sisters (n.d., not signed), Sisters Archive.

⁶⁶ Joyce Nicholson, *A Life of Books*, (Melbourne: Courtyard Books, 2000), p. 279.

⁶⁷ McPhee, 161.

⁶⁸ Correspondence from Murphy Sisters, September 1988, Sisters Archive.

⁶⁹ Sally Milner, e-mail to author, 2 July 2002.

⁷⁰ Hilary Rose (1993), cited in Victoria Robinson and Diane Richardson, "Repackaging Women and Feminism: Taking the Heat off Patriarchy" in Diane Bell and Renate Klein (eds) *Radically Speaking: Feminism Reclaimed*, (Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 1996), 179.

⁷¹ *Sisters News* 17.

⁷² Correspondence, Sisters Archive.

⁷³ Minutes, Box S0023, Sisters Archive.