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TW Feature by Lorraine Berry and Martha Nichols

An Open Letter About Why the Fight Still Matters

Focus on AWP 2015: Don't miss TW's panel "[The Politics of Empathy](#)" [4]—and "[Making Diversity Happen](#)" [5] with editor Martha Nichols.



Dear Young Writers Who Believe Activism Is Meaningless:

It's Women's History Month again, and you may be tempted to think the battle for women's rights is over. But in 2015, we're here to tell you that gender still matters when it comes to getting your writing published or read or reviewed.

This was news to Lorraine's colleagues at the Tiny State College (TSC) where she teaches, some of whom attended her lunchtime talk last week titled "Norman Mailer's Ghost Still Smells: Why Literature is Still a White Man's World." It

was a surprise for the three students who turned out (two female, one male).

She had trouble deciding what to cover in her thirty minutes. These days, we longtime feminists can't keep up with every example of discrimination discussed in the press. The digital reports of sexism have become so constant it's all too familiar, even boring, as if we're talking about Uncle Crank acting out at the dinner table.

But, writers, please don't assume the cranks have no impact. Lorraine named her talk for an oldie but goodie—Norman Mailer—and she began by quoting from his 1959 assessment of women's writing in *Advertisements for Myself*:

I doubt if there will be a really exciting woman writer until the first whore becomes a call girl and tells her tale. At the risk of making a dozen devoted enemies for life, I can only say that the sniffs I get from the ink of the women are always fey, old-hat, Quaintsy Goysy, tiny, too dykily psychotic, crippled, creepish, fashionable, frigid, outer-Baroque, *maquillé* in mannequin's whimsy, or else bright and stillborn.

It's easy to dismiss Mailer, but he and his generation of male writers continue to haunt us. We both first came across his misogynistic ramble while reading Francine Prose's 1998 *Harper's* article "The Scent of a Woman's Ink."

At the time, Martha was an editor at *Women's Review of Books*, a journal founded in 1983 to address the gender gap in the *New York Times Book Review*, *New York Review of Books*, and other venues. She needed no convincing that, in Prose's words:

[S]ome of us can't help noting how comparatively rarely stories by women seem to appear in the few major magazines that publish fiction, how rarely fiction by women is reviewed in serious literary journals, and how rarely work by women dominates short lists and year-end ten-best lists.

In the late '90s, Lorraine didn't yet call herself a writer; she was still in graduate school, trying to be someone else. But she was thinking about the writer part. Even though half the students in her graduate program were women, and most literary writers she read were women, Prose's article crystallized her unease: Women didn't get to call themselves *writers*. They would always be thought of as *women writers*.

In 2010, more than a decade later, the nonprofit organization VIDA: Women in the Literary Arts released its first "Count": stats with helpful pie charts that show the staggering level of underrepresentation of female writers in many prestigious magazines. There's been a VIDA Count every year since, and the numbers remain depressing. (The 2014 Count will include a new section on women of color.)

By 2012, both of us were working writers and teachers. That year, in response to the "perception" that it was sexist, the vaunted *New York Times Book Review* published an entire issue devoted to women—with a cover cartoon of a big red high heel stomping a male dress shoe. At TW, we made clear in our own piece ("A Women's Place" in the *NYT Book Review*) what a condescending goof this was.

In 2014, with Pamela Paul now top editor, the NYTBR published another women's issue ("Women and Power") that appeared far less sexist. No hot-pink graphics; lots of female reviewers. But if anthropologists from Mars analyzed the ads alone, they'd assume women in this major city on Planet Earth were all white and upper class.

During the Q&A section of Lorraine's talk at TSC, she noted that gender disparity is sometimes due to lazy editors only reaching out to their network of writers for work. Those writers find their way into elite publishing networks early, often when doing an internship in New York City during a summer between college semesters.

You aren't paid for the internship. You have to support yourself for three months in the City, which most of our students could never do. When Lorraine interviewed feminist author Caitlin Moran in 2014 for TW, they discussed the ways those who write for a living tend to be economically privileged. Moran grew up working class in England and views

herself as a statistical outlier. If people model themselves on what they see on television—if we take seriously, as Moran does, the notion that TV sparks aspirational feelings—what about the working-class girl who never sees herself there?

That's why we're sitting here this morning, in the middle of another Women's History Month, drinking cups of coffee in our respective homes, going back and forth by email to write this letter. The world is lonely for feminist academics and writers, especially those toiling in places like TSC. But while it's good to talk with friends and colleagues, we hope for more than commiseration.

We hope the students who attended Lorraine's talk will want to know more—that you, young writers, will understand women's progress isn't simply history. We hope we'll keep having lively discussions, and that our discussions will turn into calls for action, and that action will change the structure which still holds too many of us down.

Read the TW companion piece, ["Gender Wars: The Listicle."](#) [6]

Publishing Information

- ["Scent of a Woman's Ink"](#) [7] by Francine Prose, *Harper's*, June 1998.
- ["The VIDA Count"](#) [8] by Amy King on the website for VIDA: Women in the Literary Arts.
- ["A Woman's Place' in the NYT Book Review"](#) [9] by Lorraine Berry and Martha Nichols, *Talking Writing*, September/October 2012.
- ["Women and Power' in the NYT Book Review"](#) [10] by Lorraine Berry and Martha Nichols, *Talking Writing*, Fall 2014.
- ["Caitlin Moran: 'You Just Can't Argue with Cool.'"](#) [11] TW interview by Lorraine Berry, *Talking Writing*, Fall 2014.

Art Information

- ["Women's History Month Collage"](#) [12] © Carmichael Library (collage by Cierra and Tiffany; photo by Joel Bullock); Creative Commons license.



Lorraine Berry is a contributing editor at *Talking Writing* and an instructor at a small college in the Fingerlakes region of New York. When not teaching, she writes work that has appeared in *Salon*, *Diagram*, *Dame*, and *Bitch* magazine, among many other literary journals.



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Martha Nichols is Editor in Chief of *Talking Writing* and a contributing editor at *Women's Review of Books*.

For more about the place of female writers and their need for a feminist journal of their own, see Martha's 2013 WRB essay "[A Profound Absence](#)." [13]

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- [6] <http://talkingwriting.com/gender-wars-listicle>
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- [8] <http://www.vidaweb.org/category/the-count/>
- [9] <http://talkingwriting.com/a-womans-place-in-the-nyt-book-review>
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- [11] <http://talkingwriting.com/caitlin-moran-%E2%80%9Cyou-just-can%E2%80%99t-argue-cool%E2%80%9D>
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- [13] <http://www.wcwonline.org/Women-s-Review-of-Books-Nov/Dec-2013/a-profound-absence>