

The Writing Life



Many (white, male) writers throughout history have suffered from both poverty and plagiarism. If they were not born rich, they all had day jobs. Many were never paid for their published writing. Some had to pay to be published. Writers—even the greats—also suffered scathing reviews. Some were censored. Their books were burned. Some were imprisoned, sent into exile, or murdered for their thought crimes against religion or against the state.

In our time, our work, especially our best and most radical feminist work, simply goes out of print and stays there. It dies softly. It does not get translated into other languages. We are lucky if it is noted at all, even if only to be critically savaged. More often, it is simply not reviewed. The tree falls, no one hears the sound.

When people ask me how long it took to write my first book, [*Women and Madness*](#), I usually answer: my entire life. And although it became a bestseller, it also led to countless sorrows for me. My university colleagues feared, envied, and perhaps even hated me for my sudden prominence. They made my

academic career a permanently uphill ordeal. Some feminists scorned the success; those who had demanded that I publish “anonymously” and donate the proceeds to the “revolution” stopped talking to me.

However, buoyed by a rising feminist movement—this was the late '60s after all—I coasted my way through the many patriarchal assaults and university-based punishments launched against me. I'd learned that one measure's one's success by the strength of one's opposition. I was not looking to please patriarchal ways of thinking but to transform them.

But, despite publishing quite a lot after that—I also perished, institutionally speaking. It took me 22 years to become a full professor, my tenure was challenged again and again, as were my promotions (which determined one's salary and one's pension). I never received a serious (i.e., tenured) job offer at any other university.

Nevertheless, that first book of mine was embraced by millions of women. It was reviewed prominently, positively, and often. However, it was also damned. Psychologists and psychiatrists were offended, enraged. I was certainly not invited to lecture to such groups, at least not until feminists had more senior roles within them.

An author rarely learns why a particular person has been assigned a review or why they've undertaken it. Here's one story of mine that I've never before shared, a rather bizarre, Byzantine, only-in-Manhattan tale that unfolds over a 33-year period. I don't think the story is unique. What's unique is that I was finally able to connect the dots.

All the players have died. I'm still here and writing about it.

In 1973, *Partisan Review* ran a very negative review of *Women and Madness*, written by Dr. Louise J. Kaplan, a psychoanalyst whom I did not know and whose work I knew nothing about

because she had not yet published anything. I was surprised that such a classically liberal and somewhat neoconservative journal had bothered to review a radically feminist work. How had this come about?

Here's how. Sociologist Norman Birnbaum, a repulsive man in every way, once tried to date me, and impress me, by telling me how many important literary figures he knew. Nevertheless, I spurned him.

Reader: She spurned him.

Thus, he handpicked Dr. Louise and used his close association with *Partisan Review* editors to seal the deal.

In the spring of 1973, seven months after my publication date, Dr. Louise criticized *Women and Madness* for its "statistical analysis" which was "simplistic and superficial." She attributed the book's support among feminists to its having taken "the ultimate radical stance, particularly (in relation) to bisexuality, lesbianism, and (in the) definitive rejection of maleness." She chided the book as a "prototypical female monologue ... a ladies-magazine smorgasbord of Demeter, Sylvia Plath, the penis-envy paragraphs of Freud, the usual bits from Reich ..."

I did not believe this is the book I wrote but, as they say, critics are entitled to their opinions.

Years later, Edith Kurzweil, the editor of *Partisan Review*, whom I had subsequently befriended and whose Holocaust-era book I had later reviewed, admitted that Dr. Norman, who was very friendly with her and her husband, William Phillips, had arranged Dr. Louise's review.

As I reviewed my archives for my 2018 book, [*A Politically Incorrect Feminist*](#), I found a scathing review of *Women and Madness*, published in the *Village Voice* on Oct. 11, 1973—and written by Dr. Louise Kaplan's husband, Dr. Donald M. Kaplan,

a professor at NYU's prestigious postdoctoral program in psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. His critique was oddly placed in a nonacademic venue. I had totally forgotten about this and may not even have read it at the time.

Dr. Donald's review characterizes the book's ideas as immature, "scattered, impetuous, and sensational"; its author as an "intellectual hustler" whose statistics are "incomplete," and purposely "deceptive"; an author who "favor(s) lesbianism as a definitive solution to the problem of gender differences," "equates psychosis and social heroism ... (and views) madness as a form of positive, militant feminism."

Between 1978 and 1995, Dr. Louise published four books. In 1991, she produced *Female Perversions: The Temptation of Emma Bovary*. It was made into a movie starring Tilda Swinton. But despite her own success, Louise was not done with me. In 2004-2005, unbeknownst to me, we were both working with the same editor at the same publishing house.

By now, Louise's husband had been dead for more than a decade and she had become known as a feminist. Ironically, just as Second Wave feminism had initially disgusted her—now, more than 30 years later, she had become a celebrated *left-wing* feminist.

Perhaps Louise was now trying to defend a feminism that, in my view, had become hopelessly Stalinized and opposed to Western Enlightenment values. I said so in my 2005 book, [*The Death of Feminism: What's Next in the Struggle for Women's Freedom*](#).

But this book-baby was stillborn, because suddenly, the editor canceled my book tour and stopped sending out galleys to reviewers. I only found out about this at the lovely book party that the publisher was already committed to give me—when the lead publicist burst into tears and told me that all publicity had been canceled; she did not know why.

I asked my editor about this directly. At first, she only told me that “one of her other authors” had told her that I disliked her and that I was very unhappy. I could barely breathe but I found a list of her other authors, saw Louise’s name on it, and quickly faxed the editor a copy of Louise’s old *Partisan Review* piece.

The editor was dumbstruck but, to her credit, immediately admitted that “quite frankly” she’d been “gaslighted.” It was too late to save my book—and too late for her to back out of the latest edition of *Women and Madness*, which she was also publishing with a new introduction; it was also too late to back out of publishing Louise’s book *Cultures of Fetishism* which came out in 2006.

The Death of Feminism critiqued Western feminists for their multicultural relativism (which is not the same as multicultural diversity); for their peer-pressured deep dive into postmodernism, anti-colonialism, and anti-imperialism; for their mindless embrace of Islam—as if a religion was a race—and an endangered and persecuted race at that, not as an increasingly supremacist, totalitarian ideology which silenced all Muslim dissent via torture and murder.

I also documented the failure of academic and activist feminists to understand honor killings and honor-and-shame tribal societies and thus, I explained their abandonment of “brown and black” women trapped in such cultures. I also noted the escalation of intolerance among feminists and their peculiar concern with the alleged occupation of a country that did not exist (Palestine) than with the very real occupation of women’s bodies worldwide. A virtue-signaling anti-racism had already trumped anti-sexism among feminists and the consequences are still being felt today.

Yes, I wrote about all this back in 2005. Unfortunately, the book received only a handful of reviews and found no foreign publishers. It was taken out of print which

is where it remains. I believe that copies may still be obtained online.

But just *imagine* if we'd all been able to have a public and ongoing conversation about what I'd written about. We'd be 16 or 17 years into one of the most important conversations for 21st-century feminism.

This is only one example of the kind of crazy shit that can, perhaps, routinely happen to a feminist writer. But there is more, so much more.

And I'm a "successful" feminist writer. Just think about those who are not visibly "successful," whose work is excellent but has been forgotten, "borrowed," not cited, laid to rest before it could do its considerably good work in the world. I think about this all the time.

And now for some unrequested advice.

Be wary of small presses—but be even warier 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 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 Krazy Glue.

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. In this very work, I was not allowed to write at length about my 21st-century preoccupations, which include the rise in antisemitism 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 a 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 45 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.

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 60 years in the writing life did not spare me.

Here’s what happened next: 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.

A chapter in which I critiqued identity politics was rejected outright. Well, maybe it was not a perfect or even a final draft, 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.

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.

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.

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 Aug. 28, 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.

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 & 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 100 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-and-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?

In these times, every author, not just me, faces such ordeals. It does not matter if you’ve been a bestselling author or a legendary pioneer. Nothing will spare a writer from such nervous scrutiny.

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.

First published in [Tablet](#).