

HERSTORY WRITERS WORKSHOP

Long Island Organization Ventures into Publishing

In 1996, Long Island writer Erika Duncan helped to organize a conference for women at Southampton College about breaking silences. After the conference, she challenged the participants to write about their experiences by offering a free week-long memoir writing workshop. Little did she know that the offer would lead her to create an entirely new method of teaching women to write about their lives – one in which women with little formal education could learn to write side-by-side with university professors.

Erika's method would evolve into Herstory Writers Workshop (for more information, visit herstorywriters.org). Now, more than a decade later, the program has enabled more than 2,000 women – most from Long Island – from all walks of life (including women in prison) to share their life stories with others ("paper strangers," as Erika Duncan calls them).

Herstory has grown into a phenomenon that has women all over Long Island participating in workshops, conferences and other events. Women from throughout the United States, and even in other countries, have expressed an interest in learning Herstory's teaching methods, and now Herstory's success has taken the organization into an entirely new realm: publishing. In addition to anthologies, literary journals and magazines, in May 2009, Herstory added three books to its list of publications.

Of the three newly-published books, one is a step-by-step training manual, written by Erika Duncan, that explains Herstory's writing methods. The other two books are memoirs written by workshop participants.

Love Song at the End of the Day: A Journey in Alzheimer's by Muriel Weyl, is a charming, compassionate and beautifully written set of stories and reminiscences that coalesce magnificently into a memoir that was spawned at a Herstory Writers workshop. When the author's husband was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, she began writing about her life, her memories and the man she had known for 62 years. "Herstory provided the motivation and the discipline to write down some of those stories," says Weyl. "My husband's Alzheimer condition gave me a new focus as well as the opportunity to explore my feelings, to review my past life with him and to help me understand and cope with this new challenge."

The Teller in the Tale: A Half-Jewish Child in Nazi Germany by Elizabeth Heyn is the story of a childhood in Nazi Germany, a miraculous escape three

weeks before the German borders closed, coming of age in Franco's Spain, and then learning to become a typical American teenager. The compelling story is told with such exquisite detail that the reader is completely drawn in from page one. "It was not until I joined a Herstory writing workshop that my wish to tell my childhood story to my grandchildren gave me the encouragement and the skills to write," shares Heyn. "Little did I know that my book would interest strangers as well. To others who want to write about their lives but have doubts that they can do it well, I say: find a group of other writers who are also struggling and a skilled mentor and dare to do it!"

Herstory founder and artistic director Erika Duncan shares her thoughts about Herstory's new publishing venture:

Long Island Woman: *When you first started Herstory, did you envision that the effort would one day evolve into book publishing?*

Erika Duncan: I did not imagine publishing workshop-member-written books, as most participants wished either to keep their projects for their families and/or their own exploration of their journeys or find commercial publishers. However, it was not long before I began to think about putting together an anthology and a manual for others who were interested in our approach.

When did you first realize that the publishing route was a possibility?

Even by the middle of 2009, most of our members – Herstory has produced 17 finished book manuscripts in all – were still holding out for commercial publishers. However, two wonderful writers in their eighties began to consider using the newly-established Herstory imprint to bring their books to family, friends and others. Through Jim Harris at Soho Press, we knew we could print beautiful books on demand, and Alan Gold, our designer, offered a price that was a steal, because he knew that the women would be donating all production costs and profits back to our program.

How does publishing the books add another dimension to the Herstory project?

As we seek to bring our work to a wider public, our trickiest task is reconciling the clear visibility that our empathy-based approach enjoys in social justice and healing circles, with what many people refer to as "our best kept secret" – the power of the art that emerges from following our method. With the publication of our books, arts funders and readers alike are able to see the sustained literary quality of what we have been able to produce. This will greatly enhance our capacity to attract writers seeking MFA level writing instruction, and will allow those looking for start-to-finish help writing books to use us as resource. Already, teachers of writing are seeking out our manual, even as healers and sociologists are using it as a basis for their course work. We are planning a four-day Herstory conference at Adelphi for the summer of 2010, and our archives have just been added to Stony Brook's special collections.

For more information about Herstory Writers Workshop programs and events, and to purchase books or other publications, visit herstorywriters.org or call 631-676-7395. ♦

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