

The Hitchhiker's Guide to Second-Wave Feminism

A zinelike directory for feminist outposts across the U.S. from 1973 has been reissued, and is selling out.

By Meg Miller

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For all of its attention-sucking, data-mining downsides, the internet has held true to at least one of its original promises: connecting disparate groups of people. There's hardly a better reminder of this than a global health crisis and a national wave of protests. Online, informal support networks have flourished; people are coordinating services for their neighbors and other communities, sending micropayments to strangers, and adding book and media recommendations to immaculately organized Google Docs.

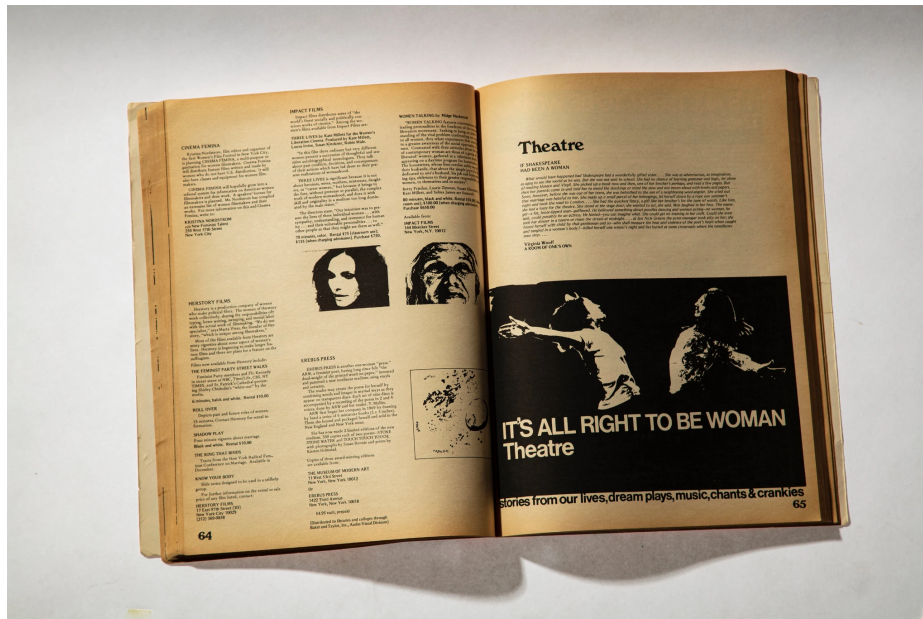
They are also, sometimes, simply passing PDFs from friend to friend. This was how I first encountered “The New Woman's Survival Catalog,” a zinelike 1970s compendium of feminist publishers, bookstores, health clinics, divorce co-ops and rape crisis centers across the country.

It is the culmination of a six-month, 12,000-mile road trip in which the authors attempted to document a nationwide network of feminist alternative culture and resources. Reading it now feels nostalgic, voyeuristic even — all that travel and communing — but also inspiring. It's an example of resources readily shared, of helpful social connectivity.

“The New Woman's Survival Catalog” was a best seller when it was published in November 1973, but soon fell out of print, the remaining print copies rarely even surfacing on secondary markets.

“It felt like they sort of evaporated,” said Rachel Valinsky, the book's new editor at the nonprofit art publisher Primary Information, which reissued the book in September. (One of its founders, James Hoff, was inspired to do so after receiving a copy from his mom for Christmas.) The reprint is available in museum shops, bookstores and more than one Brooklyn boutique. According to the publisher, the reprint is nearly sold out.

It's hard to miss: Large-format, 223 pages, with a siren-red cover, it's about as physical a representation of network culture as you can get. The black-and-white cut-and-paste, catalog-style interior is reminiscent of Stewart Brand's counterculture classic “Whole Earth Catalog,” but the singular focus is women-run initiatives, from feminist credit unions (“credit discrimination is a very sexist business”) to a feminist karate union (“free from male chauvinism”) and feminist goat farmers.



The book is culmination of a six-month, 12,000-mile road trip from 1973 in which the authors documented a nationwide network of feminist alternative culture and resources. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

“Back then, cataloging was essentially our version of what social media is now,” said Susan Rennie, 80, a co-author of the book. She and the book's other author, Kirsten Grimstad, 75, were both professors who saw the compendium as a way to draw attention to the Women's Movement.

Ads in the catalog suggest visiting a 20-foot bulletin board at the Oakland bookstore A Woman's Place to connect with other women; or to send a letter to one of the volunteers in various states offering legal guidance for changing one's name to a “liberation name,” à la Sue Sojourner or Laura X.

An entry on the Chicago Women's Graphics Collective describes the group making “most beautiful and stirring” posters for the Movement, without authorship and entirely collectively. Elsewhere, readers are invited to use the New York Woman's Directory to employ women doctors, lawyers and carpenters; join a tenants'

association-turned-feminist playwrights collective; and participate in community child care (\$5 a week per family).

Ms. Grimstad and Ms. Rennie met in the early 1970s while they were both working at Columbia University, after a meeting for Barnard's newly opened Women's Center, a research center for feminist scholarship and activism. Ms. Grimstad was putting together a bibliography of women's studies for the center, and she shared with Ms. Rennie some of the answers she had received from a questionnaire looking for women's organizations across the United States.

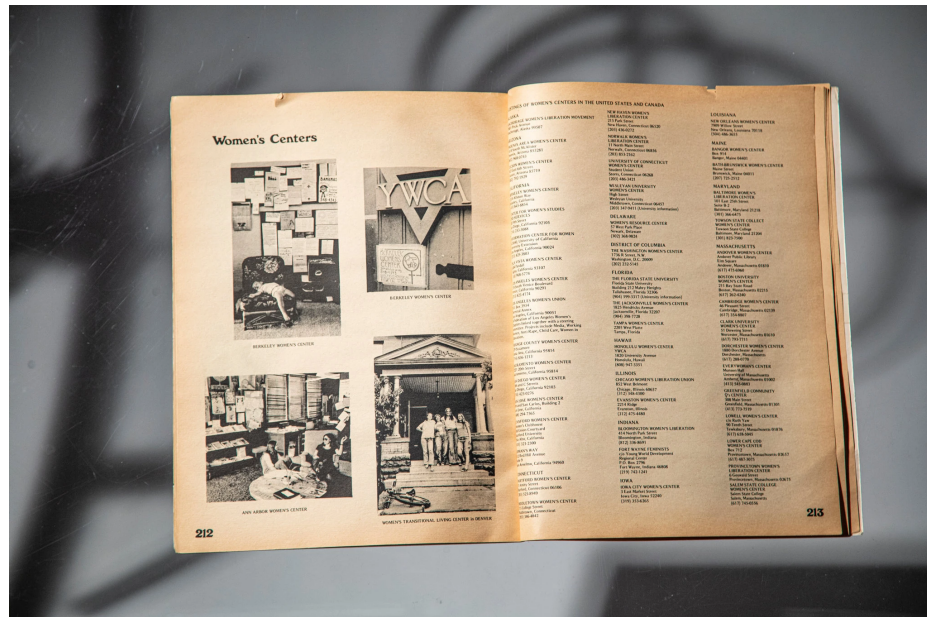
"The imagination was just fantastic," said Ms. Grimstad. "Somewhere in the country, every single aspect of society that you could imagine was being reshaped from a feminist perspective."

After they approached an editor at Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, she signed them on the condition that the whole thing would be done in time for the Christmas season. This was March 1973. By May, they'd quit their jobs, found a place to lodge Ms. Grimstad's dog and hit the road. Ms. Grimstad drove the rental car — a green Plymouth Duster with a "Women Pick Up Women" bumper sticker — while Ms. Rennie navigated, consulting a file box of index cards with the names and addresses of the groups they wanted to visit.

They slept in motels and on futons, often crashing after impromptu, booze-fueled dinner parties thrown by their hosts. Everyone they met introduced them to 10 or more people. "The energy was electric; it was rocket-fueled," said Ms. Grimstad.

When the pair stopped in Washington, D.C., to visit the Furies, a lesbian community, they met Rita Mae Brown, then a young author on the rise just after the publication of "The Rubyfruit Jungle," who insisted they visit the feminist collective in Atlanta that gave the book its name. In Los Angeles, they showed up unannounced at the ranch house of the artist Judy Chicago, who they said opened the door in a "Judy Chicago fan club" T-shirt, welcomed them in and introduced them to a wide network of feminist art workshops.

At a women-run bookstore in Oakland, Calif., the pair picked up a magazine called "Country Women" published by a feminist agriculture collective in Northern California. Lacking an address, the bookstore owners encouraged them to drive to the small town of Albion and ask around for the "women goat farmers with an octagonal barn."



A list of women's centers from the 1970s in the United States and Canada. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

"We pulled up to the farm with our New York plates, and here are these women in bluejeans and Wellington boots, looking at us like, 'Who are you?'" said Ms. Rennie. Once the pair explained where they'd come from, the farmers invited them to stay overnight and arranged a big dinner with others in the area. (Exasperated by the perception of women farmers as "farmers' wives," the collective shared resources for everything including wood-splitting, hoof-trimming and animal husbandry — a term they pointedly rejected.)

Upon its publication, the guide was generally well-received. Even The New York Times review, from Jan. 6, 1974, which called the book's "attitude of self-righteous indignation" counterproductive, conceded: "If the catalogue bails you out on only one occasion, it will still have been worth the price."

There were so many responses from women-run initiatives that there was a follow-up book, "The New Woman's Survival Sourcebook." It set the authors themselves on track to reach a broader audience; they helped create and edit a feminist magazine, "Chrysalis," at the famed Woman's Building nonprofit arts and education center in Los Angeles, which was co-founded by Ms. Chicago.

Reading "The New Woman's Survival Catalog" today, it's easy to identify plenty of shortcomings of the second wave — namely, an underrepresentation of women of color and trans women. Ms. Grimstad and Ms. Rennie acknowledge this, and seem genuinely excited by the increased inclusivity of the feminist movement today, as well as the energy of grass roots digital organizing.

The popularity of their book's reissue implies that some of the admiration is mutual — or, at least, that the history of women's movements, warts and all, is vital to our understanding of the movements of today. As the book's editor Ms. Valinsky put it: "There's something still really powerful about the on-the-ground coalition building that happened with this book."