

## FROM THE EDITORS: A BOOKSTORE OF ONE'S OWN

July 29, 2011. Last week I attended a reading and Q-and-A with mystery author Sara Paretsky, at one of the few remaining indie bookstores in Madison: Room of One's Own, on West Johnson Street. "Room," as it's often called, has been a feminist fixture in town for thirty-six years, with a loyal and longstanding following (and now an online storefront as well, at [www.roomofonesown.com](http://www.roomofonesown.com)). Even so, last December, with sales down, the owners wondered if they could confidently renew their lease beyond 2011. Fortunately, a successful "buy five more books this year" pledge drive has helped secure a more solid future for Room. But the co-owner who introduced the reading celebrated that success cautiously. "If you buy books here, we can be here," she said simply. "Yes, they're cheaper at Amazon.com," she added, "but you can't meet Sara Paretsky in person at Amazon.com."

I winced as Paretsky then took the podium and — before she began reading her work — spoke passionately about the value of this store as well as other independents, and the importance of supporting them to keep them in our communities. I hadn't been in the store for quite awhile, and the last books I had bought were from Amazon.com — or from Borders. Of course, Borders had just announced that it would be folding, nationwide, and liquidating all of its remaining stores. The big chain had failed. Ironic, I thought, remembering the very different face of Borders thirty years ago:

I moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan, in the fall of 1980. I was a naïve, scared, but excited twenty-three-year-old, a year out of college, hoping to experience the big wide world and grow up in ways I couldn't articulate

but imagined with vague longing. I would end up staying for nine years, until I moved on to what seemed like the even bigger world of Seattle, Washington. Then I would move in 1995 to Madison, Wisconsin, where I've been happily settled ever since — and where, in 2000, I lucked into the job of a feminist word-nerd's dreams, editing *Feminist Collections* for the women's studies librarian's office at the University of Wisconsin.

A key feature of my world-expanding experience, in that first decade of independent adulthood in the urban wilds (it seemed to me) of Ann Arbor, was the first independent bookstore I grew to love: Borders. Yes, Borders! Not everyone realizes that the big-box behemoth that just announced its own extinction was once the antithesis of "chain store." In recent years, the downtown Ann Arbor Borders has been known as "Store One" of hundreds. Back in the early 1980s, though, that store *was* Borders, and it was unlike anything else around.

I grew up in some important ways in that Borders. For nine years I spent an amazing amount of my meager income there (never regretting a penny of it). I was in awe of the staff, many of them otherwise-out-of-work ABDs in English literature who didn't want to leave town, and who seemed to know every title in the store, or at least could figure out from very few clues exactly what I needed and which shelf it was on. It was there that I first encountered women's studies, in the form of a small bookcase near the front of the store. I'd sidle up to that bookcase, afraid to be seen scanning titles that included the lesbian novels I nevertheless was dying to read, and in the process discovered the works of poet, novelist, and memoirist May Sarton — almost all of

which I bought there before I moved to the West Coast. Over time I also got comfortable chatting with fellow shoppers; it was definitely a cozy, community gathering place. In fact, one Sunday a small crowd of us were waiting on the sidewalk for the store to open (it was one of the few places in town where one could get the Sunday *New York Times*), and an acquaintance and I wistfully remarked to each other that the only thing lacking at Borders was a café. "Wouldn't it be wonderful," one of us said, "if you could drink coffee in the same place where you browsed books?" Then we both said, "Nah — they'd never do it." (Irony indeed.)

In Seattle in the early 1990s, I reveled in the abundance and variety of independent bookstores, from three-story Elliott Bay with its basement café (!) in Pioneer Square, to collectively run Red and Black on Capitol Hill, and I hung out in and shopped at them all. They didn't have to have coffee shops, since there was an espresso stand on every corner in the city. I even envisioned putting together a bookstore-and-espresso tour for visiting friends and relatives. Borders, which I was dismayed to learn had become a national chain, opened a downtown Seattle store during that time, but I avoided it.

One of the first things I knew about Madison, Wisconsin, was that it had bookstores to die for — including the magical and incomparable Canterbury Books, long gone now, and the feminist Room of One's Own, which has lasted, although not without some anxious moments. Sadly, though, over the past sixteen years I, like many of my peers, have gradually drifted away

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from the downtown independents. I also buy fewer books than I did in the old days, as the mortgage payments and shrinking storage space of middle age have turned me into more of a library borrower. And when I shop for books, well, um... I'll have to confess that I let myself be seduced not only by the big stores with their discounts, abundant free parking, and plentiful café seating, but also by the one-click ease and door-to-door delivery that is, well... You-Know-What.com. It was only right that I should wince upon my return to Room of One's Own.

I made a vow that night, though, to return to Room more often from now on, and to spend at least some of my book dollars there; and to start myself off I purchased Paretsky's latest novel and got it signed. This is not so noble of me — after all, Borders is about to be a non-option anyway; its major competitor is still in town with that parking, those discounts, and all that coffee; and I am not swearing

off of You-Know-What entirely. But I'm ready to recommit to the truly independent bookstore, and especially to the fabulous feminist one down the street from my office (who needs parking when you're on foot? and there's espresso on every block). I hope it's not too late.

This issue of *Feminist Collections* reviews books that Room of One's Own will gladly order for you if they are not stocked in the store — see the four about Caribbean women writers, reviewed by Consuelo López Springfield; the four about women defining themselves in theater, reviewed by Autumn Shiley; and the sixteen reference works reviewed by librarians from all over. We also have a group review of the independent film *Pink Saris*, a look at how Web-based information gets archived and can be found, and our regular columns about periodicals and “e-sources.”

○ J.L.

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