Trying to Get Published and Failing and Doing It Yourself

(November 2003): The book discussed here is *Reading Between the Lines: A Lesbian Feminist Critique of Feminist Accounts of Sexuality*. (See Publications). In fact, the book never did sell very well—the difficulties of distribution defeated me. Spinifex took over the distribution but most of the 500 copies I gave them are still sitting in their warehouse (I think); and most of the rest of the original 1000 copies are stored in the roof space at my house. I presented this as a paper during Feminist Book Fortnight, at Eva Cox' Distaff Associates premises, St. Johns Rd., Glebe, on 20 September 1991. The 'you' addressed in the text is me—a stylistic device intended to convey the impression that I'm talking to myself. Whether it works or not I'll leave to the reader to decide.

So you decided to do the publishing yourself. Having been rejected by every feminist press in the English-speaking world (well, not really, but that's the way it felt), you decided that it wasn't worth trying again. It was especially futile to keep sending publishers a manuscript they had not solicited, because it took them so long to say 'no'. It had taken Virago 12 months, and the Women's Press in London 18 months, to get back to you with their final decision. (A friend of yours once remarked that the difference between Women's Press and Virago was that the Women's Press apologised as they kicked you downstairs, although you had to admit that they had both apologised for the delay). But even going to a publisher through personal introductions had resulted in rejection, the difference being that once someone had seen and spoken to you, they put you out of your misery sooner.

So you borrowed the money from a friend, lined up another friend to do the typesetting and layout (and teach you how to do it), and launched yourself into the laborious, time consuming, utterly uncharacteristic (of you) process of producing and marketing a book. You didn't see any other way. The publishers' rejections of your ms had destroyed what little faith you had in the ability of those who work in the system to understand what you were saying. You weren't too depressed about that. You didn't take it as a personal insult. You knew that your book had been rejected, not because it was not good enough, but because it

was too good. Indeed, part of what the book was about was the strange inability of those who ought to know better to read accurately the words on the page. You weren't surprised at the rejections, but you did feel helpless about how to get past the gatekeepers of the system which was so busily rewriting and co-opting feminism to make it palatable to the boys (a term which does not include all male persons, but which is synonymous with the ruling class).

One and all, the publishers referred to 'the market', or rather, the lack of same, as the reason why they had regretfully to decline your kind offer. And when you thought about it, it made sense. 'The market' is defined by the boys (with the aid of their female ancillaries). Because your book was an attempt to counter the male supremacist rot within feminism, it was hardly likely to find favour with 'the market'. It was not sound, rational business practice to pour good money into something which refused to pander to the latest intellectual fad designed to veil the male supremacist interests masquerading as 'feminism'. You suspected, too, that 'the market', or supposed lack of same, was a code for your lack of academic status. But you had hoped that somewhere in the self-styled feminist presses there was a publisher's reader who could read what was actually written, instead of filtering it through the cur-rent trendy fashion in 'feminist' theory.

Not all the rejections were bad. Some of the readers made insightful and appreciative comments about what you had written. Susan Ryan at Penguin said that it was 'an important book', but that it was too academic for Penguin. At Pandora, Dale Spender said that she was 'more than impressed with your content and style', and that she thought that you had done 'an excellent piece of work'. However, she was only 'one voice in an editorial context', she said, and there was nothing she could do about it. Janice Raymond at Pergamon liked the book too, and even recommended that it be published. But her recommendation was not taken up, and you didn't know why.

Some of the reasons given for the rejection were frankly bemusing. The Virago editor said that she was 'slightly worried that the tension between the theoretical writing and the personal experience was not quite resolved'. Since you didn't know what distinction she was making, you didn't know what she was talking about. But there wasn't much point in

worrying about it. They weren't going to publish it whatever you did.

The Women's Press editor said that the main reason they wouldn't publish the book was, she thought, because 'the debate on feminism and sexuality is simply too different in Australia from here, or so I am told by Australian feminists with whom I have discussed the matter'. That statement was, quite simply, false. A year or so later, you read Sheila Jeffreys' book, *Anticlimax*, which was published by the Women's Press. Her chapter called 'Feminism and Sexuality' (the title you had originally suggested for your book) contained much the same arguments as your book. It referred to many of the same texts, and even used the same terminology you had used, like 'anti-anti-pornography' and 'sexual libertarian', terms which you had thought up as part of your process of identifying the problem and devising a critique, terms which to your knowledge had never been used before. You did not think that Sheila had seen your ms. But you already knew that she was engaged in much the same critique of the sexuality debates as yourself, and had reached much the same conclusions you had, and in England, the 'here' mentioned in the Women's Press rejection letter.

You got no better reception in Australia. In fact, things got worse. The editor at Women's Redress Press here in Sydney also thought the book was too academic. She suggested that 'a carefully composed collection of interviews with a range of lesbian (and maybe also heterosexual) women on the subject of sexuality could make interesting reading (or has it already been done?)'. You had a fleeting impulse to tell her about Shere Hite (among innumerable others), but you decided that you couldn't be bothered.

Pandora included the reader's report along with their rejection. This reader obviously disliked the book. She referred to its 'untheorised hunches' and 'unsubstantiated claims'. (As a friend of yours pointed out, if she had liked the book, she would have called them 'fruitful insights'). Since the book did contain a theory of sexuality, clearly if sketchily laid out in chapter two, you could only conclude that she couldn't understand it. She also accused you of 'adding words to quotations which change their meaning (notably in favour of the author's own position)'. Since that was one of the very faults you had criticised in the texts you had discussed, you were appalled at the thought that you might have done it too. You

hurriedly checked the two passages she mentioned, only to find that you had done no such thing. The authors you quoted had been talking about 'sex'. They were discussing heterosexual sex, and made no mention of lesbianism. In the quotations you had used, you had interpolated '[with men]' after 'sex', since it was in fact sex with men that the authors were discussing, although they did not say so explicitly. Rather than 'changing' the meaning of what they were saying, your additions clarified it.

In amongst all the rejections by publishers, you were also rejected by a literary agent. She agreed with the Pandora reader. She 'found it hard', she said, 'to pinpoint where you were coming from theoretically'. Anyway, she said, 'the fact that Virago, Penguin and Allen and Unwin [i.e. Pandora] have rejected the work means that there is almost nowhere left to go'. She concluded by suggesting you try Redress Press.

The unkindest cut of all came from Pergamon. One reason you felt Pergamon's rejection so keenly was because they were one of the few radical feminist presses around. They published feminist texts which clearly identified male domination as the enemy (rather than, say, capitalism, or 'gender relations'), and which acknowledged the importance for feminism of connections among women which were outside male control and definition. But then you remembered that the Women's Press was also radical feminist.

And the Pergamon reader's report had lots of good things to say about your book, although you had some misgivings about the way she said them. She referred to the book's 'raw, gutsy energy', and said that 'the author's honesty is admirable', although she then went on to serve you a backhander by commenting: 'though it [i.e. her honesty] sometimes trips her up where she has not thought through her theoretical position'. Since you knew you had thought through your theoretical position, you knew that it was the reader who hadn't thought the theory through. What was worse, she hadn't even seen it, but in this she was no different from the other publishers' readers. This persistent failure on the part of publishers' readers to perceive the theoretical position you did outline might have worried you, were it not for the fact that there were a number of women who could see quite clearly what you were doing. And despite the Pergamon reader's criticisms, she did recommend that it be published. 'While I have mainly pointed out the problems', she said, 'I believe that

75% of this text is gutsy, strong, interesting, provocative and absolutely necessary as an overview of contemporary debates and a contribution to further debate'.

But as far as you were concerned, no amount of positive feedback from this reader counteracted the accusation which was the main reason why the report upset you—her accusation of 'racism'. She didn't put it quite as crudely as that. She referred to 'the author's inability to address questions of race in a satisfactory way', and asserted that you were 'clearly uncomfortable with the issues'. (It occurred to you that if the reader thought she herself was comfortable with the issue of race, she was engaging in self-deception). She discussed her objections to your 'unsatisfactory' handling of the issue of race under the heading 'Race Awareness', of which you appeared to have little or none. Her objection was two-fold—that you excluded from your account 'the voices' of 'women of colour and indigenous women' (quote—unquote), and that you disagreed with certain arguments by 'women of colour and indigenous women'.

You felt that you could not let this pass without comment. In reply, you wrote pointing out that the question of race was irrelevant to the project you were engaged upon, because positions on sexuality did not line up along race lines. You also said that the suggestion that you include a certain quota of writings by 'women of colour and indigenous women', for no other reason than to demonstrate your anti-racist credentials, was tokenistic in the extreme. You also thought (although did not say) that it was racist. It would mean defining women solely through their racial characteristics and using them as a means to an end, rather than addressing their writings on their own merits. You did point out that the reader's recommendation that you use the 'voices' of 'women of colour and indigenous women' in your own text was somewhat ironic, since those 'voices' had already been published and you had not. As for your disagreements with Lynne Segal and Hester Eisenstein (who did not to your knowledge qualify as 'women of colour and indigenous women'), and with Audre Lorde (who probably did), nothing the Pergamon reader said convinced you that your arguments were 'unsatisfactory'. They were, in fact, rather more satisfactory than her own arguments, which relied heavily on triple exclamation points and question marks, and on what could only be deliberate misreadings of what you had said. It all seemed pretty futile. If your original arguments could be so misinterpreted, there didn't seem to be much point in providing more.

You had to make the attempt, but you were not unduly surprised when they had no effect.

But it was not at this point that despair set in. There was, after all, something you could do—you could publish yourself. The main problem with self-publishing is not the work involved in actually making the book, as long, that is, as you have sufficient money and skills for every stage of the long, complicated process. In fact, as you discovered, you even enjoyed it at times. The main problem is distribution. You knew that, but you decided to go ahead anyway. You decided that distribution was only a problem if you wanted to get your money back, and especially if you wanted to make money from the book. You decided that what you had to say was so important, that you would get the book out and just take things as they came. (You had to make that decision if you weren't going to let the bastards get you down).

Despair didn't hit until the arrival of 'Feminist Book Fortnight' (so-called). Despite certain misgivings you had about the feminism of 'Feminist Book Fortnight', you were relying on the publicity it generated to help you get the book known. One aspect of that was to have the book appear in the 'Feminist Book Fortnight' catalogue, which contained listings of books written by women and published during the last two years. This catalogue is distributed for sale to bookshops all over the country, and is backed by resources far beyond anything you could manage by yourself.

You were unclear about what you had to do to get the book included. You naively thought that it was enough that one of the catalogue's organisers in Melbourne knew about your book—in fact, you had had a number of lengthy conversations with her about it, and she had suggested that it be included. She did not, however, tell you how to go about that, or even that there was something you ought to do. You had also made the existence of the book known to one of the Sydney organisers of the Fortnight (who was not involved with the catalogue, which was put together in Melbourne). When you saw the catalogue, you realised that that had not been enough at all. Your book was not in there. Obviously you had had to go through some other esoteric process that no one had told you about.

On further reflection, you could see that you ought to have known. A close study of the first

Australian Feminist Book Fortnight catalogue would have told you that the Fortnight was first and foremost a publicity drive for publishers, that the 'feminism' of the Fortnight was limited to the marketing of 'women's writing', and that 'women's writing' was seen primarily as fiction, drama and poetry, with 'non-fiction' confined to biography and history. What the Feminist Book Fortnight and its catalogue were not concerned with was feminist books, i.e. books which explicitly and directly addessed feminist issues. By a curious lapse of logic, which is perfectly understandable if we remember who owns the publishing houses, 'women's writing' does not automatically include feminist writing. The organisers of the Fortnight do not seek out feminist books to include in the catalogue—they accept what the publishers offer and leave it at that.

This state of affairs is not unchallengeable. You heard of one feminist theorist who had managed to get the publisher to include her book in the catalogue. A simple request and reminder was not sufficient. She had to engage in a protracted campaign of harassment before the publisher would include the book. But you were not very good at that sort of thing. Your years out of the workforce, spent reading, writing, thinking, and clarifying ideas and argument, had unfitted you for such hard-headed politicking. It was only after it was too late that you guessed what the correct procedure was. You realised you should have put on your publisher's hat, officially contacted the group organising the catalogue, and asked to be sent the appropriate forms or whatever, instead of relying on the informal network. If you had done that, you could have overcome the curious logic of the misnamed 'Feminist' Book Fortnight. But the information about what to do was not made available among the reams of material sent out to publicise the Fortnight. So you missed an important opportunity which would have made the hard slog of distribution a little easier.

Still, the despair didn't last long. You were basically an optimistic character, and there were a number of aspects of self-publishing which made it all worthwhile. The process of learning how to make a book (as opposed to actually writing one) was fascinating, especially as you retained control. While the actual printing still had to be done by the (expensive) experts, the new desk-top publishing technology was a delight to use as you watched the book taking shape in front of your eyes. Even the dreaded distribution was not all bad, as long as you took it easy and avoided having to engage in any hard-sell. It was nice to think

that none of the profit (such as it was) was going to the big publishing houses, although some of it had to go to booksellers and Australia Post. As a self-publisher, you did not have to worry about exploitative contracts, copyright, bad design, late royalty payments (or none), inexplicable delays in supply, or that most devastating assault on an author's self-esteem, remaindering. You could keep selling your book till it ran out, and make your own decisions about reprinting. Of course, you were in the fortunate position of having both money and time, two resources which are usually mutually exclusive since most people have to work to get the money and that takes time. And you were learning the system, if painfully.

But the main reason you would do it all again (if you had the money, and if you ever had time to do any more writing) was the feedback you were starting to get from the women who had read the book, and who were as fed up as you were with much of what passes for 'feminism' these days. They were your 'market', the women who could understand and appreciate what you were doing, whether they agreed with you or not. Your 'profit' was good conversation and sharing a passion for speaking the truth, an enterprise which has no monetary value because phallocratic reality cannot afford it. So you weren't too disheartened by the difficulty of it all, or at least not most of the time. The actual concrete existence of the book opened up opportunities you would not otherwise have had. So on balance, it was worth it, and you had every intention of doing it again.