IN OTHER WORDS

Writing as a feminist

Edited by
Gail Chester and Sigrid Nielsen

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Volume 18

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Introduction: writing as a feminist

Gail Chester and Sigrid Nielsen

This book has been written by women of many different ages and backgrounds, living in Scotland, Ireland, and England. Some of the authors have never before published a piece; others are established writers. They use writing for many different purposes: to earn their livings, examine their experiences, communicate their feelings, further their politics; and all of us are writing as feminists.

Each of the contributors would probably provide her own definition of feminist writing – and her own account of what led her to write from her feminist beliefs. The editors' own routes to writing have been completely different from each other: one of us wrote fantasy fiction about amazon heroines, dreamed of being a writer from an early age, and then stumbled on Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* in a supermarket. The other saw writing as an ordinary skill, like mental arithmetic, and only began 'writing' when she joined a feminist group and discovered it produced a magazine. Despite these different approaches, writing plays a vital part in forming our perceptions of our lives as women, in working out our feminist views and in communicating them to others.

In the same way, writing has been crucial to the lives of women all over the world, in the past and now. Writing is essential to women's struggle for liberation from second-class status, poverty and enforced silence. Feminism, literacy and education for women are closely linked worldwide; illiteracy is a central part of women's subordination. Most liberation movements make a priority of teaching reading and writing to their supporters – and women have taken the lead in organizing and running such programmes (see, for example, the introduction to *Sisterhood is Global*, Robin Morgan (ed.), Penguin, 1985). Most totalitarian governments, on the other hand, realize that writing is a danger to their rule. A significant proportion of Amnesty International's prisoners of conscience are writers and journalists; and the authors and publishers of the original feminist *samizdat*, *Woman and Russia* (Sheba, 1980), were forcibly exiled from their country. One of the most

moving sessions of the 1986 Oslo International Feminist Bookfair was 'Writing as a dangerous profession', where women from Spain, Kenya, South Africa, Northern Ireland and Uruguay spoke poignantly of being imprisoned by the authorities, and of being rejected by their own communities, simply for communicating in writing with others. Even in supposedly liberal societies, minority groups often experience difficulty in writing or getting an audience for their work.

Perhaps this is because writing can be a powerful force for change, not only individually, but by enhancing group effectiveness. NUPE, the trade union which represents mainly manual workers in the public sector, has made support for literacy its official policy – and together with other unions has developed a programme called Workbase, which provides literacy and numeracy classes. With their tutor, a group of women cleaners in Sheffield learnt how to organize their writing, take notes at meetings, and write down what they remembered later on. As a result, they gained the necessary confidence to challenge the hierarchy of their own union and elected the first woman shop steward at their largely female workplace.

This power of writing to give women control over their own lives is not limited to our own time. Recent research by Dale Spender (discussed in *Mothers of the Novel*)* shows that English women have been earning money from writing since the early seventeenth century; while in France, Christine de Pisan was writing for a living 200 years earlier (see *Medieval Women Writers*, Wilson). Since then, increasing numbers of women have followed their example, possibly because writing is one of the few professions which does not necessarily require formal training, expensive equipment, or a respectable front. Like many of the most exploitative women's jobs, it is often piecework. And since the writing is being bought, rather than the writer's presence, women have been able to publish under a male pseudonym, as the Brontës and many others have done.

Many of the papers in this collection show how thoroughly an education or a job can transform women's lives. 'Words are weapons' by Pratibha Parmar describes her determination to get a university degree and use her education and writing to improve life for all black people. 'T.S. Eliot never called himself a clerk' by Berta Freistadt explores the way a woman gains confidence by deciding to call herself a writer. Yet, vital as women's relationship to writing has always been, the feminism of the 1960s added an insight

* Biographical details are not given for books and authors listed in the Resources section.