

How I Had to Fight My Publishers Over Everything



I started writing when I was eight years old and have not stopped. When people ask me how long it took to write my first book [*Women and Madness*](#), I usually answer: My entire life.

And now for some unrequested advice.

Be wary of small presses—but be even more wary of large ones. Avoid small feminist presses—but large corporate publishers might be the death of you. Self-publish—but never self-publish unless you can personally fund a marketing, social media, and publicity campaign that might cost \$150,000.00 or more. If you find a small publisher who loves your work but neither of you can make a ha’penny from it—stick to them like crazy glue.

And there you have it.

Here’s two tales of woe that I’m sharing for the first time. I will not “name names” because, in one case, the small press has changed hands; and in the other instance, the large press remains in place, all-powerful.

It took me six years to write [*Mothers on Trial*](#) (1986). It remains in print. In fact, in 2011, I updated it with eight new chapters. I planned a first-ever Speak-out on Women and Custody and a national tour with custody battle mothers. The editor was powerful and 100% behind the work.

A Fathers' Rights group threatened to sue and their mere threat knocked *Mothers* off the publishing auction block. The publisher was afraid of a lawsuit.

Impatient, (my greatest weakness, but perhaps one of my virtues), I turned to a small feminist press and, to their credit, they instantly agreed to take it. Within six weeks, long before the book went into production, long before they expended a penny on it, a major publishing house promised to print 100,000 copies and offered me ten times the advance. Alas, alas, the small feminist press refused to let me go. I offered them the rights to [*Women and Madness*](#) forever and ever if they did. They refused. They said that "all the other feminist presses knew that they 'had' me." A curious turn of phrase.

My agent assured me that I could easily sue them for the return of my work but I chose not to sue my feminist "daughters." I was so wrong. How could I do that? What would that look like? What a jerk I was!

The small press exacted their revenge for my even wanting to leave. They managed to sabotage and destroy *Mothers on Trial*. First, they only printed 4,000 copies which, unbelievably, they said, had somehow been lost. Fallen off the truck, yes? Then, they cancelled the Speak-Out that I had already organized. They told the women that I was the one who had cancelled it. In their hands, this book was never allowed to do its work in the world. I'm sure they printed another few thousand copies and then called it a day, a month, a year, a job well done.

In my view, at least 100,000 mothers—the exact number of books never printed—lost their children without understanding that this was patriarchal politics as usual and that it was not their fault. After five years, the small feminist press finally agreed to let me go – but only if I paid them about \$80,000, which was the sum they'd expected to obtain from sales. I would have gladly given them the money if I'd had it.

What feminists they were!

They *did* eventually let me go. But all momentum was gone, I'd moved on to other subjects and, although I did have a new, and a good publisher, neither they nor I were about to embark on a national tour of any kind.

Here is another tale told out-of-school. It concerns publishing right now, or as of a few years ago.

Today, a feminist cannot be “politically incorrect,” not even in a book with that precise title. I was not allowed to write at length about my 21st century work which includes the rise in anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism; the failures of feminism; 9/11, Jihad terrorism, and Islamism; the dangers of identity politics; the nature of honor-based violence, including honor killing—I've published four pioneering studies on this subject which have allowed me to submit affidavits to judges in political asylum cases—all these subjects were deemed too politically incorrect and not part of the earlier, more acceptable, and more “positive” moments of the gender-neutral, liberal and left Second Wave.

I had no cause for alarm. I had worked happily with the same editor and the same agent. They both had real enthusiasm for what they *hoped* I would write. A bestseller! They wanted a jazzy, bubbly, harmless, only slightly naughty account of Girls Together Gaily. Maybe a bit of an intellectual memoir.

And yes, my editor wanted me to “come out” as a lesbian. But how could I do that without writing an entire book about sexuality—if I ever wanted to delve into it at all. Please understand that, although I was a very radical feminist and ran with the most radical lesbian feminists—that, until I was forty-five-years old, I was hopelessly heterosexual. A serious, hard-wired man-junkie. Two husbands, many male lovers. The original Lady of Babylon. Everyone knew this. Everyone felt sorry for me, wrote me off as a “closet case.” Accepted me as I was. But this frustrated my otherwise completely supportive editor and became a point of tension between us.

“They wanted a jazzy, bubbly, harmless, only slightly naughty account of Girls Together Gaily.”

Now, I don’t think what happened was unique. I believe this was and still is happening to many other authors, too. It’s just that nearly sixty years in the writing life did not spare me.

I had to do mortal combat with 4,000 editorial challenges and demands (yes, I counted them up) made by at least two, but probably by three different editors. No one editor had seen what the other two editors had to say. This felt like a prolonged assault. It did not improve the writing so much as provide the editors with an opportunity to knock the work down, not elevate it.

This was beyond exhausting, frustrating, even insulting. Junior people were asking foolish questions. Of course, some comments/queries/challenges were useful. I wish there had been more of them.

When I named the names of the rich and famous—I was interrogated very closely. I needed lots of proof, backup, even witnesses, letters—as if I were on trial in a court proceeding.

A chapter in which I critiqued identity politics was rejected outright. Well, maybe it was not a perfect or even a final chapter, it needed work, but the publisher was afraid of legal, critical, and perhaps even violent repercussions. I questioned, no, I deplored identity politics. I questioned the use of gender over sex. I viewed this as dangerous. I went through every one of my own “identities” to reject each one. In my case, I concluded, you might only be able to find me in my books—but once I finished a work, I was gone, I was no longer there.

My work was not done after wrestling the 4,000 challenges to the ground. The manuscript was then submitted to two outside “sensitivity” readers, one for race, the other for gender. Had they only been as literate as I was, it might have been acceptable, but both lacked my knowledge base. These were terrifying and demoralizing experiences. Apparently, if those events that were known only to me were not backed up on the internet or in the media I could not add to the body of knowledge on a particular subject.

For example, one “sensitivity” reader wanted me to mention all the famous people who had frequented Elaine’s (Famous Persons) Restaurant and which were detailed at Wikipedia. I said that I could only name those whom I myself saw. We fought. In other instances, I revealed stories, analyses, facts that were utterly unknown. But no, I could not do that. If it was not backed up elsewhere, I had no right to share what only I knew, what I remembered.

One of the two or three editors—I’m not sure which one—demanded that I attribute the song *Embraceable You* to Nat King Cole or I’d be seen as an ignorant racist. But the song was written by two white Jewish boys (George and Ira Gershwin); Ginger Rogers first sang it in a musical in 1930, and the divine Billie Holiday made it her own in 1944, all long before Nat King Cole’s mellow rendition ever appeared. No matter.

The ultimate indignity: The gender editor removed what I'd written about a custody case that I myself had worked on and substituted her own version of reality which included quoting from the poor woman's ex-husband, who ranted on and on at a Fathers' Rights website.

Wearily, I insisted on my own version. As I've written: Everything was a fight.

And then there was a three-month legal vetting about which I will say nothing other than it was pure Hell. I had worked with this lawyer before and he is very good at what he does. However, he was in and out of the hospital, we lost time, we lost our scheduled publication date. And, he needed to work from a previous draft so that we were literally never on the same page. My assistant and I were forever desperately hunting to find the line or the paragraph that he was questioning. He also personally knew and was friendly with some of the major feminists about whom I was writing. Once again, I had to have proof of those episodes that only I knew about—or I was not allowed to tell my own story.

In these times, every author, not just me, faces such ordeals. It does not matter if you've been a bestselling author as I've been; or a legendary pioneer—which I've also been. Nothing will spare an author from such nervous scrutiny.

Some truly Bad Things continued to happen.

My editor was "let go" for corporate reasons. This orphaned my book. The editor who inherited the work barely read it. She was also too busy to talk to me. She had an option on my next book which she swiftly declined. My agent then refused to represent this work—or me.

"Unbelievably, the printer managed to drop 40 pages of a science fiction novel right into the middle of my book."

The editor who inherited me chose to rush it out with a lead

time of about two or three months, and with a pub date of August 28th, a time of year when everyone is away. I could be wrong but I doubt they sent out copies to the right potential reviewers. They probably did send them to all the precisely wrong reviewers, and to only a few of them. Although the book was endorsed by some feminists of standing, only one review appeared in the mass media—and it was written by a former employee of one of the feminists whose far-less-than-perfect actions I'd exposed. It was a breathtakingly vicious review.

Otherwise, the conservative media happily reviewed this title; they were overjoyed because I'd criticized feminists, including left feminists; but not radical feminism. Never that. Perhaps they failed to make this distinction.

Happy Days continued. Unbelievably, the printer managed to drop 40 pages of a science fiction novel right into the middle of my book. I only found out about this when a few readers who knew me reached out to me. The publisher shrugged it off. "This happens." Although they paid me to read for the audiobook, they chose not to publish a paperback version of this title.

And then the publicist told me, with great disappointment, that it was too late to book readings at Barnes and Noble—and that only one bookstore was even willing to have me at the end of August.

"What bookstore is that?"

"The Rare Book Room at the Strand."

Oh, I was in heaven. I may have spent a quarter of my life browsing there. The venue had sentimental value to me and it represented a love of books that is missing from the chains.

At the last moment, I managed to fill the place with more than one hundred people and I hope that a good time was had by all. It aired several times on [C-SPAN](#). I also read at a wonderful

store, Book Culture, on the upper west side of Manhattan where a spirited Q&A took place.

That was it. No editor ever appeared to greet me, support me, see me in performance, take me out for a drink.

What may we learn from this? I'm really not sure. Wait for better times? Form your own publishing company? Take up needlepoint? Write like Hell and never stop, just keep going?

Look: Walt Whitman had to self-publish. Herman Melville was very negatively reviewed and had to work as a customs inspector. I could go on. You get my point.

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