



Epilogue to an Era

BRIAN WALSKI / Los Angeles Times

"Now people have so many options about where to buy books," says the bookstore's co-owner Adele Wallace.

Beaten by the Big Guys,
Sisterhood Bookstore
in Westwood gets ready
to close its doors on a
27-year commitment to
'the diversity as well as
the commonality of
women's experience.'

It may have been where you purchased your first copy of "Our Bodies, Our Selves"; the place where you first discovered Gloria Steinem and the tenets of Ms. magazine; the spot where you first heard Rita Mae Brown, Barbara Kingsolver and Alice Walker read from early works; or maybe it was where you found the missing piece of the jigsaw puzzle that was to become you.

Back then, Sisterhood Bookstore may have been a part of one's life prologue, not simply fostering awareness but fueling politicalization. Now Sisterhood is poised to write its own final chapter. Despite the optimistic fund-raisers and heartfelt fanfare, Sisterhood will soon close for good.

It was a good long fight, says Adele Wallace, co-owner and co-founder of the Westwood Boulevard cottage space that recalls, even

still, the days of '70s incense-perfumed bookstores outfitted with roaming cats as mascots.

An announcement as informal as a flier that has been circulating for the last few months—both as hard copy and on the Internet—alerted startled longtime customers, supporters and friends to the news.

The store held a fund-raiser mid-May and will be having another tonight.

"We sent out a letter . . . mostly telling people we are closing the end of July," Wallace explains. "We're open to selling. Investors. An angel would be wonderful!" But, she adds cautiously, "the only way we would be able to have a fighting chance is to get parking, an advertising budget—all of that. So we're not exactly holding our breath."

She figures that the money raised from the June event will help cover closing costs.

Please see Sisterhood, E3

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Sisterhood

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"It's a sad story," says Wallace, who opened the store in 1972, "but the whole retail bookselling industry, the publishing industry, is changing so rapidly that it's making me dizzy. It's harder to deal with change."

Steady Competition From the Big Chains

Sisterhood outpunched the '70s chains that rose to prominence—Waldenbooks and the like—and even outfoxed the first generation of discounters.

"The first thing, of course, was Crown. They came in like 15 years ago. They *did* knock out independents," Wallace says. "But they weren't something that could compete with a *good* independent store. I can't help gloating a little bit. They started this whole thing, then somebody came around and did it better. . . . Barnes & Noble and Borders opened in front of them."

Sisterhood withered a bit on the vine when a Borders Books & Music opened three years ago, casting a long, broad shadow. Outfitted with a cafe and its own underground parking in a community severely squeezed for spaces, Borders came ready to rumble. But even that obstacle, Wallace resolutely felt, she could clear—had it not been for the online phenomenon of Amazon.com and the superstore copycat versions of it.

"We used to ask: What can we do different? But now people have so many options about where to buy books. Loyal customers do go out of their way, put up with lack of parking and lack of discounts. But we just need more regular people who will just come in. What's really kept us going are UCLA professors ordering texts—English, women's and gender studies—more and more of our sales were textbooks, and that's not what we're about."

Wallace says sales peaked in 1992 but have been sliding since.

"We just can't go on. Unless some angel lands. Some stores have made it—you hook up with some nonprofit and have some sort of women's center. . . ."

Sisterhood Bookstore opened its doors with shelves and spinner-racks full of border-shattering titles to edify and enlighten women who were attempting to define themselves outside of the predesigned boundaries of daughter, homemaker. The owners trumpeted, as well, a timely and provocative mission statement: "To thrive as an independent bookstore by offering the best service and the deepest, most diverse choice of books. . . . To demonstrate the diversity as well as the commonality of women's experience. . . . To provide a center for the women's community where women and men can gather, exchange information, and use our resources to move the community toward political action."

Adele Wallace and former sister-

in-law Simone Wallace, products of L.A.'s women's movement, cultivated a staff that is sensitive to and knowledgeable about a wide range of poetry and literature, and it wasn't uncommon to overhear snippets of conversation in the aisles raging, and ranging from race and feminism, to lesbian and bisexual studies, to violence against women, to self-help, theology and spirituality. The store prided itself on being an integral center for a community of and for women in need of a sounding board and support.

Similar Bookstores Feeling the Pinch

To be sure, Sisterhood is not the only specialty independent forced to confront a drastically changing marketplace. Brad Kraft, manager of A Different Light Bookstore in West Hollywood, has taken sobering note of his store's dipping numbers and the would-be (or used-to-be) customers who drift into the store now simply to jot titles down and then head off to make their purchases, he surmises, elsewhere.

"We have been contacting vendors and publishers and the community and letting them know that there is a *need* to support us," Kraft says.

A fixture for 10 years in L.A.'s gay and lesbian community, A Different Light, like Sisterhood, has always willingly shouldered a greater purpose.

"Like Sisterhood we are a cultural *institution*," Kraft says. "It's a cultural center in West Hollywood—if someone has a flier for anything that's going on in the gay community, whether it's a play or something that's going on at the Gay and Lesbian Center, they bring them here."

What will decide the fate of stores like this, says Kraft, is recognition from the community that "this is a special case—that we offer something special to the community—and if they don't believe that, we won't be there. And what you're losing isn't just a bookstore."

True, with the one-stop super-market expanse of the superstore, the at-your-desk ease and privacy of double-click shopping, it just might be that people now take for granted the existence of the hard-to-find, small-press books that may not even have had a chance at life at all if it weren't for the crusades and tenacity of the independents who stood behind them.

Shining Praise on the Little Writers

Local writer Michele Serros, author of "How to Be a Chicana Role Model," knows that to be true. Her first book, "Chicana Falsa," which had been published by a small press (that subsequently went out of business), didn't have an International Standard Book Number (ISBN), used to catalog books.

"It was very discouraging for me to go into a chain and not be ac-

knowledgeable at all. 'We don't sell books without ISBNs. We don't carry books by small presses. That's not my job, talk to the manager over there,'" says Serros, recalling the runaround. "I remember Adele . . . taking time out to stress how important it was that I was doing this. Here I was, this community college student, with this little book I'd been selling out of the trunk of my car, so I couldn't believe that not only a bookstore owner, but an owner of a store as well known as this one, would take time out to talk to me. It was so important to me. They gave me so much confidence."

But Wallace feels her own confidence—in terms of the lifeblood of the store—waning.

"We are ready to go on with sufficient funding and encouragement," she says. "But on the other hand, we are also resigned . . . but I'm certainly open to miracles."

She's also a pragmatist.

"I have an MLS degree, library science. I figured if nothing else happens, I will work as a librarian, so at least I will still be around books."

Nonetheless, it's been a difficult adjustment over the last few days. Instead of planning readings and stocking the shelves to sagging, she's planning for farewells and a liquidation.

"It's hard for me to go into the store now. The other day I got a call from a woman whose daughter was doing a report on women in the '20s," Wallace says. "She wanted to know if we had any books. I said, 'Oh, yes! Come on down!' " I got excited . . . that was until I realized we used to get those calls *all* the time."

And where have all the followers gone? One thing's for certain, Wallace says: "When you're sitting here alone, you have lots of time to wonder. . . ."

■ *The Sisterhood Bookstore fundraiser will be held at 7:30 tonight at the Tiffany Theater on Sunset Boulevard, one block west of La Cienega. For ticket information, call (310) 477-7300.*

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