

community profile



New Victoria Publishers Claudia McKay & Beth Dingman Struggle to Keep Lesbian Feminist Culture Alive

“[Glossy magazines] are fine, but the feminism has gone out of it. Now it’s all about fashion, lifestyle, celebrities, parenting. Maybe it’s because we won, but I doubt it.” Claudia McKay

By EUAN BEAR

In the quiet hills above Norwich, Vermont, a small white cape-style house sits on the left side of the road, behind a birch tree holding a small sign: New Victoria Publishers. It is an unassuming place for a publisher whose mission was originally to revolutionize gender relationships in the United States. But there it is.

Work and life partners Beth Dingman and Claudia McKay have 44,000 books in the distribution pipeline, in bookstores around the country, and in storage in their garage. Beth is short and wiry-tough, with short iron gray hair, a practical businesswoman. Claudia is tall, with short auburn curls and a medium build, articulate and visionary. They’ve added a collection of lesbian-oriented rentable videos to broaden their cultural reach. But both women admit that the press they’ve spent 27 years of their professional

lives on is struggling.

It helps not one bit that their primary distributor has gone bankrupt – again – and that they won’t receive payment for any of the books the distributor has shipped out or has in its own warehouse.

Another factor is that, as Claudia says, “The culture has changed, and we just don’t get it.” Beth continues, “Lesbian feminist enterprises are going through a major transformation and difficult times, especially publishers and book stores. The current situation is not just a slump – it isn’t going to get better. The culture has changed and women don’t need the affirmation of the word *lesbian* in books: it’s so much more available now.”

We commiserate over how many women’s presses and bookstores have gone out of business in the last five years, and it’s a long list. In part, the bookstores fell victim to the same forces that have closed independent bookstores across the

country: cutthroat competition by large chains offering huge discounts.

But in part, “The agenda has changed. Lesbianism is now about assimilation. Feminism was more radical, about changing the values of society so we’re not just men in high heels,” Beth suggests.

New Victoria began as a print shop run by a feminist collective in Lebanon, New Hampshire in 1975. The group came together through a women’s writing workshop and included four women who had been fired from another press. Claudia had been arrested with a group of Quakers demonstrating at the White House some time before, and was optimistically expecting a \$30,000 settlement or judicial award for false arrest. The settlement was eventually pared down to \$1500, all of which went to the ACLU for legal expenses. The group then applied to the Haymarket People’s Fund for money to buy a printing press – Haymarket declined to provide funds

directly, but did connect the women with a donor who could provide a press. They printed a lot of local women’s, nonprofit, and leftist movement fliers and posters.

The following year, New Victoria Publishers was born as a nonprofit organization. Claudia remembers, “It really was a women’s community effort. Beth, I think you were the only lesbian in the collective at first.” Claudia reaches for a file of old photographs of the original women who worked on the print shop. She flips it open and begins listing names, along with where the women went when they left New Victoria. Most simply moved on to other projects.

The first year of publishing, Beth got a job teaching printing in Bradford in order to support the press. In 1976, the first edition of the children’s book *Brown Like Me* (originally titled *Noelle Lamperti’s Brown Book*, it was reissued in 1999 with a new introduction and afterword) was

published. And the next year, poetry by Maine writer Miriam Dyak, who named herself after a tribe in Borneo (I met the poet a few years earlier, and I had always thought she said it was matriarchal, but I could find no reference to matriarchal or matrilineal traditions with regard to the Dyak of Borneo). Dyak’s second book of poems, *Dying* was embraced by Marge Piercy, who called it, “an extraordinary work ... as real as a lump of stone, as the palm of your hand.”

Then came *Tilt*, a collection of northern New England women’s art and writing that included poetry by Louise Erdrich, who was then a student at Dartmouth, a member of the first women’s class to matriculate there. The publishers got a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to print a collection of women’s speculative fiction called *WomanSpace*, that included a story by Joanna Russ, author of *The Female Man*.

Eventually, the group had