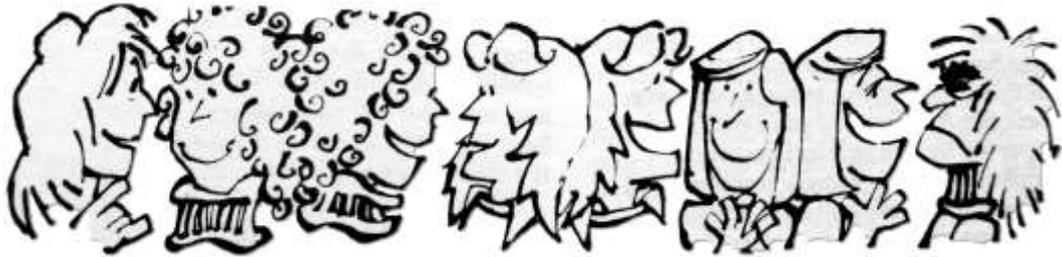


# Liberating Histories

## A testimony by Peter

An important aspect of the Liberating Histories project is recording the experiences of actual readers of feminist magazines, **people like you**. This is Peter's response.



### Introduce yourself...

Peter. Maybe I'm not the kind of reader you're looking for (i.e. a man) but I saw the post on the MECCSA list, and had five minutes, so thought I'd write in. I don't have any big story to tell: I can just tell you that encountering Spare Rib was a thrill and influenced my politics profoundly. But please note: it was a very long time ago, and I'm probably remembering through rosy specs. Sorry if I'm wasting your time, folks...

### How/when did you first encounter a feminist magazine? How old were you, where were you living, who introduced you to the magazine/s?

I was 19, in my first year at Exeter University, and it was 1980. I sought it out by myself. Probably got it from a radical bookshop along with some underground newspapers.

### How did it feel, reading a feminist magazine for the first time?

Compelling is the word. It all made perfect sense to me, and I did not feel excluded. Also, it was funny, and that really mattered. I particularly liked the cartoons. Context: I'm from a conservative (upper-) working-class background, and 'feminism' did not figure in the family, or at school, or anywhere. But I gradually educated myself. I'd seen The Slits play in 1978 and that had been a challenge: women were not supposed to behave that way! But I knew that the 'women empowered by punk' story was mostly a veneer. When I saw Spare Rib it confirmed that there was a sophisticated movement out there. And, like I say, nothing I saw in its pages made me recoil.

**Did you encounter feminist magazines through the women's movement, or the other way round?**

n/a

**What features or aspects of the magazine(s) stand out to you most vividly/are most memorable? Did you have favourites? Dislikes?**

The cartoons, as above. But I also liked the way it was inclusive of all women - my mum was disabled (in a wheelchair) and I'd never seen even-handed representations of disabled people like that before. (Did one issue have a blind woman on the cover, or did I imagine that? Amazing!)

**How involved a reader were you? Were you a subscriber? Did you send in letters or listings?**

I just picked up issues here and there, whenever I found them. I was reading them out of sequence. It didn't matter. I was just a part-timer. (They weren't that easy to get hold of, either.)

**Did reading feminist magazines influence your politics or daily life? If so, how?**

I parroted what I read in Spare Rib to pals - must have seemed like a sanctimonious prat - ha!. But it was important to me. I absorbed it and 'lived' it, and it embedded me further into a peer group that was countercultural. My uni years (1980-83) coincided with some historic moments. 1980 was the time of the Ripper murders, and the women students on campus were terrified (even though the uni was in a faraway part of the country) - I was involved with some stuff around that. Then 1983 came round and it was Greenham time. I was going to go, but after talking it through with feminists (women) decided it wasn't my place.

Later on in life, I'd read other mags - Trouble and Strife, Shocking Pink, many others (can't remember titles) - but they didn't have the same pizzazz.

In the end, things came full circle: eventually, I became a lecturer at Birkbeck and taught journalism (in the 1990s), and introduced a class on feminist mags! (I brought in some old Spare Ribs that I'd kept, and the class was astonished by it - it was the time of 'lad mags', as I recall.)

**As a reader of feminist magazines, did you feel part of a larger network or movement?**

Hard question. It was part of my intellectual/political 'formation'. It was all part of the counterculture. I was into other kinds of 'social justice' - anti-racism, CND, etc. It all melded together. I suppose I was a 'radical' (not hardcore) for a while, and that meant speaking out. But I can't say I was part of the feminist movement, and as man I sometimes encountered hostility e.g. being blanked by separatist lesbians at a commune. But in general, I 'got it' (I think...), and my feminist friends 'got me', and it made me a better person (cliché, cliché, cliché...).

### **Do you still read feminist magazines now? If so, are they print or digital?**

No. I realise they still exist (I work near Housman's Bookshop), but I'm not curious in the way I was as a teen. I'm still a feminist 'ally' if you want to put it that way, but mags are not part of my cultural diet. (As an aside, I still work in education, and 'feminism' is massively controversial - not news to you, of course. Politics today is kind of souring my experience of politics then, if you see what I mean. Quite sad.)

### **Did your mother read feminist magazines?**

Ha! No. But she sometimes read cheapo women's mags which sometimes had surprisingly 'feminist' content.

### **Looking back, how much impact do you think feminist magazines had?**

As above. Post- my Spare Rib epiphany, i.e. many years later, I met one of the women on the editorial team (from the period I was reading). We got on like a house on fire and became firm friends. Makes perfect sense!

ENDS (and thanks for allowing me the space for my reverie...)

## About the project

Liberating Histories tells the stories of the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) through UK feminist magazines and connects these stories to women's activism today.

## Want to tell us your story?...

We are collating stories of the women, like you, who read magazines like *Spare Rib*, *Red Rag*, *Outwrite*, *Mukti*, *Scarlet Women* etc. and the impact they had on their lives and attitudes.

If you would like us to include your story in our archive, [check out this page](#) on our website to find out how to get involved.