

to either find a substantial amount of money to upgrade the print shop or close it. New Victoria Publishers paid off the print shop's debts, the print shop closed, and in 1985, New Victoria – by then with three members (Beth, Claudia, and Rebecca Beguin; Claudia and Rebecca are both editors and authors in their own right, and Claudia designed many of the covers) – moved across the border to Norwich.

That was the year Sara Dreher sent New Victoria her first Stoner McTavish mystery.

In New Victoria's best year, said Beth, "we grossed a couple hundred thousand dollars." The four women who worked there actually got paid. But by 1998, sales had started to dip. In 1998 New Victoria published eight books. In 1999, six books came off the presses. They had four books planned for 2000, but there was no income because their distributor – a specialist in alternative presses – went out of business. They now have a new distributor – not the same principals under a new name – and plan to publish two books this fall.

"No one's been paid," declares Claudia. She has been talking about retiring, being less involved. She's relieved in a way that there were so few books in the pipeline when their distributor dissolved. Rebecca Beguin has gone to work for the Vermont Book Professionals Association. The new distribution deal doesn't "officially" take effect until January.

"Part of me, I would like to just shut the doors and move on," Beth admits. But the lifestyle is still attractive: "I could be my own boss and do the things I wanted to. Except for the pay, it's been great! This was a mobile proposition, we could go anywhere and still do this. Finding a regular job would mean our not being together as much, not being able to travel. We travel well together. There are places that we would not go separately, but together we would."

Beth adds that she has reservations about the deal with the new distributor: "It means making a commitment to keep publishing. Maybe if someone came along who was interested and savvy about publishing ... but it's not happening. Besides," she muses, "inertia is my middle name – I'm not very into making changes."

Claudia comes back into the room and the conversation returns to cultural change. "The thing is that we're very wary of getting subsumed by gay male culture. We come out of the feminist movement. But now, 'feminist' is not used and 'lesbian' has been subsumed in the gay cultural scene. And the term 'queer' – I disagree with that, not because of its pejorative history, but because it loses women."

The phone rings, and Beth answers. "No, look," she explains, "we're not a retail store. We have a catalog, and we do everything by mail. If you give me your address, I'll send you out a catalog." It's a guy from New Jersey looking for explicit 'lesbian' pornography among the video offerings. "You can usually tell," she says. "We do have one or two guys who order the more quality videos, but mostly, when it's men, they're looking for porn. None of our titles is porn, though a few might be bad erotica. It's always a question, whether we should be sending that stuff out to men or not."

The video collection was acquired when another woman decided to close her business and sold it to New Victoria. It is, the two women say, an effort to both keep lesbian culture alive by appealing to women who are more video-oriented than print-oriented, and a hoped-for source of income from rentals. Among the titles there are *Aimee and Jaguar*, *Before Stonewall*, *Chutney Popcorn*, *November Moon*, and *Boys Don't Cry*.

Some of the funds are generated by the \$25 membership fee – which also helps screen out guys calling on a whim, looking for pornography. But response (even to a flier in this very newspaper) has been low and slow.

Claudia notes the upsurge in glossy magazines: "They're fine, but the feminism has gone out of it. Now it's all about fashion, lifestyle, celebrities, parenting. Maybe," she muses, "it's because we won, but I doubt it. It's true that half the people in law schools now are women, and half the people in med school are women," but it feels more like being co-opted than like winning, she concludes.

"We're not willing to work on books that are only for entertainment. [The book] needs to be worth the time and have a political point of

view or a spunky character," Claudia explains. I quote a mutual colleague who says she works only on books that "are worth the tree." "Hmmm, 'worth the tree,'" says Beth. "Yeah, I like that." Claudia adds, "Our kind of books are a refuge – especially for isolated lesbians. We want to keep them going."

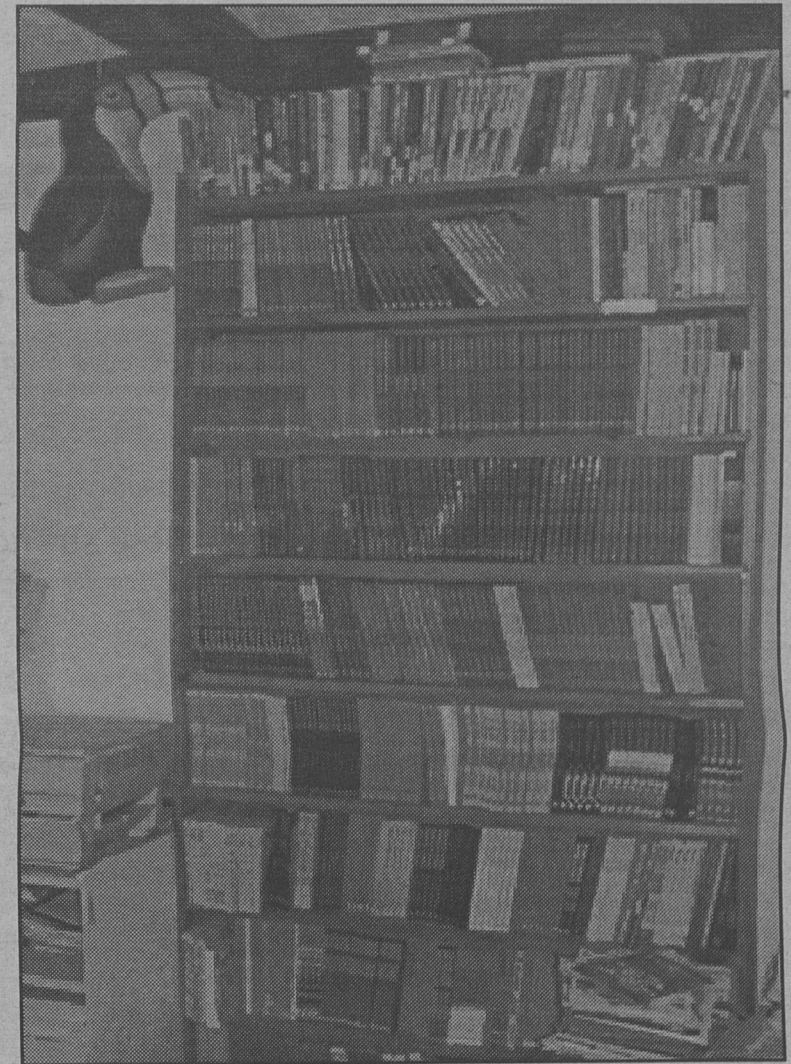
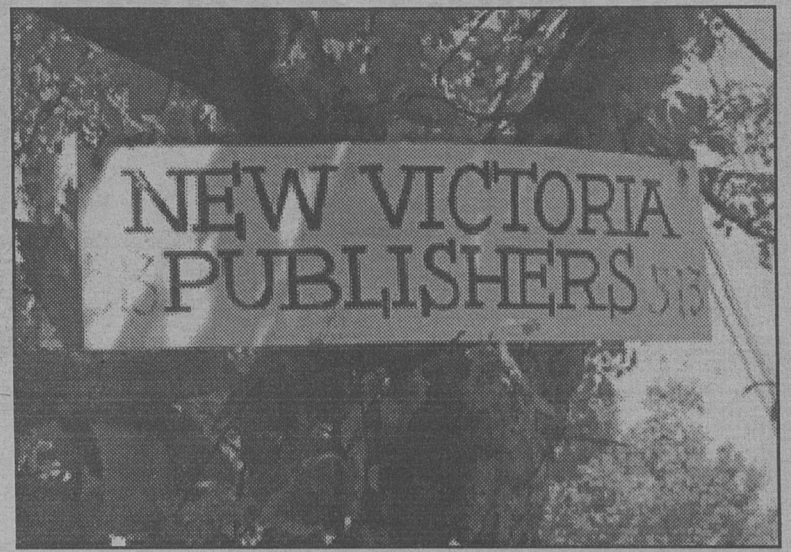
But, counters Beth, "The truth is that there's less demand for the books we publish." She says she would not have minded publishing a few more books that might not have met their political standards as long as they generated some cash flow. "There was Naiad, publishing 24 books a year, and maybe 22 weren't worth reading. But at the end, they had more cash flow, more assets."

New Victoria's best selling book so far is *Barbie Unbound*, by Sara Strohmeier, which sold over 20,000 copies in four months. It was a quirky choice for New Victoria, a photographic compilation of the iconic anti-feminist doll's adventures in the "real world," as imagined by Strohmeier: *PMS Barbie*; *Barbie d'Arc*; *Overweight Adolescent Outcast Barbie*; *Tailhook Barbie*; *Barbie Plath*; *Virginia Slims Barbie*; *Dates Tobacco Lawyer Ken*; *Barbie Antoinette*; *Co-Op Barbie*, complete with brown hair on legs and armpits. Sometimes satire is the best revenge. Certainly Strohmeier seems to have thought so.

Claudia refuses to name a favorite book, saying that since she edited them all, she has no perspective. Beth's favorite book is one of the Stoner McTavish mysteries: *Something Shady*, by Sarah Dreher, "because it pokes serious fun at psychiatry and talks about the definition of crazy – sort of like the movie *King of Hearts*."

Both Beth Dingman and Claudia McKay seem to be "in process" with New Victoria. At age 68, Claudia hopes to travel more and edit less. Beth would feel more committed to continue if there were hope for the future of feminist lesbian fiction or an influx of cash or energy. Whatever happens with New Victoria, it has played a role for many feminists and lesbians: teaching, entertaining, supporting, connecting, affirming. ▼

Check out New Victoria's website at www.newvictoria.com.



Opposite: Claudia McKay and Beth Dingman. This page: views from New Victoria's Norwich offices.

Landmark Gay and Lesbian Bookstore Closes in Montreal

By PAUL OLSEN

Citing increased competition and poor sales, the owner of Montreal's landmark gay and lesbian bookstore, L'Androgyne, announced that the store would close by the end of August.

Billed as the "Gay and Lesbian Bookstore of Montreal since 1973," L'Androgyne was located on St. Laurent Boulevard for most of its 30-year history. Less than two years ago the store was purchased by Bernard Rousseau and moved to Amherst Street, closer to the city's Gay Village. Unfortunately, the move didn't help boost sales.

In an interview, Rousseau said the decision

to close L'Androgyne was a difficult one. "I think the need is just not there anymore for that kind of store."

Rousseau notified customers of the closing in a message posted on the store's web site. "The main reason we arrived at this decision is cut-throat competition from the major bookstore chains which all now carry a selection of gay and lesbian titles, from some discounters selling some of our titles almost at our cost and from all the Web sites and especially Amazon.ca just now starting to sell into Canada," he wrote. "We think the business model of specialized little bookstores is broken and non-sustainable. Gays and lesbians can now find books and videos from the regular mainstream mer-

chants."

"I've come here many times so it represents a loss," said customer Bradford Brown of Montreal. "When I travel I usually go to the [gay] bookstore, someplace that I know is not just a place to buy books. It is a place to find identity and learn what a community really is about."

According to Todd Anderson, President of the Toronto-based Canadian Booksellers Association (CBA), many independent bookstores are losing the battle against large chain stores. "We have lost some excellent stores over the past eight years, we have faced coercive behavior and we have been challenged with intense competition."

According to

Michael Hoynes, Chief Marketing Officer for the American Booksellers Association in Tarrytown, New York, "Most of the greatest loss of [U.S.] independent bookstores took place in the early 90's. Approximately 40 percent of independent bookstores in the country went out of business. A lot of it had to do with the super chain stores and the Internet."

Likewise, in a recent story, PlanetOut.com reported that Different Drummer Books, a gay bookstore in Laguna Beach, California, was closing after fifteen years. ▼

"The agenda has changed. Lesbianism is now about assimilation."
Beth Dingman