

## TRIBUTE TO CATHERINE NICHOLSON



Catherine Nicholson's graduation  
from Flora MacDonald.

### Editor's Note:

Catherine Nicholson (1922–2013) was the founding editor and publisher of *Sinister Wisdom* with her partner Harriet Desmoines. Catherine and Harriet published *Sinister Wisdom* from 1976 through 1981. Nicholson had a long and full life. She died peacefully on June 16, 2013. Here are a few remembrances of Nicholson. We welcome more for future issues.

## CATHERINE THE LIONHEARTED

*Harriet Desmoines*

### Where She Came From

Catherine Nicholson (no middle name) was born in Troy, a small town in the Scottish Presbyterian sandhills region of North Carolina, on August 7, 1922, but her father Mike, the town druggist, registered her birth as August 8. Catherine celebrated both days.

When Catherine was four, her older sister, Edna Earle, died at home from an overdose of morphine given her during an asthma attack by a new doctor in town. The morphine had come from Mike's drugstore, a hard fact which Catherine's mother never

forgave. She took to her bed for a year, and during that year taught Catherine to read. Catherine's head start on schooling and her love for literature were born out of her mother's unassuageable grief.

To escape the thunderclouds at home, Catherine spent much of her time outside the house. She read the magazines and drank cherry cokes at the soda fountain in her father's drugstore, and watched every Hollywood movie that came to town—for free, in her uncle's movie theatre. She played long hours with Nancy and other friends in the neighborhood: one of their best games was Plike (short for "play like you're x . . ."), a form of theatre that didn't require adult supervision or resources. And, when her mother didn't intervene in time, Catherine gave her toys to the other children.

### **Moving Out into a Wider World**

Catherine graduated from a small woman's college near Troy that had been named after the eighteenth-century Jacobite heroine, Flora MacDonald, remembered by the Scots for her courage, fidelity, and honor. Then Catherine went to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for a master's in English literature. She taught in Winston-Salem, and later showed me the campus where she'd asked W. H. Auden to read. He arrived on the train from New York City, and she and her roommate invited all the beautiful, intelligent young men they knew for him to converse with. Catherine herself was working seriously on poems, but Auden never knew that.

Catherine never told me when and why her passion shifted from words on the page to live theatre, but she took the extraordinary step of moving alone from North Carolina to Chicago, to study at Northwestern University under the great acting teacher Alvina Krause. Catherine earned an MA and a PhD in theatre and oral interpretation at Northwestern, writing her dissertation on the role of the chorus in Greek tragedy.

It was during those years in the Midwest that Catherine made three discoveries which would shape her life until its closing: she discovered that, though she made a good actor, she made an even better director; she discovered the books of Jane Ellen Harrison, intellectual revolutionary who uncovered the violent destruction of female-centered culture which lay at the root of Western "civilization"; and she discovered Barbara, then an undergraduate in sociology at Northwestern and Catherine's first real love.

### **Making Theatre Live**

When I met her at the Charlotte Women's Center in 1974, Catherine had directed university theatre for nearly twenty years, first at Randolph-Macon Woman's College in Virginia, then at the new branch of the University of North Carolina in Charlotte, where she and the painter Maud Gatewood had begun the interdisciplinary arts program. I knew that the old lovers and friends she introduced me to thought she was a great director, but I had no idea what that meant until after we were living together and she was directing what would be her final play at UNCC, "Twelfth Night," cast irrespective of sex. I listened to her anguish night after day after night, and I watched as she created a whole world; I watched her slowly give that world over to the actors; and I watched her withdraw to let the actors in turn make that world live for their audience. I saw how what she did caused everyone touched by it to rise far above their ordinary selves. And I saw what happened when the play was done, the collapse of the collective extraordinary back into the individual ordinary.

### **How We Got Together and Catherine Left the University**

Catherine had become fascinated with me by reading my journal (she could quote chunks of it verbatim), and I had become

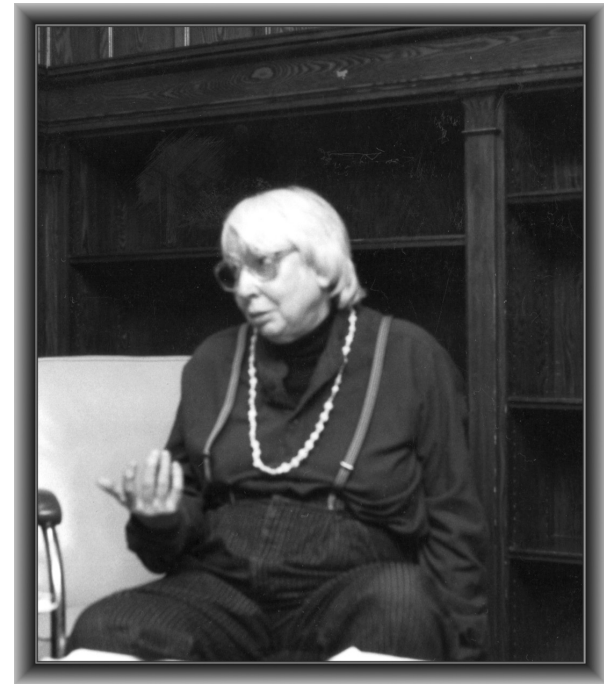
fascinated with her by listening to her talk. Catherine's mind was a library, and she could talk a blue streak—from morning coffee, when she would recount fabulously detailed, richly theatrical dreams, to the last drop of bourbon nearly twenty hours later. She was fifty-three, she was at the top of her game professionally, and she drank a lot. I was twenty-eight, I lived and breathed revolution and the Charlotte Women's Center, and I was careerless, unless you counted a part-time job as a technical writer.

We were in complete agreement that an ongoing love relationship would be a terrible idea. We were in complete agreement that my moving into her house would produce a catastrophe. We agreed completely, and then in early 1975, we went ahead and did it anyway.

After the "Twelfth Night" performances a few months later, Catherine left her tenured teaching position, explosively. In practical terms, she could have stayed. The administration was upset about the sex discrimination suit she'd filed, but they still needed her. The gay male artists who surrounded her like a Judy Garland fan club were alarmed by the women's center and by me, but, given time and reassurance, they would have come around. The real reason she left, I think now, was that she had reached the limits of what the patriarchal theatre tradition could do. She'd directed Greek tragedy, knowing that the stories the old plays told were stories of the defeat of women. She'd directed Shakespeare, playing with gender roles even more than he had. She'd directed Brecht and Ibsen and Strindberg and the first North American production of Beckett's "Waiting for Godot." She'd been there, she'd done that, and she wanted to create something new.

### **An Amazon Culture Center on Paper**

You'd think I could tell most excellent stories about the years (1976–81) that Catherine and I did *Sinister Wisdom* together, but



Catherine in conversation with an audience member after the premiere of Monique Wittig's "The Constant Journey," at the Goddard College Haybarn Theatre, March 30, 1984. This was the first performance of Wittig's play; the French version didn't premiere in Paris until a year or so later. Catherine was the producer.

Catherine hated being photographed, but, in this photo, she didn't know there was a camera in the vicinity, so she actually looks lively and intense in the way that her friends remember her.

Photographs courtesy of Harriet Ellenberger.

it was like being picked up by a tornado. Memory pictures swirl in my head, both of us being turned and twisted and swept away, from North Carolina to Nebraska to Massachusetts. I remember the women all along the way, lesbian-identified and not—massive presences, startling presences, stellar souls. I remember the ecstasy of break-through conversations, the traveling from lesbian home to lesbian home, the cooperative labor (many hands are supposed to make light work, but there was so much work associated with *Sinister Wisdom*, it needed an army and a couple of generations).

Through it all, Catherine remained in some sense the director. It was her idea that we should publish a magazine together. The resources we burned up in the process were chiefly hers. She was, essentially, the one who made *Sinister Wisdom* happen and the one who kept it going, most especially when I was felled by an attack of Graves' disease in Nebraska.

Catherine was the lion heart of *Sinister Wisdom*, and it is for that, more than for any other of the many gifts she gave, that I honor her and wish her to be remembered.

CATHERINE NICHOLSON (1922–2013), FORMIDABLE  
FOUNDER OF *SINISTER WISDOM*

Beth Hodges

In the mid-seventies, the lesbian-feminist movement in the U.S. was young, and still small enough that we could all know each other. Those were heady days, when everything seemed possible—days of women's presses, women's publications, women's music, women's theater, the Lesbian Herstory Archives, Sagaris Feminist Institute, the Gay Academic Union, the Lesbian Caucus of the Modern Language Association. We were experiencing our power, believed we were coming into our own.

When Gina Covina and Laurel Galana announced that they would no longer be publishing the lesbian-feminist journal *Amazon Quarterly*, many of us, including a couple in Charlotte, Catherine and Harriet, dreamed of assuming *Amazon Quarterly's* editorship. I met with Gina and Laurel in Somerville, Massachusetts, where they were living that year, and asked if I might take over editing it. Gina and Laurel told me no, that *Amazon Quarterly* had been their project and they wished to see her die intact, but if I wanted to start another journal, they would help by sharing *Amazon Quarterly's* mailing list.

I was a university professor on sabbatical leave, told by my chair not to return to the school, or I would face "a long, hard

winter." Starting a magazine wasn't feasible for me just then, but Catherine and Harriet, brave souls, announced that they were launching *Sinister Wisdom*, and before there was even a first *Sinister Wisdom* issue, Harriet wrote introducing herself and asking if I would guest edit their second issue. I had recently guest edited an issue of *Margins* on lesbian-feminist writing and publishing and was delighted by the invitation from *Sinister Wisdom*.

I am no longer sure how these matches were made, but I think it was Catherine and Harriet who told me about Susan and Betty, living in Columbia, South Carolina. I was spending the second half of my sabbatical year in Florida and drove up from Jacksonville to meet and to visit with Susan and Betty in Columbia. Then the three of us drove to Charlotte to meet Catherine and Harriet for the first time and to visit with them.

Classy. Catherine was classy. I knew that as soon as I saw her Karmann Ghia in the driveway. (Harriet says it was actually a red Volvo, which looked and drove like a sports car, with a "sexy behind and a lot of glass in the back, sloping"; I remember the car's being red but have thought of it as a Karmann Ghia for too long.)

Once inside the house, I saw art that Catherine had collected, particularly "For Those Who Panic A Moment Before Joining the Parade," a powerful painting by North Carolina artist Maud Gatewood.<sup>1</sup> Then Catherine talked about the revolutionary scholar and thinker Jane Ellen Harrison (admired also by Virginia Woolf) and the meaning of the term "sinister wisdom," and showed us the logo for *Sinister Wisdom*, an image of the Earth Mother published in Harrison's *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*.

I found Catherine brilliant, passionate, and formidable. She was so far beyond me, in her early to mid-fifties, confident, tall, white-haired. She had been well into her career as a PhD professor of drama when she left the academy, became partners with Harriet, and devoted her life to feminist cultural activism. I was always a

1. <http://digitalcollections.uncw.edu/cdm/fullbrowser/collection/cam/id/145/rv/singleitem>

little afraid of Catherine, of her judgments and her sharp tongue, but I felt an immediate kinship with Harriet. I worked well with them but I'm sure it was the presence of Harriet moderating Catherine's and my (potentially adversarial) relationship. I admired them both. Harriet is brilliant, with great insight, and is highly articulate. Our three-way conversations in the 1970s and my letters from Harriet were amazing. A few years back, when I gave my papers to the Schlesinger Library, I reread some of Harriet's letters to me and was bowled over at how astute her political analysis is, how passionate and lyrical her writing.

I knew Catherine in the context of *Sinister Wisdom* and of her partnership with Harriet. In the second half of the 1970s, I visited them many times in their home in Charlotte and they visited me, first in Jacksonville and later in Cambridge, Massachusetts. We would drink and talk far into the night. In 1980 I guest edited *Sinister Wisdom* 13, and not long after, Harriet's illness forced them to give up the magazine.

I lost touch with both women, although I saw Harriet once very briefly in Montreal in 1987 in the feminist bookstore she and other women had just opened. Then, almost a quarter of a century after Montreal, in 2011, Lise Weil put me in touch with Harriet via email, and although she lives in rural Canada and I'm in Florida, Harriet and I have become great friends again. Through her, I learned of Catherine's later years in Durham and then Connecticut. In early June, Harriet wrote in an email message that Catherine had just suffered a massive stroke, and I understood, although she didn't say the words, that Catherine would probably not recover. Rest in peace, Catherine Nicholson (1922–2013), Brave Feminist Cultural Warrior.

#### **Postscript on Jane Ellen Harrison:**

Jane Ellen Harrison (Virginia Woolf calls her "the great JEH") uncovered the roots of Greek religion (the roots being the old earth-goddess religions, violently overthrown by invading Achaeans, and

replaced by the whole pantheon of patriarchal Greek gods). JEH was an intellectual revolutionary and central to Catherine's intellectual (and emotional and artistic) life.



To represent *Sinister Wisdom* and serve as its logo, Catherine chose an illustration (drawn by Harrison's protégée, Jessie Crum, based on photographs of a Boeotian plate from antiquity which pictures a goddess on her throne) found in Jane Ellen Harrison's *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*. Catherine's reasons for choosing this illustration, I believe, are two. First, the goddess faces to the left or sinister side, the side identified with women, which ties in with the idea of *Sinister Wisdom*, wisdom identified with the female. Secondly, Catherine's goddess is not limited to Harrison's explanation of the plate decoration or to what the artist who designed the plate may have had in mind. Catherine meant the goddess to represent Gaia, the fertility principle, Earth, and the great mother of all.

**Editor's Note:** In honor of Catherine Nicholson, *Sinister Wisdom* returns the original logo to the inside cover.



## CATHERINE AS I KNEW HER

*Susan Robinson (formerly Wood-Thompson)*

I met Catherine and Harriet at a *Sinister Wisdom* collating party my partner and I had traveled to Charlotte, North Carolina to be part of. We didn't know the other women, but we all worked hard and well together.

At a time when there were too few resources for lesbian-feminist writers in the South, Catherine and Harriet started *Sinister Wisdom*, which became an essential resource for women thinking, writing and feeling together, advancing these abilities by pooling them—and in the process forming an astounding philosophy that others drew and grew from. As far as I know, Catherine and Harriet had never edited a magazine before, but we all needed it and they figured out how to make it happen.

When *Sinister Wisdom* hit my mailbox, I would sit down and read it through right then.

Months later Catherine asked me if I thought the bookstore at the college where I taught would carry *Sinister Wisdom*, but it was a very conservative place and I didn't think so. I wish I had asked.

Later, when she and Harriet were finishing their years of putting together *Sinister Wisdom*, they said they needed a full set of the journals they'd edited to send to the Library of Congress. I was happy to be able to offer them mine. Catherine didn't ask for much, but the few things she did ask for were important ones. She had a sense of perspective.

After Charlotte, and then Lincoln, Nebraska, Catherine and Harriet were in Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts, where I visited them often, just as they often visited me in New York City, where they slept in sleeping bags on my efficiency apartment floor. I remember best our driving to the Shelburne Falls market and Catherine's taking us to the Pot Holes. The Pot Holes were large circular depressions that held pools of water from the falls—a

natural wonder. On our first trip to climb around in them, I made fun of a major attraction with such a lowly name: "Pot Holes." Catherine told me I was hurting her feelings—but just to let me know—she wasn't holding it against me. Another time when I wrote a short story about Catherine, Harriet, and myself, she told me I hurt her feelings because Harriet was so much more a central character than she was. Again, she was "just letting me know." She never said anything to diminish me.

I visited Catherine and Harriet in Vermont when Catherine taught at Goddard and Harriet was a student there, but wherever we were I remember our sitting at the table and talking seriously and laughing, and my sleeping on their air mattress while they sang, "Tomorrow, tomorrow, we'll love you tomorrow, it's only a day away."

I remember one morning when I was in an awkward situation (a friend thought I had brought her to their house overnight for romance when that wasn't on my mind), I went upstairs to Catherine's chair to finish sleeping and she just asked, "Are you all right?" I said yes and she went back to her crossword puzzle. I appreciated her delicacy.

Catherine was unaffected, generous in big and little ways, and not competitive with anyone. I never heard her trash anyone, and her friends from way-back I met at her house were colorful, down-home, creative, and unself-consciously gifted. They were themselves in all their twists and turns, and Catherine was herself and helped us new lesbian-feminists be ourselves, in person, in writing, in whatever we were up to. Some of us became more clearly defined in the way people can be in the presence of someone they have no reason to be afraid of.

Early on when I had an eleven-page piece of writing that other editors didn't have enough pages to publish, a friend said, "Send it to Catherine and Harriet." She was right. What gave them that strength, that approaching life as if they had nothing to lose, I don't know, but it's a quality that changed their world and my world and other women's worlds.

REMEMBERING CATHERINE NICHOLSON: ARTIST,  
INTELLECTUAL, CULTURE CRITIC, LESBIAN, FEMINIST,  
DYKE COMMUNITY MEMBER, AND WILD WOMAN*Marilyn Frye*

My early friendship with Catherine was a couples thing—Carolyn Shafer (aka, Lyn) and I connected with Catherine and Harriet. In 1977 or 1978, I had met Harriet at a lesbian writers conference in Chicago where she was promoting the first issue of *Sinister Wisdom*. We visited them in Charlotte and began a long friendship with them and the magazine. I remember Catherine then as a dramatic “older” dyke, very smart, savvy about dykes and lesbian community. We liked and admired them, and were very impressed by their magazine.

Later, we visited them and their magazine crew in Lincoln. I already knew Sarah Hoagland from our feminist philosophy connection, and Lyn had known Julia Penelope back when both were in Athens, Georgia. The intensity and complexity of the personalities and the relationships of that Lincoln crew were awesome—the levels of brilliance, conflicts, egos, obsessions, passions, and commitment were amazing to behold and amazing in productivity. I have memories of some shouting and some tears, competition, strong opinions, radical dyke politics being worked out among strong women, and excitement and laughter, as was typical of political dykes in the 1970s and early 1980s. I remember being glad to engage in it and glad I didn’t live in it (though we had our own drama in Lansing, of course).

Catherine greatly admired Willa Cather, and required that we visit Cather’s home in Red Cloud. (I hadn’t read Cather before that.) A photo I took on that trip was used on the cover of a pamphlet we produced, of my essay “Separatism and Power.”

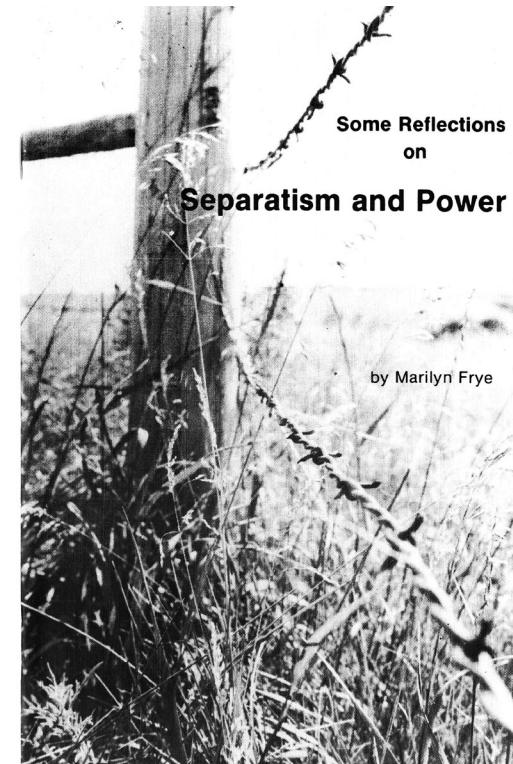
Lyn and I visited Catherine and Harriet again in Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts. As I recall, by that time the general radical-dyke-feminist fashion of enthusiasm for sobriety had begun to color

our enjoyment of booze, and I think that Catherine had stopped drinking or started stopping. The magazine was moving on to the care of Adrienne Rich and Michelle Cliff, whom I met via the connection with Harriet and Catherine. Later, Adrienne connected me with Nancy Bereano at The Crossing Press, who would publish my book *The Politics of Reality* in 1983.

In 1997–98 I lived in Durham, North Carolina, while I was at the Center for Humanities in Research Triangle. Catherine was my source of info about how to find dyke digs in Durham, and we quickly became good friends and buddies. During that year we hung out together several times a week, went on jaunts in the country, watched movies (a favorite activity of Catherine's), and discussed philosophy, politics, movies, life. She was my grounding, my dyke compass at a time when I was the only queer at the Humanities Center, the only woman who never wore a skirt.

Catherine shared her friends, her writing group, feminist/lesbian theater events, and Durham dyke culture in general. Most of her friends were her age and older. I loved being something of a sprout instead of the oldest woman in the group, as I had usually been. They welcomed me right into their scene. They were bold, opinionated, sometimes foulmouthed, and kind with each other. They were big fans of college women's basketball. I caught that bug, and women's basketball has been one of my happy enthusiasms ever since.

It was during this year in Durham that I finally came to know Catherine well, to be close to her. For a while, for sure, I was somewhat in love with her (like many women before me). I admired her; I respected her; I enjoyed her company. I came to understand much more the depths of her life-shaping connection with Barbara and Barbara's children, her godchildren. I learned about her life as a girl-child growing up in small-town Southern culture in North Carolina, and her life as a doctoral student in theatre. I knew her more as a theatre person—her director-self—and playwright.



Like all of her relationships, ours became rich and complex. I realized later that I did not understand very well the great deal she wanted to communicate about her experience of becoming old. A loss for both of us. I was young enough then (late fifties) to easily be in denial about what being old is. I regularly argued with and dismissed her reports of memory deficits, and explained away to myself the passages of disorientation and oddness that came with that. What she wanted and needed from me as a friend was a lot more than I was capable of giving her. I did routinely provide one thing she needed: clearing the accumulated colorful science experiments out of her fridge.

Catherine was always way ahead of me, not only because she had almost two decades more experience as an artist, intellectual, culture critic, lesbian, feminist, dyke community member, and wild



woman, but also because of the intensity and energy and creativity with which she engaged in life and friendship. I am, absolutely, a better Old Dyke for her love and friendship.