The Library of America interviews Honor Moore about Poems from the Women's Movement

In connection with the publication in March 2009 of *Poems from the Women's Movement*, edited by Honor Moore, Rich Kelley conducted this exclusive interview for The Library of America e-Newsletter.

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Poems from the Women's Movement *features nearly a hundred poems written between 1966 and 1982 by some 58 poets, many among the most celebrated writers of the past 50 years: Denise Levertov, Carolyn Forché, June Jordan, Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, Muriel Rukeyser, Anne Sexton, Diane Wakoski. How did you go about choosing which poems to include?*

This collection has been taking shape in my imagination for years, and many of the poems I've included have informed my life since the first time I heard them, so I had a head start even before I began to compose this anthology. First I found the poems I knew I wanted to include, then I began to read widely—first in my own library, then in other anthologies and in the library at Poet's House. Certain aspects of life and points of view clearly began to engage women writers during those years. Women poets were experimenting to find ways of writing about them. As the collection came together, I varied subject matter—choosing from among many "mother" poems, many love poems, many poems of anger and solitude, for instance—so that the selection would present the enormous scope of what women were writing about.

You chose to begin the selections in 1966, the year Sylvia Plath published* Ariel. *Why end them in 1982?

In 1982, the Equal Rights Amendment failed to be ratified and President Reagan appointed a commission to insure women equality without amending the Constitution, co-opting the radical energy of feminism. Nonetheless, by the

1980s, the number of women writing poems had exploded—in a way, the call sent out in my poem "Polemic #1" ("*This is the poem to say 'Write poems, women' because I want to read them*") had been heeded. It seemed to me, too, that there was a discrete moment when poetry changed, and it was that moment I wanted to mark. Also, it was in 1982 that Eileen Myles wrote the final poem in the book, "Joan," about Joan of Arc: *"Four hundred and thirty-one years ago today. / A dove leaped right out of her mouth."* I liked the progression of a volume that began with a woman being asked, *"First, are you our sort of a person?"*(in Sylvia Plath's "The Applicant"), and ending with a dove leaping from the mouth of a woman burned for acting from the power of her imagination.

The collection isn't organized alphabetically or chronologically by the author's birth. What's the organizing theme?

The collection is arranged chronologically by the date of composition of the first poem included by each poet. Her other poems follow, whatever the year of composition, if I include more than one, then the next poet's initial poem resumes the chronology.

There seems be a progression in the book from the tentative confessional poems in the beginning of the book—like Sylvia Plath's "The Applicant" or Anne Sexton's "The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator"—to the explosive rage of "Women's Work" and the sensual, self-satisfaction of "She Lays." Was this kind of evolution happening in the poetry of the time? Are there other examples of it?

I wouldn't call "The Applicant" tentative—I would call it furious, like the first utterances of the women's movement in the late 1960s—rage comes first, then articulation. It is as if the rage burns a place in the terrain for what comes after. There is of course evolution in the volume, from Plath and Adrienne Rich, through the directly feminist utterances of Joan Larkin, Irena Klepfisz, and June Jordan, to the more sensual poetics of Myles, Olga Broumas, and Jorie Graham. But the most important evolutionary moment in the collection is the one embodied by Judy Grahn's "A Woman Is Talking to Death" (1973) —a poem that I consider, as I write in the introduction, "a caution that we not allow our poems to become merely parochial and a demonstration of the poetic force we now had at our disposal."

In* The World Split Open: How the Women's Movement Changed America, *Ruth Rosen describes a reading in Berkeley in 1970 when Susan Griffin went "to a podium bare-breasted, to read "An Answer to a Man's Question,

'What Can I Do About Women's Liberation?'" (a poem included in this volume). "The crowd greeted the title with howls of laughter and the poem itself brought the house down." How significant were these public readings to the creation of the work collected here? Do you have any favorites you remember being particularly powerful when you heard them read?

I'm glad you asked that question, because the poem read out loud was such an important part of the movement of women poets, and the voices come into my imagination as I think about those readings, often of groups of poets. In addition to Judy Grahn's "A Woman Is Talking to Death," I remember being stunned when I first heard Adrienne Rich's "Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev," Olga Broumas's " Caritas," Marilyn Hacker's "Elegy," June Jordan's "Case in Point," Joan Larkin's "Rhyme of My Inheritance"—all included in this volume—and many others!

Many of the poems are addressed to mothers, aunts, or previous generations of women, some with anger, some with remarkable sympathy. I was struck by the lines in the Louise Gluck poem, "Pomegranate," where she writes

> ***. . . examine***
> ***this grief your mother***
> ***parades over our heads***
> ***remembering***
> ***she is one to whom***
> ***these depths were not offered.***

Is there a generational progression even among the poets collected here?

The first five poets in the book, Plath, Wakoski, Rukeyser, Rich, and Sexton, along with Audre Lorde, Diane Di Prima, and Denise Levertov are perhaps the founding voices in this movement. The rest of us follow them, inspired and encouraged.

What I also found striking is the way some poems reframe traditional relationships and ideas.

Yes, one of the most powerful poems in the collection for me is Diane Di Prima's "Annunciation," which reframes the angel's visitation to the Virgin Mary as a rape; another is Carolyn Forché's "Burning the Tomato Worms," which presents a grandmother who is imposing and frightening. Poems like these that alter received cultural archetypes contributed to the development of feminist consciousness. As Audre Lorde wrote of poetry in her essay "Poetry Is Not a Luxury" (1977): "It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of

light within which we predict our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action."

The Women's Movement during the period this collection covers experienced some divisive disputes between heterosexual and lesbian feminists. Did the poetry writing of this period suffer from any of this divisiveness?

My experience was that from the beginning, group poetry readings were diverse in terms of race and sexual preference and were a forum for exchange and reconciliation, a place where we could set divisiveness aside, where we could accept and come to understand each other's truths. Poems like June Jordan's "Case in Point" and Jan Clausen's "After Touch" dramatized conundrums about race and sexual preference in personal ways that reminded women of what we had in common. As I wrote in the introduction, "For all of us, what we had kept to ourselves because of competition with other women became instead a way to connect with one another."

You note that one of the significant events during this period was the publication in 1974 of* The World Split Open: Four Centuries of Women's Poetry in America, 1550–1950 *edited by Louise Bernikow. The title comes from a poem in the book, "Kathe Kollwitz," by Muriel Rukeyser, in which she writes, "What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? / The world would split open." In fact, Rukeyser is the only poet included in both volumes. Do you see* Poems from the Women's Movement *as a sequel to or continuation of the work begun with* The World Split Open*?

The World Split Open was a comprehensive collection, while mine is a personal sampling, but certainly *Poems from the Women's Movement* partakes of the spirit of Bernikow's volume, in that it sets out to historicize a literary movement that has been missing from the canon of literary history. While poets like Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich are prominent in histories of American poetry, writers like Judy Grahn and Audre Lorde are either omitted or not considered central.

Were there any personal discoveries you made in editing this volume? Do you have any favorites among the selections?

I discovered the poems of Beverly Dahlen ("Gesture") and the early work of Fanny Howe ("Nursery"). One of my favorite poems in the collection is Alice Notley's "The Goddess Who Created This Passing World," a poem I hadn't known before.

Last year you published a controversial memoir,* The Bishop's Daughter, *about your father, Paul Moore, who had been the Episcopal bishop of New York from 1972 to 1989. What made it provocative were your frank revelations of your father's exploration of his homosexuality (he was married and the father of nine children) and your account of a 15-year period when you dated only women. I'm wondering whether the writing of that book overlapped with your work on* Poems from the Women's Movement *and how one may have influenced the other.

I began *Poems from the Women's Movement* after completing the writing of *The Bishop's Daughter,* but during its production and early publication. Remembering the women's movement while writing it brought back the excitement of the 1970s and my beginnings as a poet, which inspired me to think about doing this volume. Adrienne Rich's lines *"A woman in the shape of a monster / a monster in the shape of a woman"* from her poem "Planetarium" figure in *The Bishop's Daughter.* I suppose you could say that if poems were music and my memoir a movie, then the poems in *Poems from the Women's Movement* would be a soundtrack for *The Bishop's Daughter.*