

## The Haunted Room

By Carole DeSanti



“Give her another hundred years, ... a room of her own and five hundred a year,” wrote Virginia Woolf in 1929, of the woman novelist. “[L]et her speak her mind... and she will write a better book one of these days.” In her essay “A Room of One’s Own,” Woolf looked forward to a time when women writers would not find themselves so utterly circumscribed, “at strife” with themselves, and fighting conditions hostile to the creative process.

She knew very well that creative and intellectual freedom depend on material resources, and that “women have always been poor,” as she wrote. But even though her famous “five hundred pounds” are central to the essay, she barely pauses at the site of connection between writers and their main source of financial support, the commercial publishing industry. (She saw the popular women’s writing of the time as part of the problem of the less-than-“better” book, and sidestepped the issue to some extent by publishing her own work with Hogarth Press, the small publishing company that she ran with her husband, Leonard.) Woolf’s references, in terms of the battles to be fought and foundations laid, were to the beadle-patrolled lawns of Oxford and Cambridge, the measuring sticks of critics and professors, and the almost exclusively male preserve of the literary world, and the remedy she proposed was the complete reconstruction of literary knowledge and imagination along egalitarian lines. By bringing attention to the conditions under which creative effort occurred, she provided for women writers a compelling metaphor, a vote of confidence, and a blueprint.

Indeed, in the three generations since Woolf wrote her famous essay, women’s expressive efforts have been unprecedented, in terms of contracts written, ink spilled, and volumes sold. Many women have turned full force to the market, rather than to the still-contested terrain of the literary establishment, to underwrite their “rooms,” transforming themselves from bluestockings to blue chip. With a mass audience responsive to distinctive content and genuinely interested in a diversity of voices, and new ways to promote and sell, women writers have been able to shrug off the continuing paucity of traditional literary opportunity. If Shakespeare’s long-suffering sisters can produce the right sorts of novels, promote them, and not allow too much time to elapse between books, they can stake out a gold mine.

So, are our “rooms” amenities solidly established? Do we now enter at will, abide and create freely? Are women writers inspired, productive, reasonably happy, and able to engage fruitfully with their work’s deepest challenges? Do they write with the confidence that they will be heard? Do they have “enough” to share, can they afford to be generous? Have women writers, on the whole, engaged with, and dwelled within, what Woolf called the “incandescent mind”?

“Despite bestseller rankings and lifestyle features, big advances, and superstardom, many women writers seem to be living hardscrabble creative lives. Even those whose “rooms” are more like palaces are nailing down the floorboards, putting buckets under leaky roofs, and wondering how to keep the lights on, particularly those of the “incandescent mind.””

When I was a young editor just starting out in the publishing industry twenty-some years ago, I learned that publishers thought about books this way: on the one hand, there was critically acclaimed, prize-winning, “beautiful writing that doesn’t sell.” On the other, audience-oriented popular work, often written to formula, published to meet a well-understood demand. This opposition was called “the literary *vs.* the commercial,” and the careers of both authors and editors had generally been directed along these separate and unequal tracks. The literary set donned tuxes for awards dinners while the commercial gang paid the bills that kept the lights on and the copiers running—and each side wanted what the other seemed to have. By the early 1990s, though, a sea change was occurring. In the new era, every book was to pay its own way. “You can’t eat literary awards,” one publisher cautioned a group of us editors, after yet another round of conglomeration and downsizing. The numbers, and the numbers alone, were to be our measuring sticks.

The writing I wanted to publish didn’t fall neatly onto one side or the other of the literary-commercial divide, anyway. I believed, as did some others in the industry, that diverse, content-responsive audiences could be found. More importantly, as a feminist who admired the work of Carolyn Heilbrun, Carol Gilligan, Adrienne Rich, Toni Morrison, and others, I wanted to direct publishing’s resources to a diverse field of women, across the lines of race, class, experience, and sexuality—to those who wanted to breathe new life into the stale old categories. The writers I most admired had not made their careers by way of awards or privilege—nor by abandoning their literary values. So I put “the literary *vs.* the commercial” to one side and got to work.

Twenty years later, I’m battling mightily, as editors always have, to mediate between competing needs—author and publisher, art and commerce, time and money—and get the work, mostly fiction, mostly by women, delivered, edited, scheduled, and out into the world. But despite huge changes in the industry—distribution over the Internet, the rise of book groups and websites, and an enormous emphasis on that new juggernaut, the “women’s audience”—my job seems harder than ever. As usual, some authors don’t meet their deadlines, but where I was once able to give six-month extensions, now I can offer only two weeks. Others deliver final manuscripts that read more like drafts. Troublingly, some of the most promising authors with whom I work have become “stuck” or “blocked,” and are unable to write for long periods. Meanwhile, the industry demands frequent publication, on-time delivery, and an end to “monkey business”—a professional approach with little latitude for the mysteries, serendipities, and chaos of the creative process. With stacks of manuscripts that should be better than they are, authors frozen “between books,” and agents on the phone pleading that their brand-new clients “just need an editor,” I find myself with many headaches, and even more questions. The discipline of the market, while tonic in many ways, does not cure every ill.

What do women writers need to build successful careers these days? Why do their needs seem greater than ever? Has some formerly available resource run dry? It’s not talent, or determination, or opportunity—or audiences, or even money—that is lacking, but something else. Despite bestseller rankings and lifestyle features, big advances and superstardom, many women writers seem to be living hardscrabble creative lives. Even those whose “rooms” are more like palaces are nailing down the floorboards, putting buckets under leaky roofs, and wondering how to keep the lights on, particularly those of the “incandescent mind.” And then there is the nagging question of “what will sell,” and how to reconcile that with what one genuinely wants to write.

Pragmatically speaking, there are gaps in the infrastructure. First of all, where are the early readers, amanuenses, advisors, and general factotums who have always guarded the literati—today’s equivalents of Dorothy Wordsworth,

Sophia Hawthorne, Sofia Tolstaya, and Cynthia Thoreau; Leonard Woolf, Alice Toklas, Elizabeth Fowles, and Gabrielle Kerouac? Where are those who used to read drafts, shore up doubts, shush children, cook meals, endure writerly tantrums, encourage the wild experiment, agree to move abroad, hold salons, point out plot glitches, and bring the writer back to her heart's desire? What about those editors who (even in my own day) would drop everything to get on a plane, and then sleep on their authors' couches until the book was done, the hangover wore off, or the divorce proceedings were finished?

As far as I can see, women writers need, want, and deserve everything that writers have ever had, but those who can provide it are in short supply. All the gift-labor and the literary ghost-work has dried up or gone elsewhere. Perhaps this accounts for the silence from which some authors suffer, the sense of being haunted by a sort of negative presence—the lurking, terrible knowledge that the work to which both they and I are devoting our lives is lacking some unattainable, yet necessary ingredient.

A few years ago one of my authors, exhausted after the publication of her second novel, commented,

I provide everything for myself. The income that purchased my home and my studio was generated from my work. When I needed a writing space, I designed it, paid for it to be built, painted and outfitted [it]. I have it heated, cleaned and repaired.

Her husband didn't read her work, do research, handle correspondence, hide negative reviews, manage her website, or accompany her at appearances: he was busy with his own work, which she deeply supported. And while she had experimented with hiring people to provide necessary services, for her, a sense of personal connection was lacking in these arrangements. Tasks might get done, but she still felt essentially alone in her effort. Describing her creative life rather ruefully, she said, "I am the vessel and its passenger, and I am the one keeping it afloat."

"When is her next novel coming?" one of our marketing directors recently asked, with a wistfulness not uncommon at publishing conference tables these days. It had, we all knew, been far too long since her craft sent a signal.

Those of us who work with writers have accepted that in corporate publishing, relationships are not as personal as they once were. The business is less intimate and dramatic; less "fun" than in the good old days, but more democratic. It's healthier—isn't it?—for a spouse not to sacrifice his or her own creative life to that of a partner, and for an editor not to eat, sleep, breathe, and vacation in the shadow of her writers. And counting things—copies sold, dollars earned, time spent, books returned—can be a path not only to profitability but also to fairness.

Still, some form of essential nourishment that once came from the publishing life, which editors poured into books and the lives of their authors, is missing, and its replacement has not yet been found. Some try to make the case that books can be produced, and certainly consumed, without such nourishment, but for women writers and readers, this kind of literary monocropping has led to pretty thin gruel. In terms of content, it's resulted in a succession of novels and memoirs appealing to a generic feminine audience, a dull march through the supposed life-stages of chick-lit, mommy-lit, divorce-lit, and their permutations (breast-cancer lit, looking-for-love-at-the-assisted-living-facility lit...). Women writers have been all too ready to meet the demand, mining the intimate material of their lives for commercial fodder. The internalized voices of "write this, think that" are now based on assumptions about the marketplace. But the fast-paced commerce in tales of love, sex, relationships, and women's private lives obscures a real issue: the building of the kinds of work, relationships, and organizational structures that will provide foundations, windows, doors, and walls for women's creative "rooms."

Audiences are onto it, too. Inevitably, at the end of a reading by a woman author, a hand shoots up—and the question is not about the content of the presentation. It's "How do you write; when do you write; what allows you to write?"

One successful novelist (who had managed the uncommon, enviable feat of both pleasing influential critics and rising on the bestseller list) answered the question frankly. She reported that she worked, at first, at coffee shops and cafes. Then, "manna fell from heaven," she said. She received a fellowship from a major university. "There," she explained,

I had an office, air conditioning, interesting companions for lunch, a computer. I dropped off the kids at school, went to the office, picked them



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up at the end of the day. *Heaven*. When that year ended, I cried. I asked my husband, "What am I going to do?" And he said, "Shut up—because nobody even gets what you did."

She continued,

But he can go into his office at home, and shut the door and work. I can't do that. Even when he's taking care of the kids, they call and need something, and I go to them. I can't *not* do that.

When I looked at my notes from that evening, those words, "Shut up," seemed more vividly dramatic than the scene from the novel she had just read.

Where are we, then, in terms of Woolf's "room?"

Women writers, over the past eighty years, have done an extraordinary job, often under adverse conditions. In terms of literary architecture, they've sited, designed, laid foundations, and put roofing over vast, unsheltered areas; they've refurbished old structures and put up whole new wings. It's largely because of women writers that "the literary *vs.* the commercial" is no longer the reigning paradigm—although sometimes it seems that we've either replaced it with "boy *vs.* girl," or that we are wobbling without any governing structure at all.

"Publishing" is, in so many ways, storytelling about storytelling. Marketing a book amounts to, "what kind of story do you tell about this story?" What is

important about it, and to whom will it appeal? I believe we are at a tipping point, one where these stories-about-stories could very well change. And so we must ask: Have the voices we have allowed ourselves (and have been allowed), the stories we have told, the lives from within which we create, been sufficient to our own needs and to the needs of our readers? On the business side of our lives—both as writers and as publishers—have we invested in supporting and sustaining that for which we have the greatest passion? Have we found relationships that nourish our work and create a sense of connection, that allow us to feel loved? In what ways do we still behave as renters, temporary tenants rather than owners of our creative, working lives?

The commercial era of women's writing has provided many lessons, and opportunities to negotiate new relationships with the industry, the culture, and the audience. Many of these have been fruitful; some are deeply compromised. I'd like to think that all of this has been a step along the way to what Woolf called "the better book." But to get it written and successfully launched into the world, I propose that we all have to look closely at the areas in our "rooms" that need repair—and at the stories we are telling ourselves. 

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# An Unbalanced and Impossible Relationship

*White Heat:*

*The Friendship of Emily Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson*

By Brenda Wineapple

New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008, 388 pp., hardcover, \$27.95

*Reviewed by Mary Loeffelholz*

As perhaps the most famous recluse in American literary history, Emily Dickinson might seem an unlikely candidate for the currently vogueish genre of collective biography. "On a Columnar Self— / How ample to rely..." she wrote around 1863, at the height of her productivity, when she was composing and copying out, on average, very nearly a poem a day. "Suffice Us—for a Crowd— / Ourselves—and Rectitude..." she concluded.

Surprisingly, though, some of the best work done on Dickinson in the last half-century has been in the vein of collective biography. Richard Sewall's magnificent *Life of Emily Dickinson* (1974) approached its subject through separate chapters on the major figures populating Dickinson's life: her family, her possible beloveds, and her friends in the literary world. Sewall surrounded Dickinson's columnar self with so many adjuncts because he resisted ascribing a singular narrative to Dickinson's mysterious, outwardly uneventful life. The group portrait seemed to him "the truest way of presenting a figure upon whose biography no narrative structure can be imposed that is not to a degree arbitrary or

fictitious." At the other extreme of confidence in finding a mastering pattern in Dickinson's literary remains, Martha Nell Smith and Ellen Louise Hart's influential 1998 *Open Me Carefully: Emily Dickinson's Intimate Letters to Susan Huntington Dickinson* looked at Dickinson through the lens of her intense, long-lived, mutual bond with her sister-in-law.

Like Smith and Hart, Brenda Wineapple, in *White Heat*, pairs the poet with a single adjunct figure from the crowded Dickinson mausoleum: Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the *Atlantic Monthly* essayist to whom she wrote in April 1862 to ask whether her verse was "alive." Higginson would become a lifeline for Dickinson, first as a genial correspondent and ultimately as one of the most influential of her posthumous champions. He saw the first volumes of her poetry into print, read her works aloud to assemblies of Cambridge literati, and defended the formal unorthodoxy of her writing in a bold essay for the middlebrow *Christian Union*: "When a thought takes one's breath away," he asked, "who cares to count the syllables?"

As Wineapple observes, Dickinson often credited Higginson with saving her life: "To



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