

Golden Thread Booksellers / Rhea Hirshman and Alison Cunningham

Overview

Golden Thread Booksellers, a feminist bookstore that operated in New Haven, Connecticut from 1982 until 1996, was co-founded by Rhea Hirschman and Kim Lawrence, and later owned and managed by Alison Cunningham. Golden Thread was more than just a storefront, having served as gathering place and sanctuary for progressive feminist thought and identity during a critical era in feminist and Lesbian history.

Summary

Founded in 1982 by Rhea Hirschman and Kim Lawrence, Golden Thread Booksellers was a feminist bookstore born from passion and perseverance. With limited resources, the founders purchased the inventory of a small feminist book business* and initially operated as a mobile venture before establishing a permanent location on Brownell Street in New Haven. The store was named after a popular Holly Near song, symbolizing its commitment to connection and inclusivity.**

Golden Thread quickly became a cultural and educational hub, offering literature often excluded from mainstream publishing. The store aligned itself with feminist publishing houses like Firebrand Books, Naiad Press, and Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, which gave voice to authors too often excluded from mainstream publishing.

Still, the owners made careful decisions about what to carry, balancing popular titles with lesser known but vital works. “You’d buy *The Color Purple*, but I’d make sure there was something next to it that you maybe hadn’t heard of but needed to read,” Rhea said.

As Rhea described it, Golden Thread provided education and support that extended beyond the mission of an independent bookstore. “There’s so much kind of education we were doing—not in a direct way, but you’re going to figure out this is what it means to be a Lesbian, and equally important as a feminist, because where else were we going to learn that?,” she explained.

More than a bookstore, Golden Thread offered informal but transformative education, especially for women seeking community. Yale Divinity School student Alison Cunningham was among those deeply impacted. “I was just coming out,” she recalled, “and I thought, oh, I need to go over and check this out and meet Rhea.” Alison would go on to work as a volunteer and later become the store’s owner in 1998.

Golden Thread proudly hosted readings by authors such as Barbara Kingsolver, Judy Grahn, Alison Bechdel, and Olga Broumas. “Barbara Kingsolver read at Golden Thread Bookseller, which just blows me away... she’s a rock star now,” said Alison. They fostered a warm, volunteer-driven environment, where quirky traditions—like small rewards for those who handled difficult customers—were part of the charm. Volunteers earned store credit and formed lasting bonds through their service.

Golden Thread’s cultural contributions extended beyond books. It sponsored community concerts, sold music and feminist art, and even supported a local softball team. During the holidays, Rhea would open the store on Christmas Day for tea and cookies, offering a safe haven for those needing emotional comfort.

Despite its success, Golden Thread faced mounting challenges as the years progressed. The late 80s and early 90s rise of chain bookstores like Barnes & Noble undermined the niche market that feminist bookstores once dominated. “They started selling Lesbian and feminist books, and that was devastating to us,” Alison explained.

By 1996, the store closed its doors for good, commemorated by a farewell circle, where dozens of community members shared emotional stories of the role Golden Thread played in their lives.

Yet Golden Thread’s legacy endures. Bookshelves from the iconic Connecticut store have found renewed life at the Wanderground Lesbian Archive/Library in Cranston, Rhode Island, where they display some of the Lesbian literature once sold by Golden Thread.

The memories persist too. Decades later, Rhea and Alison say strangers approach them to share what the store meant to them. “Golden Thread was right there among the highlights of my life,” Alison reflected. “It was so formative for me and for so many other women.”

“A bookstore is one of the places where you are reminded of how important the capacity of words is to create good in the world,” Rhea said.

* Shorelinewoman Feminist Bookstore, co-owners Lynn Kingston and Maurya Meenan

** Holly Near song – Golden Thread - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x8bVKAkj8tg>

*.... A woman's love is like a golden thread
It can weave in and out so magically
I know this is true....*

NOTE: Additional conversation about Golden Thread can be found in the New Haven Group Discussion, also part of this project. Recorded April 28, 2024.

Video Quotes from Interview

 – indicates VIDEO clip available

 **Alison starts as volunteer** (:54)

I just, I really, I have such fond memories of that store. It was teeny, tiny, as you said, Rhea. And in 1982 I had just come to the Divinity School. I moved up here from Texas, and at the div school, I met Mev. And I'm sure Mev told me about Golden Thread, or I saw something about it somewhere in the Women's Center there, and I was just coming out. And so I thought, oh, I need to go over and check this out and meet Rhea and find some more music, because I tiptoed into a feminist bookstore in Austin before I moved up here, but I was terrified that I might be a lesbian, and sure enough, but that was a great little store. And, you know, within a couple of months of going in to visit regularly, Rhea said, “Why don't you just volunteer? I need volunteers.” So I started volunteering and continued volunteering...



 **Impact of Store & Closing ritual and impact** (2:07)

(Rhea with Alison) So there's a real sense of community and togetherness about Allison's absolutely right, and that closing ritual. Do you remember the closing ritual? I cried my story through it - So I don't remember a lot. Because, well, me too. What we did, you know, we invited people to come this. The shelves were pretty much bare at that point. Yeah, sat around in a big circle on the floor, told stories and told stories.



Everybody went around to say something. And in fact, as I was thinking about our doing this interview, I thought we might want to get some other people in, not today, but a few other people in, to talk about what the store was in their lives, because I still hear those stories. Oh, me too all the time. People come up to me in random ways and say, Oh, do you remember me from Golden Thread? I'm like, no, no, tell me your name. I'm so glad you remember, Oh, my God. So you know, woman, just like I did, coming out, found Rhea, found the store. Woman after woman after woman would come in and feel safe to talk to me about coming out. It's almost like therapy, but not really. And then people would come in and just hang out. Pam Smith used to come. Pam Smith ran Amazon radio from WPKN so she played all the lesbian music on this, you know, community radio. And she'd come in and we just chat, and she just hang out. We didn't even have to chat. She just came in and, you know, she'd see people that she knew. And you know, lots of people would do that. And, yeah, yeah. And I run into friends who brought their children in to explore the children's books, and now their young daughters, who were babies are now grown up and feminist women. And you think, okay, the impact of the store and stores like it is very deep. You know, it's just really remarkable kind of this space. And I think you know, what Mev is trying to do with Wanderground is to reclaim that space and say and to remind us, and especially young women, how important lesbian space is for all kinds of reasons.

📖 Softball team (:52)

(Alison) Oh, never forget the Golden Thread softball team. [Oh, see, that was Alison's thing. I had no said she has a couple, she's got some, some memorabilia from Yeah, she does.] Well, so, so that emerged as a thing, right? The softball team needed supporters, and it used to be that the Women's Center in New Haven supported the softball team, but then the Women's Center started having real financial difficulties, and they actually closed their doors before I closed the store, or maybe right after, but it was the same time and then, and so, so I said, Sure, well, it didn't cost much, so we sponsored the softball team. Was good advertising for us because it had our T shirt and the players would come in, you know, it was they supported us. I supported them. It was great fun.



📖 Choosing What to Carry & Educating Ourselves (2:47)



Rhea: another issue that was not fraught in any way, but just something you have to think about owning a business like this is how much of how much mainstream stuff, and I'm not talking specifically about race and sexuality, but mainstream, as in bestseller type stuff. Yeah, that's popular. That would fit in with the theme of would fit within the theme of the store, but that was also available every place else

Alison: I carried a little bit of that. So what I did care, I did do, I did make a decision to do that, because it made money exactly, right, exactly, and I didn't carry all of it my that that list was not long, but I. Um, if there was a best seller and I knew I could get it, then, yeah, I got it.

Rhea: I mean, you know, clear example would be something like *The Color Purple*. I mean, who wouldn't have carried the color Absolutely. Then maybe along with *The Color Purple*, you carry some books that maybe aren't as well known, but that need to be next to *The Color Purple* right on the bookshelf. Make sure that people bought that right? You have to buy that, but you have to buy this, right, or looked at that so. And as far as the the S and M issue is concerned, I don't know if you remember this, but I carried against, there's an anthology called against S and M, and then there was another anthology called *Sapphisty*. Remember *Sapphisty*? Remember that book? I remember that one which was a collection of erotic writings, not all of which, but a number of which did have an S and M theme. And I carry those and put them right next to each other on the shelf.

Alison: Well, that's the way to do it. You know, if you're going to do this, then do that. You know, like you said, it's so there's so much of people wanting to know kind of different than you can walk into RJ Julia's and you're going to get the best sellers and you're going to buy a book, but you walk into a feminist bookstore, because you kind of, I wanted to know, from my experience, what is happening here, who's writing? What are they writing about? What do I need to know about this experience? What's going to help me understand my own process of coming out, or being an aging lesbian, or dealing with issues of, you know, what is the *Lesbian Sex* or *Our Bodies, Ourselves*? Or, you know, there's just so much, there's so much kind of education we were doing, not in a kind of a direct way, but you know, you're gonna, you're gonna figure out this is what it means to be a Lesbian, because, and where else were we going to learn that?

Rhea: And equally important, I would say what it means to be a feminist. And yes, thank you. To me, it was, I mean, obviously we carried a lot of Lesbian Lesbian material, you know, including the music. But what does it mean? What does it mean to be a woman in the in this world, in whatever way you are choosing to be?

📖 Running the Store - Absolutely critical (1:20)

I've had a pretty remarkable work life. I've had jobs that I have loved all my life. Me too, from the time I was a camp counselor till the job I have now, and golden thread was right there among the highlights of my life. I mean, it was, it was a remarkable period of time. I often felt like I had no business running that store. But Rhea and I are very different, and we ran it, you know, we ran it very differently, yeah, and both of us filled a niche in the community that needed to be filled, and people responded to us in a way and equally, you know, in different Yeah. And I wouldn't trade those. All those years I was involved with Golden Thread, I wouldn't trade it for anything in the world, because it was so formative for me and so formative for so many other women, right,

(Martha-Interviewer: from little and, as you said, people that recognize you in the grocery store or wherever, the impact that you have in the community, right?)

Rhea: I think we have to remind each other sometimes, you know, for some at some point, it's well, you know, it's what I'm doing, but I think we have to remind each other sometimes, what a huge how, how important it was. It's easy to forget.

Alison: yeah, yeah, no. It was really critical. It was absolutely critical.



📖 Words for good in the world (1:24)

Rhea: Let me see I can say this, the whole idea of how important words are, yeah is, is what I'm thinking now, and I don't know that I have a whole lot more to say about that right now, but except to say that a bookstore is one of it's not the only place, but it's one of the places where you are reminded of How important words are, and at a moment now where in our political lives, words are being so badly twisted and so misused, either because they're being used as weapons, even if they're not being used as weapons, if they're being used to to promulgate terrible untruths and terrible cruelty that falls into love its category, the importance of remembering how to use words honorably and to use words to create rather than to destroy. And I think part of being in the book business means that you value the capacity of words to create good in the world.

**Related Items in Wanderground Collection**

- Picture of bookshelves from GT
- Photos of all owners
- Softball t-shirt
- Bookmarks from across the years
- Poster with cat
- Photo of Flyer – Hothead Paisan event

Details

- Interview with: Rhea Hirshman and Alison Cunningham
- Topic(s): Golden Thread Booksellers, softball team, Lesbian community spaces, significant authors
- Date & How Recorded: March 17, 2025 on Zoom
- Interviewed by: Martha Young
- Summary Prepared by: Martha Young