

A Brief History of Feminist Bookselling in Gainesville

The history of feminist bookselling in Gainesville began with “Womanstore Bookstore,” a small shop helmed by Ann Gill that was a part of the community center “Women Unlimited.” Founded in 1974, Women Unlimited and Womanstore were located in the Tench Building at 115 South Main Street, and they opened their doors on the day before the first march on Tallahassee in support of the Equal Rights Amendment.

The original Woman Unlimited was short-lived, but Womanstore’s inventory was recycled in 1975 into a new bookstore called “Amelia’s.” Owned by Bonnie Coates and Linda Basham, two members of the group associated with Women Unlimited, the new store was located at #14NW 8th Street—right behind the current Wild Iris—and shared a building with counseling and rape crisis services. Operating costs were originally funded in part by money from the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA), a federal program for community education and outreach. When conservative members of the Gainesville community found that a feminist newsletter was being published out of the building, however, and learned that activists were using the bookstore as a space for planning protests and demonstrations, they complained to the legislature that federal money was going to support “political” action, and CETA funding was withdrawn.

Coates and Basham sold the store to a second pair of owners, Carol Aubin and Gerry Green, in 1979; Aubin and Green ran Amelia’s until 1982. During this time, the store carried around 1100 titles, including many classics of Second Wave Feminism and Lesbian Pride, as well as non-sexist children’s books, all of which were difficult to find in the southeast at the time. In addition, Amelia’s continued to form a hub for political activity: groups working on behalf of Women’s Rights, Civil Rights, and Gay Pride used it as a base from which to organize civil disobedience, marches and rallies, and

lobbying efforts aimed at a host of local, state and national officials.

After a hiatus of almost ten years, feminist bookselling returned to Gainesville when Susan Keel and Kerry Godwin opened Iris Books in 1992. The inventory expanded to around 10,000 titles, ranging from feminist classics to books on women’s spirituality and recovery, feminist science fiction, and gender and queer theory. Despite the increased size, the store continued to serve as a kind of community center and organizing space. In 1996, new owners Dotty Faibisy and Bev White changed the store’s name to Wild Iris, and increased the non-book inventory offered. Pride paraphernalia, cards and bumper stickers, and woman-made crafts all became important parts of the store’s offerings. Faibisy also developed the store’s connection to the University of Florida’s Center for Women’s Studies and Gender Research, and feminist and progressive faculty from around the university began to use Wild Iris as a resource for their course books.

In 2004, current owners Cheryl Krauth and Lyly Rodriguez ushered in the newest chapter of feminist bookselling in Gainesville’s long and dignified history. They have expanded the store’s range of merchandise, and Wild Iris now offers videos alongside its selection of new and used books, hand-beaded jewelry, artisanal soaps, and Fair Trade coffees. In the spring of 2004, more than twenty graphic design students at Santa Fe Community College competed to produce a new logo for Wild Iris, one that would convey the still-vibrant presence of what is not only a Gainesville institution, but also the only feminist bookstore remaining in Florida. Lynn Stuart’s organic, energetic, and colorful emblem captures vividly what Krauth and Rodriguez see as the mission for this feminist bookstore of the 21st century: “celebrating life and diversity.”

Written by Trysh Travis, from interviews with Dotty Faibisy, Gerry Green, Sallie Harrison, and Phyllis Meek