



# Women in Print

*Essays on the Print Culture of  
American Women from the Nineteenth  
and Twentieth Centuries*

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## Preface and Acknowledgements

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On the afternoon of September 11, 2001, Wayne Wiegand and James Danky, co-directors of the Center for the History of Print Culture in Modern America, a joint program of the University of Wisconsin–Madison and the Wisconsin Historical Society, arrived at an obvious but not surprising decision. Namely, that the conference, “Women in Print,” scheduled for September 14–15, 2001, and which had been planned for over two years, would need to be cancelled. In the days of sadness and anger following the tragedies of 9/11, the center determined that the conference could not be rescheduled, a great disappointment to those on the Madison campus as well as to the many scholars across North America who had made proposals and were preparing to come to Madison. We know that the conference would have been a great success, both in terms of intellectual content and local arrangements, because of the work of Jane Pearlmutter, assistant director of the School of Library and Information Studies, who has aided the Center so many times in the past.

However, we determined that we would proceed with our intention to produce a volume of the best papers, and we invited participants in the lost conference to submit finished drafts appropriate for publication. After careful review, the papers in this volume were selected. In this process Rima Apple, William J. Reese, Phyllis Holman Weisbard, and all members of the center’s advisory board aided the editors. The committee’s work was greatly facilitated by Fran Scharko Steele and Sarah Dauscher of the Wisconsin Historical Society’s Library. The center’s “home” is in the School of Library and Information Studies where it has benefited greatly from the support and advice of its director, Louise Robbins.

The center celebrated its tenth anniversary in October 2002 and it continues to help determine the historical sociology of print in modern America (ca. 1876 to the present) in all its culturally diverse manifestations. (See the center's WebPages for more details, including our mission statement <http://slisweb.lis.wisc.edu/~printcul/>.) In designing our colloquia, annual meeting, and biennial conferences we rely on the wisdom and energy of our advisory board members who include, in addition to those cited above: James L. Baughman, Paul Boyer, Sargent Bush (Chair), Kenneth Frazier, Peter Gottlieb, Robert Kingdom, Ginny Moore Kruse, Mary N. Layoun, Anne Lundin, Nellie McKay, Tony Michels, Richard Ralston, Stephen Vaughn, and David Woodward.

This volume, the fourth to be published by the University of Wisconsin Press as part of the series *Print Culture History in Modern America*, has benefited from the encouragement and support of press director Robert Mandel, and associate director Steve Salemsen has been essential to the enterprise. *Women in Print* is the inaugural title to be published both online and as print on demand. The cooperative venture between the Press and the University of Wisconsin–Madison Library is an important development in scholarly communications. The Press has been an enthusiastic supporter of this initiative, especially Terry Emmrich, Scott Lenz, Adam Mehring, and Mary Sutherland. For the General Library System, the volume has benefited from the work of Eric Larson, Tom Murray, Lee Konrad, and Wayne Hayes.

## The Volume

This book divides into four parts. The first consists of Barbara Sichertman's essay "Connecting Lives: Women and Reading, Then and Now," which was to have been the conference keynote. Sichertman locates women and reading in a much broader context of print culture history. By scanning the contemporary cultural landscape, she finds evidence of a "reading revival" at the beginning of the twenty-first century and sees women positioned at its center. In a theoretically grounded, well-crafted historiographical journey, she traces the kind of relationship between women and reading of which Oprah's Book Club is only the latest (albeit the best-known) manifestation since its mid-nineteenth-century origins.

Sicherman's introductory piece is followed by ten essays that conveniently divide into three sections. In the section titled "Print for a Purpose: Women as Editors and Publishers," Kristin Bloomberg seeks to rescue Clara Bewick Colby, editor of the *Women's Tribune* (Beatrice, Nebraska) from 1883 to 1909, from a women's history that has overlooked a generation of feminist activism between Seneca Falls (1848) and passage of the Nineteenth Amendment (1920). As editor, Colby used the *Tribune's* columns as an agent to link the women's culture she inherited to a feminist activism she hoped would lead to true equality for women. June Howard resurrects the career of Elizabeth Jordan, editor of *Harper's Bazar* from 1900 to 1913 and editor of two composite novels, *The Whole Family* (1908) and *The Sturdy Oak* (1917). As editor, Jordan crossed and combined public and private worlds and commercial and cultural space in attempts to open up room for women in professional worlds. Terri Castaneda highlights the career of *Smoke Signal* editor Marie Mason Potts. *Smoke Signal* was a periodical representing the interests of the Federated Indians of California that was published between 1948 to 1978. As editor, Potts helped shape California Native Americans' political solidarity and cultural identity, and gave voice and cultural pride to marginalized people seeking land claims legislation. At the same time, Potts modeled behavior for several female American Indian editors who followed her. Toni Samek shows how San Francisco Public Library employee Celeste West founded the Booklegger Press in 1972 to articulate through *Booklegger Magazine* an alternative library philosophy. In its pages West challenged the professional ideology that libraries could provide "neutral" service and collections embracing "all points of view." In addition to *Booklegger*, the press also published *Revolting Librarians* (1972), a collection of forty essays on many topics, all demonstrating bias that exists throughout the library profession. *Revolting Librarians*, many have argued, marked the beginnings of critical analysis in library literature.

Three essays fit comfortably into the second section, entitled "Women in a World of Books." Michelle Cloonan analyzes the career of California bookseller Alice Millard, an aggressive arbiter of highbrow taste in a middlebrow book world. In the 1920s, Millard was the only woman in America running an antiquarian bookstore, and she did so on a shoestring budget by creating what she called "undeniable opportunities for those who wanted to possess fine things." Cloonan argues that the gospel of good taste she preached and practiced in the early

twentieth century has endured in the rare book world. Jane Aikin looks at a number of highly educated women who assumed positions as bibliographers and subject-heading specialists at the Library of Congress at the beginning of the twentieth century, when the LC shifted its focus toward becoming a national library. In such positions these women became silent arbiters between publications and consumers by crafting rules and practices that have influenced librarianship and the world of books ever since. Although names like Harriet Wheeler Pierson, Malina Gilkey, Elizabeth Howard West, and Margaret D. McGuffey have long since faded into the pages of Library of Congress history, Aikin makes a convincing case for their pioneering work. Christine Pawley describes a mid-century Wisconsin Free Library Commission–sponsored project that funded a bookmobile library service to the rural parts of Door and Kewaunee counties in Wisconsin’s Door Peninsula. With the project WFLC sponsors hoped to demonstrate to local citizens that libraries constituted “an important and informational asset.” At the same time, they hoped to balance the gender profile of users away from primarily women and children, and to attract more men. During the project, circulation figures did rise by 160 percent, and although a majority were children, 95 percent of adult users were farm women and female teachers in rural schools, whose lives were transformed in many ways and who interacted directly with the female professionals providing the service. All used the project to challenge gendered domains and role definitions.

While women in previous sections focused on particular sites (periodical and book publishing and library institutions) as opportunities to effect change in the world of print, women profiled in the third and final section (“A Centrifugal Force: Gendered Agency Through Print”) worked as authors and used print to effect change in women’s lives. For forty years following the Civil War, Lois Waisbrooker published books and periodicals on female sexuality and women’s rights. When she was arrested in 1894 for violating the Comstock Act of 1873, she declared, “If prison will advance the work, I am ready.” Joanne Passet points out that her contributions constituted a site around which rallied a geographically dispersed community of female readers who were marginalized by the dominant patriarchy. Sarah Robbins analyzes several late-nineteenth-century religious foreign mission periodicals for gendered agency, and discovers that those women who wrote for and read from the pages of these periodicals used a set of shared social beliefs and activities to

fashion a community for themselves. For example, for half a century a Presbyterian monthly titled *Woman's Work for Woman* offered space in its pages for "home letters" and other columns in which authors shared stories. These periodicals, Robbins shows, played a productive role in the everyday lives of their readers. In hundreds of variously titled articles in the "women's section" of *La Follette's Magazine* over a twenty-year period beginning in 1909, Belle Case La Follette sought to influence public opinion in her highly personalized column. She called upon her fellow women (who until 1920 lacked the franchise) to champion the cause of African Americans, another oppressed group. Her persistence reflected a deep and broad-based commitment to civil rights, since she refused to back away from criticizing the racism of some of her white sisters. What upset her most, however, were efforts of Woodrow Wilson's administration to racially segregate federal agencies. Nancy Unger concludes that the Wilson administration failed in its attempt to segregate federal civil service in large part because Belle Case La Follette used the printed word to challenge its segregationist activities.

