

Betty A. Prashker, 99, Who Pushed Boundaries in Book Publishing, Dies

A top editor and executive at two publishing houses, she was an advocate for women in publishing, and for equal pay in an industry that had long been male-dominated.



Betty A. Prashker in 1974 in her office at Doubleday, where she was an editor for 21 years. Her instincts for what would make a best seller were extremely broad and crossed high and low culture. Credit...Librado Romero/The New York Times

By [Trip Gabriel](#)

Betty A. Prashker, a pioneering woman in the book business who published the feminist classics “Sexual Politics” by Kate Millett and “Backlash” by Susan Faludi, but who also brought out racy commercial fiction by Judith Krantz and Jean M. Auel — viewing their frank female sexuality as no less a statement of feminist empowerment — died on July 30 in Alford, Mass. She was 99.

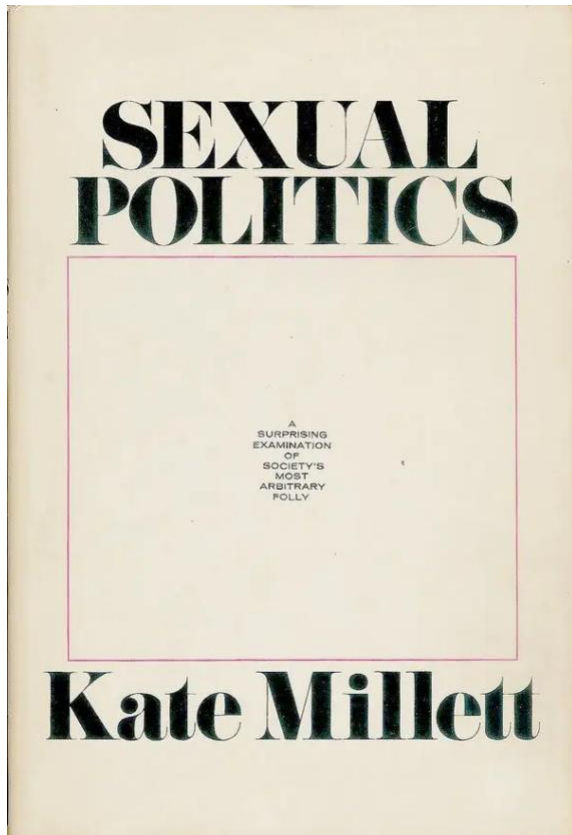
Her death, at the home of a daughter, was confirmed by her family.

The list of authors Ms. Prashker discovered, championed or positioned for best-sellerdom as a top editor and executive at two of the leading publishing houses, Doubleday and Crown (now both divisions of Penguin Random House), included plenty of men, too, among them Isaac Asimov, Erik Larson, Dave Barry and Dominick Dunne.

She was a Vassar graduate whose first toehold in publishing, in 1945, as a reader of unsolicited manuscripts for Doubleday, came because men who would otherwise have taken such jobs were still at war. After marrying in 1950, she set her career aside for a decade to raise a family before rebelling at the role of homemaker.

“I suddenly realized I was going insane,” Ms. Prashker was quoted as saying in “The Time of Their Lives,” a 2008 history of publishing by Al Silverman. “I felt my entire life was constricted by when the man was coming to fix the washing machine, and the logistics of getting children here, there and everywhere.”

Returning to the workplace, she was both an early avatar of 1960s feminism and a catalyst of its advance. Doubleday rehired her, and she soon heard of a Columbia graduate student, [Ms. Millett](#), who was working on a writing project.



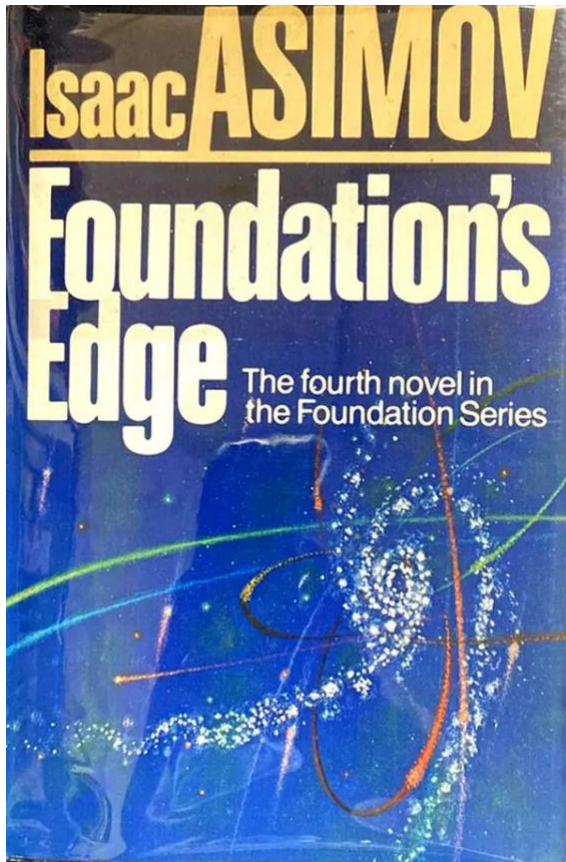
Ms. Prashker was so excited about Kate Millett’s “Sexual Politics,” she later recalled, that her pitch to a company sales meeting was met with applause. Published in 1970, it became a landmark of second-wave feminism. Credit...Doubleday

Ms. Prashker didn’t like what Ms. Millett showed her, but asked if she had anything else. Ms. Millett sent over her Ph.D. dissertation, “Sexual Politics”: an analysis, drawing on 20th-century literature, of how patriarchal power forces women into submissive roles in society, the workplace and the bedroom. Ms. Prashker was so excited about the work, [she later recalled](#), that her pitch to a company sales meeting was met with applause.

Published in 1970, “Sexual Politics” became a sensation, a landmark of second-wave feminism and of feminist literary criticism.

Ms. Prashker's instincts for what would make a best seller were extremely broad and crossed high and low culture.

In 1981, she told Mr. Asimov that he should write a sequel to his 1950s science fiction trilogy, "Foundation." The author of more than 100 books, Mr. Asimov protested that it had been nearly a decade since he had written a novel. Doubleday insisted, and a year later Mr. Asimov submitted a novel called "Lightning Rod." After Doubleday asked for a title change, it was renamed "Foundation's Edge" and published in 1982. It became one of Mr. Asimov's most popular books, [spending 25 weeks](#) on The New York Times's best-seller list.



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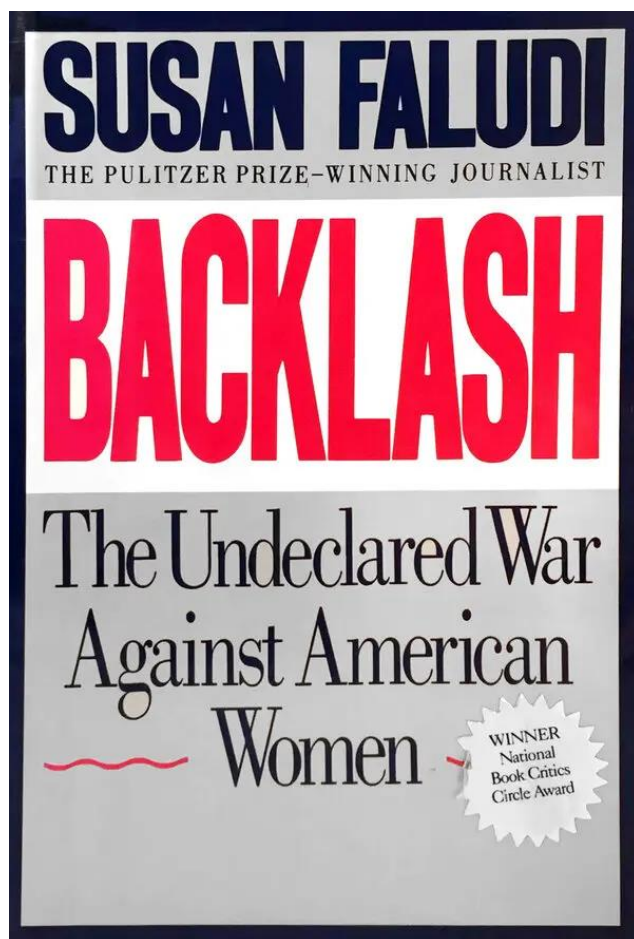
Mr. Larson, the author of "The Devil in the White City" (2003) and other top-selling works of nonfiction, was someone else Ms. Prashker helped steer to a new level of success.

After a disappointing experience with his first book in the early 1990s, he decided to pitch his second, "Lethal Passage: The Story of a Gun," to three houses.

He had two uninspiring meetings, then met with Ms. Prashker, who had left Doubleday for Crown Publishers. She ended their conversation by saying she had another meeting. Mr. Larson assumed he was being shown the door, but it turned out that the meeting, which Ms. Prashker asked him to attend, included a dozen Crown associates discussing how they would promote Mr. Larson's work. He was sold.

"She was a terrific editor," Mr. Larson said in an interview. "She had a rare knack for being noninterventionist. She'd take what you gave her and make it better by cutting things out and tying things together without getting in your face."

Ms. Prashker moved to Crown in 1981, after 21 years at Doubleday, and was named a vice president and editor in chief. She became an immediate champion of Ms. Faludi's "Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women," a critique of the attacks in the 1980s on advances that feminism had achieved in prior decades. Other publishers had been cool to it.

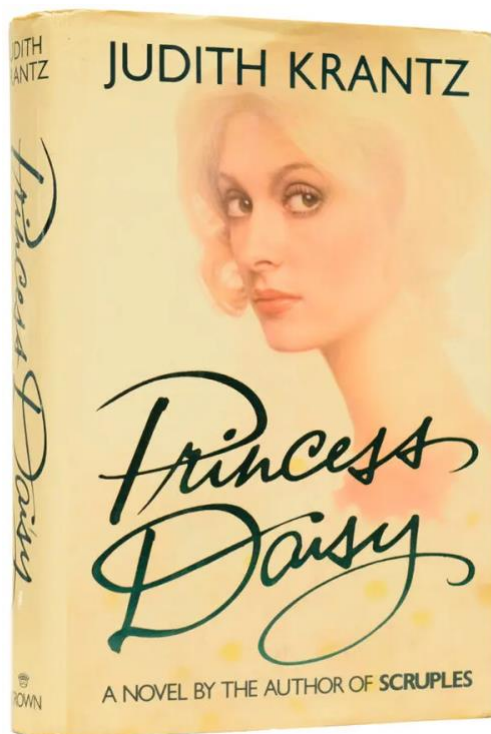


“I remember Betty being the one editor I met with when we were pitching ‘Backlash’ who understood — instantly — what I was trying to do and the need for such a book in the bleak ‘80s,” Susan Faludi said. Credit...Crown Publishing

“I remember Betty being the one editor I met with when we were pitching ‘Backlash’ who understood — instantly — what I was trying to do and the need for such a book in the bleak ‘80s,” Ms. Faludi said in an email. “Most of the other editors seemed either oblivious to what women were up against or convinced that feminism had achieved its aims.”

Throughout Ms. Prashker’s career, she was also known as an advocate for other women in publishing, and for equal pay in an industry that had long been male-dominated.

“She was determined that she was going to elevate as many women as she could,” said Rachel Kahan, a vice president and executive editor at William Morrow, whom Ms. Prashker took under her wing when Ms. Kahan was an industry newcomer.



Ms. Prashker unapologetically championed popular fiction by and for women that was looked down upon by critics, like Judith Krantz’s “Princess Daisy.” Credit...Crown Publishers

Ms. Prashker unapologetically championed popular fiction by and for women that was looked down upon by critics, like the eyeglass-steaming works of Ms. Krantz, the author of sex-and-shopping novels like “Princess Daisy” (1980), and of Ms. Auel, whose “Clan of the Cave Bear” series was about a matriarchal, sex-positive society.

“She was not a snob about what she published,” Ms. Kahan said. “Jean Auel wrote these fabulous cave-man sexy novels. Treating women’s sexual adventures as something they don’t have to apologize for — it was and in many ways still is a political statement.”

Betty Louise Arnoff was born on April 6, 1925, at the Manhattan home of her parents, Ellis Arnoff, who owned Shirley Fabric, a company in the garment district, and Lillian (Burger) Arnoff. She attended the Dalton School and graduated from Vassar in 1945.

In 1963, after she had returned to the book business following a decade raising three daughters, the editor in chief of Doubleday, [Ken McCormick](#), took her to lunch to offer her a job. He told her, she recalled, that the publishing house didn’t have enough women in senior jobs. “And if we want to continue to do business with the government,” he continued, in Ms. Prashker’s recollection, “we have got to do something in the way of affirmative action and have more women in our group.”



Ms. Prashker in 2014. Toward the end of her career, she took the title editor at large at Crown.Credit...Lisa Drew

Toward the end of her career, she took the title editor at large at Crown, working with select authors including Ms. Auel.

She is survived by her daughters, Susan P. Herman, Lucy Prashker and Marti P. Murray; six grandchildren; and five great-grandchildren. Her marriage to Herbert Prashker, a labor lawyer, ended in divorce in 1974 after 24 years. She had homes on Central Park West in

Manhattan and in Watermill, N.Y., in the Hamptons, before moving to a continuous-care community in Greenport, N.Y., also on Long Island.

Ms. Prashker shook publishing's ethos in other ways. In the 1970s, she took on the Century Association, one of Manhattan's men-only private clubs, where publishing executives met one another and their (male) authors, subtly advancing networks and careers in a realm closed to women.

Founded by James Fenimore Cooper and other 19th-century literati, the Century turned Ms. Prashker down when she sought membership in 1978. A decade later, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a New York City law banning discrimination in private clubs, beginning a trickle of women members.

But by then, Ms. Prashker was no longer interested in the Century. She chose to mix business and pleasure in a more exclusive venue: the Grill Room of the Four Seasons, the walnut-paneled enclave designed by Philip Johnson, where she had a regular table.

The restaurant at that turn-of-the-century moment was [the power lunch spot](#) for the Manhattan elite of publishing, media, fashion and politics.

"That was her club," said Mr. Larson, who was sometimes a guest of Ms. Prashker's.

"She'd be shown right away to her table," he recalled, "and without anybody asking anything, she'd be given a bowl of consommé."