

Friends of 3Graces

3Graces' Literary Manager, Suzanne Barbetta, speaks with Gloria Jacobs, Executive Director of The Feminist Press at CUNY

Earlier this summer, Suzanne e-interviewed Ms. Jacobs for 3Graces' summer issue of GraceNews. Unfortunately, the interview had to be edited for space considerations. It was such a great conversation, though, and we didn't want you to miss out on any of it. So here it is in its entirety:

SB: *How did The Feminist Press start?*

GJ: We like to say that The Feminist Press started in Florence Howe's mailbox. It was 1970 and Florence, who is the founder of the Press, was teaching literature at Goucher College in Maryland. She began talking with colleagues and students about the need for materials for the new women's studies courses that were cropping up. There were no textbooks, much of women's writing from earlier eras – including the 20s and 30s – was out of print. Florence went off on vacation and said if the group would make some donations to help fund the cost of printing up some materials she would take charge of doing it. She came back from vacation and her mailbox was stuffed with checks, and that was it. The Feminist Press was born.

SB: *What inspired your commitment to women and women's stories?*

GJ: I find it hard to imagine that all women wouldn't become feminists – it seems so obvious to me. But I know that isn't fair to so many women whose background and current situations might make it difficult for them to accept that we are all equal, that women and men should have equal rights and opportunities, and that our education and socialization needs to reflect that.

More specifically, my mother is certainly an inspiration for my involvement with women's issues. She was a single mother raising three children on her own; she didn't finish high school, and always had very low-paying jobs, but took for granted that she would find a way to send all three of us to college – myself as well as my two brothers. Her siblings, who were married and generally had two-incomes, didn't really understand the idea that you would send a daughter to college, since she was just going to get married and be in the home anyway – I grew up in the 50s and 60s. But I also saw my mother's strength and ability to cope at a time when women were still considered fragile in many ways. And then as life happened to me I began to see my own strength and finally realized that the model I had grown up with, that women were somewhat helpless – or should act as if they were – and that their greatest achievement should be marriage, was bull****, if you'll excuse the expression.

In the 60s and early 70s the struggle for civil rights and then war in Vietnam drew many of my friends and me into political activity, and from there activism around women's issues seemed both obvious and inevitable. I don't think I planned to always work in women's organizations, but over the years I've discovered that I'm happiest working with women – I think a combination of nature and nurture has made us more egalitarian and less competitive with each other, and I like that kind of environment. So that is why, when I saw that The Feminist Press was looking for a new Executive Director, I jumped at the opportunity.

SB: *How does Feminist Press find emerging writers?*

GJ: Finding good writers is not easy! I know writers hate to hear that, but as an editor I realize that part of the problem is that I'm looking for work that specifically fits our mission and our editorial needs – I'm not going to publish all memoir one year and all literature by say, French writers the next. So finding the right mix of fiction and nonfiction, young and older writers, out of print and new work, U.S. and international is a challenge. One solution, which we've instituted this year, is to create an advisory board that represents the diversity we're looking for in writers; they will recommend writers that they know of, review manuscripts for us, and generally help us



expand our reach. But we also encourage writers to send us proposals. The guidelines are on our website: www.feministpress.org, and we review every proposal that we get and ask for a manuscript if we think the proposal sounds like something we would like. We don't read unsolicited manuscripts though – we'd never get any other work done if we did that! We also are not able to commission books that have not been written yet – we don't have the money for the kind of advances that would require.

SB: What are the current challenges facing your organization?

GJ: At 38 years old, we are the oldest continuing feminist publisher in the world. That's an extraordinary achievement, but also a painful one: where are the others that started when we did, or later? Why are there so few surviving feminist publishers and bookstores? We would all love to see the day when we don't need feminist publishers and bookstores, but we're not there yet. But I don't see our greatest challenge as keeping feminist alive – I think there are still many many readers out there who want to read what we publish. Our greatest challenge after 38 years is surviving the current economy and the enormous technological shifts that are going on. The economy is a temporary blip, but when you're a small, independent publisher, the fact that the cost of paper is going up, as is the cost of fuel for shipping our books, coupled with the fact that people have less money available to spend on books, this is a blip that can do a lot of damage.

At the same time, publishing is experiencing the technological shifts that are affecting the music, film, and tv audiences. Technology allows people to choose when and where and most importantly, in what format, they will listen to music, see a film or read a book. Book publishing is at the beginning of this enormous shift, with ebook readers just coming on the market. But the changes will happen quickly and when the recession is over, we will not be able to go back to the world of book publishing as it existed even a year ago.

I wouldn't be honest if I didn't admit that the challenge is frightening as well as exciting: my daughter and son, who are in their 20s, may be reading books off their cell phones, or certainly from an e-reader in a few years – it frees them from carrying a pile of books when they go on a trip, say, but as a publisher, I don't yet know how I will pay writers and earn money for the Press with that model.

The most important thing for us right now is to find challenging, provocative, engaging books that people will want to read and think about, no matter what the format.

SB: What new initiatives and projects are you excited about?

GJ: And that leads me to some of our new initiatives – all of which I'm deeply excited about. We have a project funded by The National Science Foundation, as well as several individuals who are concerned about science education in the U.S. The goal of the project is to encourage women to enter and remain in scientific fields, and we're doing it through books that are interesting, lively, and good literature as opposed to books that are "worthy." We have a novel about a young woman who discovers science through her experiments with cooking, a novel about an astrophysicist who tries to rebuild her career after spending a decade raising children. We also have nonfiction in the series: a revised edition of Vivian Gornick's groundbreaking book on women in science that lays bare the barriers women faced in the last decades of the 20th century and still face today in many cases – although Gornick shows that women are more attuned to the problems now and ready to bust that glass ceiling.

We have an exciting new novel by a new author from Argentina, Gloria Lise. The novel is about a young woman who is forced into hiding with relatives in a rural area after the military comes to power and begins abducting and killing activists and anyone associated with them. There is a marvelous, almost magical realist quality to the descriptions of the village where she is hiding, which shows that life, in all its variety and loveliness, goes on in even in the most difficult of circumstances.

We will be publishing a new book of essays for Black Women's Studies in 2009, titled *Still Brave*, that updates our earlier book – the first of its kind. And we're working on pamphlets aimed at young immigrant women in the City

University system, to help them understand how to become political activists and use the skills they are gaining while attending college. We're housed in the Graduate Center of the City University, and are aware of how many young immigrant women are in the university, and are often the first women in their families to receive a higher education – they may be the first in their families at all to attend college, but it's especially important to see that families from traditional patriarchal cultures are encouraging, and allowing their daughters to attend college. We want to build on what they're learning.

SB: *Can you see our organizations working together on any projects?*

GJ: I love the way our mission statements reflect each other and sort of dance along the same edge! All of us who are promoting women's voices need to work with each other, as a way to magnify our efforts. I can imagine lots of way we can do that: we could work with you to turn some of our books into plays – along the lines of what Joan Holden did with Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed*. But they don't have to be finished productions: we could also have living authors do readings of their work as a first step towards thinking about the dramatic potential of their writing. It would be exciting for us to see some of our books brought to life in that way, and we could bring out our audience of readers as well as your audience of theater-goers, mixing media as well as people!

Gloria Jacobs is Executive Director of The Feminist Press at CUNY, the oldest continuing feminist publisher in the world that publishes works by and about women. A journalist, editor, and author, Ms. Jacobs was for many years the Executive Editor of Ms. magazine. At 3Graces' Annual Benefit this year, we honored Ms. Jacobs and The Feminist Press with a 2008 Amazing Grace award for their sustained commitment to ensuring women's presence as writers and thinkers in the world of ideas and for bringing new, empowered voices of women to the general public through their books.

To learn more about The Feminist Press, please visit www.FeministPress.org.