

# ***Barbara Grier, Publisher of Lesbian Books, Dies at 78***

By [Paul Vitello](#) Nov. 13, 2011

Barbara Grier, a founder of one of the most successful publishing houses for books by and about lesbians, including a nonfiction chronicle about lesbian nuns that became a phenomenon after it drew complaints from Roman Catholic officials, died on Thursday in Tallahassee, Fla. She was 78.

The cause was lung cancer, said her partner, Donna McBride.

Ms. Grier became a revered figure to several generations of lesbian writers and readers after founding Naiad Press in 1973 with three other women, including Ms. McBride. Armed with just \$3,000, they set out to publish books, as Ms. Grier later described them, “about lesbians who love lesbians, where the girl is not just going through a phase.”

That comment referred to the lesbian-themed romance novels she had read as a girl, growing up in the 1940s, in which the heroine dallied with a female lover but ended up with a man, reflecting what publishers considered the only acceptable happily-ever-after outcome.

Naiad Press published over 500 books with unconditionally lesbian themes during the next 30 years — romance novels, histories, erotica, volumes of poetry, science fiction and self-help guides.

Ms. Grier’s most controversial and successful book, [“Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence.”](#) was a 1985 nonfiction work by two former nuns, based on interviews with 50 former and active nuns who were lesbians like them. Nancy Manahan, one of the authors, wrote in the foreword to the book that its intent was to break the silence about “erotic love between women in religious life.”

When a local television station in Boston promoted an interview with Ms. Manahan and her co-writer, Rosemary Curb, local Catholic officials complained, saying the broadcast would be “an affront to the sensitivity of Roman Catholics.” The station canceled the segment, but publicity over the episode gave the book a “banned in Boston” cachet that sent sales soaring.

“This is crazy,” Ms. Grier told The New York Times, scrambling in ensuing weeks to fill new orders for the book, which eventually sold several hundred thousand copies. “I’m a mouse giving birth to an elephant.”



Barbara Grier, left, and Donna McBride, founders of Naiad Press, in 1993. Credit...Mark Foley

The main customers of Naiad Press were the hundreds of lesbian and feminist bookstores that sprouted up across the country in the 1970s and '80s, at the dawn of the sexual-identity liberation movement. When Ms. Grier and Ms. McBride retired, in 2003, the company's book list was taken over by [Bella Books](#), a publisher specializing in lesbian-themed romance novels.

In addition to contemporary novels (including many by Sarah Aldridge, the pen name of Anyda Marchant, another Naiad founder, along with her partner, Muriel Crawford), Ms. Grier reprinted several books considered seminal works in the lesbian canon, including Gertrude Stein's prose poem "Lifting Belly" and the poetry of Renée Vivien, a British bohemian famous at the turn of the last century as much for her openly lesbian life as for her Symbolist poems.

The most famous American lesbian novel of the '70s, "Rubyfruit Jungle," was not published by Ms. Grier. She and the book's author, Rita Mae Brown, who has since described herself as bisexual, belonged to different camps in the era's roiling politics of lesbian activism, said Victoria Brownworth, the author of a profile of Ms. Grier in "Before Stonewall: Activists for Gay and Lesbian Rights in Historical Context," a 2002 collection of biographical sketches.

But Ms. Brownworth described Ms. Grier as the premier editor to two generations of American lesbian writers, a mentor whose guidance helped formulate "new ways of defining ourselves during a time that saw tectonic shifts in the culture." Ms. Grier, she said, was "the Maxwell Perkins of lesbian literature."

Barbara Grier was born on Nov. 4, 1933, in Cincinnati, the oldest of three daughters of Phillip and Dorothy Grier. Her father, a physician, became an intermittent presence in the household beginning when she was about 5. Her mother worked as a secretary.

In addition to Ms. McBride, Ms. Grier is survived by her two sisters, Diane Grier and Penni Martin.

When Ms. Grier was 12, she told her mother that she was “a homosexual,” Ms. Grier said in the “Before Stonewall” profile. “Mother said since I was a woman, I wasn’t a homosexual, I was a lesbian. She also said that since I was 12, I was a little young to make this decision and we should wait six months to tell the newspapers.”

A few years later, when her sexual identity seemed fully mature, Ms. Grier received two of her first lesbian-themed books from her mother. Both were classics of the genre: “The Well of Loneliness,” a novel by the British writer Radclyffe Hall, which caused a scandal when it was published in 1928; and “Of Lena Geyer,” a 1936 novel by Marcia Davenport, a regular contributor to *The New Yorker*.

Ms. Grier never attended college. She went to work after graduating high school to help support the family, Ms. McBride said, adding: “Books were her education. She read everything, all kinds of books.”

But for her, books that made lesbians feel secure in their sexual identities were the best. “Her goal in publishing,” Ms. McBride added, “was to make lesbians happy about themselves.”