New York City Chapter History: Decades at the Forefront of Change

by Sheila Lewis

The history of the New York City Chapter is closely entwined with the history of the National WNBA, because for thirty years, from its founding in 1917, the WNBA was based solely in New York City. With the arrival of chapters in Chicago, Cleveland, Boston, and Nashville in the 1950s, the organization needed a new structure. In 1958, a National Board was established, New York City became a chapter, and its president no longer served as national president. This history focuses on the New York City Chapter from the 1950s to the present and its place at the heart of the U.S. publishing and literary worlds. Early WNBA history is covered elsewhere.

From its early days, one focus for the New York City Chapter has been cooperation with other professional organizations and community groups. In 1953 and again in 1956, the chapter presented programs during the annual Festival of Books sponsored by WNYC, at that time New York’s municipal radio station. In 1966 over three thousand books were donated and distributed to settlement houses, child care centers, and hospitals throughout the city in a joint program with the Publishers Ad Club and the Publishers Publicity Association. In that same year, the New York Board of Education asked the New York City Chapter to conduct a full semester in-service workshop for school librarians on Young Adult literature, the first in a multi-year project.

In the 1970s, the chapter addressed disparities in the hiring, promotion, and salaries of women in the publishing industry. An ad hoc “Status of Women in Publishing” committee was formed and developed a questionnaire “to elicit anonymous information from all
women in publishing in all job classifications.” The report—with its dispiriting results—was released in 1974; the lesson learned was that much work needed to be done to bring women up to parity. The chapter started a second newsletter, called “Did You Know?” that was dedicated to “imparting news about the status of women (and men) in publishing.”

Professional education and career development programs for chapter members have been a major focus and have included workshops on major publishing topics. In 1975, an overflow crowd attended three afternoon programs titled “The Economics of Book Publishing.” In the 1980s, fiction editors of Cosmopolitan and Glamour magazines spoke about serial rights for authors; Doubleday and Penguin editors spoke on the upsurge in paperbacks; and editors at Publishers Weekly and the NY Times Book Review predicted publishing trends. In addition, Village Voice columnist Nat Hentoff spoke on censorship issues faced by libraries and Harriet Pilpel, lawyer and editor at Publisher’s Weekly, spoke on the legal ramifications of blending fact and fiction. Anticipating developments in the publishing field, the chapter began to offer programs on electronic publishing in the 1980s. As technology changed, hands-on workshops for writers on using social media platforms and panel discussions on the latest digital publishing developments have been offered as well in the ensuing years.

Perhaps a most inspiring nod to progress took place in 1987, the year of the WNBA’s 70th anniversary. The NYC Chapter coordinated a celebration of “70 Women Who Have Made a Difference” with a reception at Barnard College and a booklet detailing the accomplishments of 70 women publishers, editors, writers, librarians and others who “are committed, dedicated, creative, and catalytic.” The list is a roster of luminaries, including Frances Steloff, Nan Talese, Nancy Larrick, Doris Grumbach, and Margaret Chase Smith.

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Consistent through the decades has been the chapter’s unparalleled access to publishing professionals so that members have been able to keep up with trends on such topics as memoirs, food writing, historical fiction, young adult fiction, mysteries, graphic narratives, the author/agent connection, and more. Because our New York City location is in the heart of publishing country, for over ten years we have hosted the popular Query Roulette, a program where writers meet with agents in speed-dating-style sessions to get feedback on their query letters. In an effort to give writer members exposure, an "Open Mic" program has been offered at various locations around New York City for members to share their work-in-progress. In October, for the annual National Reading Group Month program we have offered panels of well-known writers talking about their own works and the state of the literary community. A relatively new program has been an “In Conversation” interview with prominent writers, such as Ruth Ozeki, Carole DeSanti, Lynne Sharon Schwartz, and Hilma Wolitzer.

The chapter continues to develop partnerships that bring benefits to members. In 2012 we were asked by the U.S. State Department to host three women writers from Kazakhstan who were touring this country; we held a reception for them at Books of Wonder, the children’s bookstore in the Chelsea neighborhood and learned about the literary world in their country. We have partnered with Pace University to present in-depth panels on such topics as women writing about the environment and the challenges of writing political fiction. Since 2013, we have joined with New York University’s Creative Writing Program to host an annual author panel where recently we brought authors and agents together to address the difference between literary and commercial fiction; another panel focused on
women writing about sex. We collaborated with Random House on a program that followed Helen Simonson’s novel *Major Pettigrew’s Last Stand* on its successful path from the writer, agent, editor, and publicist to reviewer and reader. In addition, we have offered literary programs with the Women Writing Women’s Lives Seminar at the City University of New York; and with Wix.com to help our members understand ebook publishing and marketing in the digital age. In 2014, the WNBA presented a program on Trends in Young Adult Publishing at Book Expo and featuring noted editor Arthur Levine (of Harry Potter fame). An ongoing community connection in recent years has been the chapter’s relationship with the Kids Research Center, a children’s literacy non-profit organization founded by one of our members. KRC works with the New York City Housing Authority to place children’s libraries in community centers. Our members have donated books, funds, and time to help set up these wonderful libraries.

In recent years, we have offered an annual program on career development in partnership with the Young to Publishing Group, part of the Association of American Publishers. The chapter’s prominent social media presence (blog, Facebook, Twitter) has been managed by recent graduates of Pace University’s Masters in Publishing program. Their expertise has been invaluable for the chapter and for their resumes.

In continuing efforts to meet the needs of members—writers, publishers, editors, agents, librarians, publicists, and booksellers, to name a few—a diverse array of programs and networking events are planned throughout the year where members can relax and get acquainted. Traditionally, the September meeting is an informal “open house” welcoming members back from a summer break and providing new and prospective members with a chance to meet and learn more about WNBA-NYC and the national organization. The

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December meeting is a holiday party where in past years well-known authors Mary Gordon, Erica Jong, Fran Lebowitz, and Toni Morison read from their works-in-progress. For additional networking opportunities, neighborhood lunches are held throughout the year and an annual potluck Spring Brunch is held at a member’s home. Writing groups, book discussion groups, and even job opportunities have developed from these ostensibly social gatherings.

Recent chapter presidents—Jill Tardiff, Valerie Tomaselli, and Jane Kinney-Denning—have all moved from the presidency of the NYC chapter to that of the national WNBA, attesting to the important position the chapter holds in shaping and leading the organization. Moving forward into the next century, there is no doubt that WNBA-NYC will continue in its unique role to bring diverse literary and publishing communities together, while anticipating trends and meeting the needs of its members.

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