Boston Chapter History

By Nancy Rubin Stuart

In 1954, a group of women publishers, booksellers, writers, reviewers, and librarians founded the Boston Chapter of WNBA. Within the first five years the chapter had successfully campaigned for the inclusion of children’s literature courses at a local college and, under the aegis of Alice Dixon Bond, book editor for the Boston Herald, launched a Book and Author Luncheon series. For the next twenty-five years, book lovers attended the very popular event; attendance at one point reached one thousand. Funds raised from the series enabled the WNBA Boston to support local museums, public broadcasting, and the Boston Public Library for its retrospective children’s book collection.

Over the years, the series became so popular that it regularly attracted distinguished speakers, including film star Lillian Gish in 1967, who spoke about her memoir, Autobiography. That same year the chapter presented a gift of one thousand dollars to the Boston Public Library on behalf of the new Alice M. Jordan Collection of children’s books. To enhance that collection, WNBA Boston members donated books from their personal libraries. In 1968, the chapter drew national attention when children’s literature specialists joined with the National Board and other chapters to honor Horn Book Magazine editor Ruth Hill Viguers at the Constance Lindsay Skinner Award Banquet. In 1970, the fundraiser was co-sponsored with the Boston Herald-Traveler, and speakers included Erich Segal, author of that year’s mega-bestseller Love Story.
By the 1990s the chapter’s ongoing interest in children’s literature sparked a series of annual Holiday Teas resulting in sales of a thousand books for youth and a sum in excess of $30,000. Thanks to those funds, WNBA Boston was able to help support the Boston Public Library’s summer reading readiness programs for disadvantaged preschool children.

In 1996, several members of the Boston Chapter joined those members in sister chapters in Dallas, Detroit, Nashville, New York, and Washington for a WNBA National Literary Tour of London. Members visited Canterbury Cathedral, the destination of pilgrims for Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*; the tower where Virginia Woolf’s friend, Vita Sackville-West wrote; the favorite inn of Charles Dickens; and the home and grave of Jane Austen.

Over the years, and tapping the rich resources of Boston’s literary scene, the WNBA Boston has included programs ranging from brunches with best-selling authors to roundtable discussions with publishing professionals and writers. During its long association with the National WNBA, the Boston Chapter continues to maintain strong ties to the National and its sister chapters. Boston members have served on the National Board, and in 1997 the chapter hosted the National meeting. Members have served on WNBA award committees and volunteered on the Eastman Award and United Nations committees. In 1999, the chapter initiated a Teen Literacy Outreach Project to supply books and writing materials to an often-overlooked population:
incarcerated adolescents. Thanks to members’ generosity, the chapter provided books, journals, and a mobile library cart to its primary partner, the Metro Detention Center.

Through the late 1990s and into the early 2000s, the chapter sponsored monthly programs from September through June. Visits to specialty bookstores, libraries, and literary landmarks added a new dimension to these activities. Among these were visits to Kerouac’s Lowell, Emerson’s Concord, a private tour of the Massachusetts Historical Society, and a visit to the “literary dead” in Mt. Auburn Cemetery.

The Sunday Salon Series (of three literary brunches), launched in 2001, became an instant hit with members. Coupled with WNBA Boston’s publication of a pamphlet celebrating “New England Book Women Who Have Made a Difference,” Robert Taylor, book columnist for the *Boston Globe*, described the chapters’ members as “movers and shakers” in the world of books. The chapter continues to work to merit that distinction. In 2004, the fiftieth year of the Boston Chapter and under the leadership of National president Laurie Beckelman (a former president of the local chapter), the Boston Public Library began a permanent collection of WNBA member books for its research division. This program is open to all members of the National WNBA organization who wish to have their books become part of the library’s permanent collection.

In 2007, the WNBA Boston again hosted the National president’s meeting. Rising attention to women’s history in the “cradle of liberty” prompted the Boston Chapter to co-sponsor the launch of the third edition of *Boston Women’s Heritage Trail Guide*
Book. Also that year, the chapter honored women of color through participation in a tour and reception for the new African Meeting House.

In recent years, the chapter has sponsored holiday events, such as the tea in 2014 at the Copley Fairmont Plaza keynoted by Kimberly Elkins, author of What Is Visible, and co-sponsored a panel with the National Writers Union at the Boston Public Library with several literary agents, including Amaryah Orenstein, co-president of WNBA Boston. On October 24, 2015, the chapter participated in the Boston Book Festival with a booth in Copley Square; WNBA Boston co-president and author Nancy Rubin Stuart moderated the festival’s panel “Portrait of an Artist” with authors B.A. Shapiro, Courtney Maum, Peter Davis, and Elena Delbanco. In honor of National Reading Group Month, the chapter hosted an author panel moderated by Lisa Borders, author of The Fifty-First State. The final event of 2015 was a Sunday brunch at the College Club.

As WNBA Boston looks to the future, the chapter’s role in helping women achieve equity in the arts remains critical.

Nancy Rubin Stuart is an award-winning author of seven nonfiction book about women. She also serves as the Executive Director of the Cape Cod Writers Center. www.nancyrubinstuart.com