



Biography Seminar 15th Anniversary Program October 28, 2005

Report by Kathy Chamberlain, Chair of the WWWL Steering Committee

Our fifteenth anniversary program, “Inside Stories: Women’s Voices from Prison.” took place October 28th in the Skylight Room of the CUNY Graduate Center. The event was a true success: moving readings, informed discussion, a standing-room-only crowd. Bell Gale Chevigny and Jane Maher, co-facilitators, spoke from their considerable knowledge of prison issues. Bell is a member of the PEN Prison Writing Committee and editor of *Doing Time: 25 Years of Prison Writing*, a PEN American Center Prize Anthology; and Jane is director of the Pre-College Program for Marymount Manhattan College at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for Women, where she has taught literature and writing to student inmates for ten years.

Bell opened the event, I spoke about who we are (see “Introductory Remarks” below), and two former prisoners read from their work. Sharon White, who served time at Bedford Hills, a state prison, read energetic, imaginative poetry. Susan Rosenberg, incarcerated in a federal prison until her release, read two powerful passages from her forthcoming memoir. Sharon’s poem “Same Ole Same Old” was a special hit with the audience. Susan read an unforgettable description of terrible brutality that she witnessed in a jail where she was being held—and how, in the silence that followed, she recited from her cell Langston Hughes’ poem “Harlem” (“What happens to a dream deferred?”) and another woman prisoner began singing “Amazing Grace,” with the others joining in one by one.

After Sharon and Susan discussed various issues with each other, Bell, and Jane, there was a discussion with the audience. Participants included seminar members Sherry Gorelick, Louise Bernikow, and Blanche Wiesen Cook. Several in the audience offered to tutor or teach in prison, and some of the students said they felt inspired to seek out further information and explore the possibilities of doing volunteer work. The facts presented were mind-boggling—for instance, the extent to which law libraries and college programs in U. S. prisons have been ended; recent increases in the number of women prisoners; the high percent of women prisoners who are there because of nonviolent drug-related offenses; and the fact that the U. S. has close to 2,200,000 people behind bars, a much higher percent of the population than in other Western countries.

Bell and Dorothy O. Helly co-chaired the committee that planned the event, greatly helped by Jane. Dorothy served as liaison to our Graduate Center sponsors, the Center for the Humanities and the Center for the Study of Women and Society. We are especially grateful to Aioibheann Sweeney, Deputy Director of the Center for the Humanities, for arranging publicity, room, and refreshments. Sydney Ladensohn Stern and Trudy Balch, assisted by someone from the Feminist Press, helped sell books at a literature table.

We were glad to have the opportunity to do an outreach program like this for our fifteenth anniversary and for the chance to work with our generous CUNY Graduate Center sponsors.

Introductory Remarks, Kathy Chamberlain

I want to welcome all of you to “Inside Stories: Women’s Voices from Prison.” The Women Writing Women’s Lives seminar is very happy to host this program on the occasion of our 15th anniversary. This is the way we wish to celebrate our anniversary, and we thank Sharon White and Susan Rosenberg very much for being here today to read and discuss their work. We thank our seminar sisters Bell Gale Chevigny and Dorothy O. Helly for co-chairing the planning committee, and Bell and Jane Maher for co-facilitating our discussion today. And we are more grateful than we can possibly say to the City University of New York’s Graduate Center for having provided us with a home, not only today but for the last decade.

I want to say just a little bit about us. Women Writing Women’s Lives is an ongoing university seminar of biographers and memoirists, a group of sixty women who represent a wide range of feminist perspectives and are from a variety of professional backgrounds. We are academics from such fields as history, literature, and women’s studies, as well as independent scholars, journalists, and free-lance writers.

The seminar was founded in 1990, and there is no single story of how we came into being. The Tamiment Library at NYU, which houses our organizational papers, is in the process of interviewing our founding members, so we are still gathering information about our origins and will perhaps one day soon have a more complete picture. But it seems that in the fall of 1990 there was a dinner attended by Carolyn Heilbrun (author of *Writing a Woman’s Life*), Aileen Ward, Deirdre Bair, and Louise Bernikow, where the idea of a seminar was discussed. One prompt seems to have been the frustration experienced in another seminar, sometimes referred to—inaccurately, I’m afraid—as “the men’s seminar.” Frustration was expressed about the conventional approaches encountered there, as well as constraints on discussion. A great need was felt for a forum in which themes and techniques could be explored that would help women biographers better comprehend the lives of their subjects. This initial group of women was quickly joined by many others.

On my bookshelves are many books written by seminar sisters, and I took down a few of the biographies today—very arbitrarily—just to give a sense of variety: Blanche Wiesen Cook’s *Eleanor Roosevelt*, volumes I and II; Nell Irvin Painter’s *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol*; Susan Hertog’s *Anne Morrow Lindbergh: Her Life*, Shareen Brysac’s *Resisting Hitler: Mildred Harnack and the Red Orchestra*; Sydney Ladensohn Stern’s *Gloria Steinem: Her Passions, Politics & Mystique*; Nancy Rubin Stuart’s *The Reluctant Spiritualist: The Life of Maggie Fox*; Donez Xiques’ *Margaret Laurence: The Making of a Writer*; Gail Hornstein’s *To Redeem One Person is to Redeem the World: The Life of Frieda Fromm-Reichmann*; and Jean Fagan Yellin’s *Harriet Jacobs: A Life: The Remarkable Adventures of the Woman Who Wrote “Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl”*.

During many of our seminar discussions, I’ve been struck by how iffy it can be for a woman to find a voice, to manage to write anything at all, to save the records necessary for the writing of a life. We have heard far too many tales of women whose papers were burned, lost, torn up by herself, destroyed by others, thrown out by accident; and tales of women whose circumstances prevented their writing at all, or prevented their writing for long stretches of time, matters detailed by Tillie Olsen in her classic work *Silences*.

In the face of the real experience of prison, it is perhaps unfair, or unwise, to speak of the metaphor: but in addition to someone like Mildred Harnack, who was actually imprisoned—by Hitler, in Germany—our seminar has considered the lives of many women who were as if in prison—the myriad prisons of racism, sexism, homophobia, abuse, low expectations, illness, social stereotypes, political oppression. And how some of them were fortunate to discover, as one of our founders, Carolyn Heilbrun, put it, that “To write at all is to survive”—which bears repeating: **“To write at all is to survive.”**

We are for writing, surviving, finding voices, speaking out, speaking truth to power, and the recording and telling of the lives of women, known and unknown; and it is in this spirit that we’re hosting this program today on “Women’s Voices from Prison.”