

# Chronicling women's history, writers celebrate their own

*The Boston Globe*



*(Above)* The women biographer's group during a recent meeting in Brookline. From left are Joyce Antler, Roberta Wollons, Susan Quinn, Fran Malino, and Megan Marshall. In total, the writers have published 33 books. *Photograph by Katherine Taylor for The Boston Globe*

**By Hattie Bernstein** - Globe Correspondent  
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A title is as good as gold. But prospecting is tricky. So on this Wednesday evening at the monthly meeting of the women biographer's group, Susan Quinn asks for a hand.

"I have a specific issue to tackle," says Quinn, calling in a favor after the six writers are settled around a coffee table in Joyce Antler's Brookline living room.

For 30 years, this has been the routine: the half-dozen writers traveling between one another's homes to work on writing problems, offer editing suggestions, and support one another on the long, slow slog to publication — their own little chapter of American women's history.

"Biography is usually a very long project, more than any other kind of writing," says Megan Marshall, who spent 20 years writing one book and is a professor in the master of fine arts creative writing program at Emerson College. "You can be open about your doubts and fears... with immediate colleagues."

On occasion, guest biographers attend. But the group has always been small. Six is a good number around the dinner table; it also ensures that each writer gets a turn to speak.

“We’re good at celebrating, and we’re good when hard things happen,” says Quinn, remembering the year she spent writing a book proposal that she was unable to sell.

In total, the writers have published 33 books, including dozens piled on Antler’s coffee table tonight.

Together, they constitute a chronicle of US history. Their subjects include Margaret Fuller, a 19th-century New Englander active in the Transcendentalist movement; Ruth Crawford Seeger, matriarch of the Seeger family of folk revival musicians; and Mabel Dodge Luhan, who was associated with the Taos, N.M., art colony.

But the writers say it’s not commercial success, academic advancement, or awards that have kept them going. That’s because no matter how many books they publish or awards they win, the going would be more lonely, the ups and downs more difficult, and the joys less sweet without the group.

“We see each other as wise. We listen to each other. We have a background,” says Antler. “What comes out the other end is kind of a perfect collegueship.”

No two biographers started at the same place. In 1985, when Marshall joined the group, she was seeking a first audience for a literary form that was new to her. Antler, who joined in 1988, had belonged to a similar group that had disbanded when the other members moved. In 2006, Roberta Wollons was new to both Boston and an academic post.

Lois Rudnick, now retired to New Mexico, was looking for support that was not available from academic colleagues whom she felt didn’t take biography seriously. Likewise, Judith Tick, currently working on a biography of Ella Fitzgerald; Fran Malino, whose latest title, “Teaching Freedom: Jewish Sisters in Muslim Lands,” is credited to the group; and Sue Quinn were seeking intellectual companionship and support.

“The group has meant different things at different times,” says Marshall.

But at the social hour that precedes this end-of-the-year meeting, everyone is on the same page: a title for Quinn’s newest book, slated for fall publication by Penguin Books.

In the last three decades, there hasn’t been a single title that the group hasn’t helped to write; and it’s evident, as the voices rise and blend, that the writers intend to keep a good thing going.

Not that the task isn’t complicated. While it’s necessary for a title to attract attention and readers, it must also reveal the book’s content, contain key words for categorizing by librarians and booksellers, and employ language that appeals to the widest audience. Men, for example,

are generally interested in history, but not love stories; readers in general are turned off by unflattering stereotypes, no matter how off-base they are.

Indeed, everyone here understands that certain words won't fly. Like "feminist," which Antler dubs "the 'F' word." Webster's defines feminism as the belief that men and women should have the same opportunities in life; feminist biographers use the word to explain how gender affects history; and editors and publicists believe the reading public will associate it with outspoken, militant, man-hating women — notions too controversial to be associated with.

But you can't write a title without knowing the back story: not only the writer's subject, which in Quinn's case is the romance between first lady Eleanor Roosevelt and Associated Press reporter Lorena Hickok, but also her relationship to it.

"Like so many others, I had idealized Eleanor Roosevelt from afar," Quinn later says in an e-mail. "Now I would, through these intimate letters with Hick, see her up close and gain a new understanding of the suffering she worked so hard to hide. I had an immediate sympathy with Hick. She was a reporter, and I had been a reporter. She came from the Midwest, as I did. And, like Eleanor, I was moved by the story of Hick's cruel childhood and remarkable success in the oppressively male world of journalism. Also, because my daughter is gay, I felt a special sympathy with the love story of Eleanor and Hick."

The others have their back stories, too. Antler, for example, is currently working on a book about Jewish women who fought "sexism and the status quo" — untold stories that "place gender in conversation with race and ethnicity."

Marshall is at work on a book about 20th century poet Elizabeth Bishop, who was her teacher at Harvard for a semester in 1976.

But for the moment, it's Quinn's title that occupies the writers who let loose like 6-year-olds at a birthday party.

"Love in Turbulent Times?" someone tosses out.

"Not quite."

"Love in the White House?"

"Smarmy."

"Love and Politics?"

"Flat."

"The minute you join anything with love, you minimize what the book is about," says Malino.

But Quinn isn't convinced.

"The love affair is the main thing," she says. "It's embedded inside world events."

Malino holds her ground.

"You have two women influencing politics," she says. "Their relationship changes the character of the Roosevelt White House. 'Eleanor and Hick: Shapers of the Roosevelt White House'?"

Not quite, says Wollons, the history professor. "What do they do? What does the relationship do to the Roosevelt White House?"

And Malino, again, considering before she speaks.

"I'm sure it's politics we're talking about," she says, just before another writer else pipes up and the room explodes in applause.

"Eleanor and Hick: Love and Power in the Roosevelt White House."



(Left) Some of the 33 books published by the biographers. Together, they constitute a chronicle of American history.

Photograph by Katherine Taylor for The Boston Globe.

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