

COMMON WOMAN BOOKS, ORLANDO, and Audreys

Location 10702 Jasper Ave
(Audreys Books)

www.EdmontonQueerHistoryProject.ca



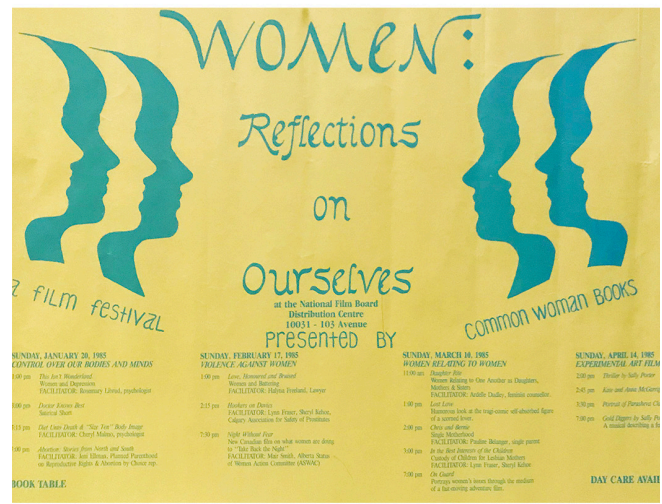
In the northwest corner of Audreys Books, shoppers can find the Orlando Corner. Here, a selection of fiction and non-fiction books by and about LGBTQ2 people has existed for almost twenty years. This corner is part of a legacy of queer bookstores in Edmonton dating back to the 1970s.

While North America had bookstores like Oscar Wilde Memorial Books, Glad Day, Giovanni's Room, and A Different Light focused on LGBTQ2 people even before the Stonewall Riots, Edmonton's first such institution didn't come along until 1978. Common Woman Books, Alberta's first women's bookstore, began in Halyna Freeland's basement when she, along with Mair Smith and Julie Anne LeGras, identified the need to make feminist literature available to Albertan women.¹ This collective-run space moved locations a couple of times before a 1981 Grand Opening on Whyte Ave. Advertisements for that Grand Opening emphasized the space's dedication to feminist literature and non-sexist children's books. By 1987, that inventory was expanding. Staff member Andrea Ansbacher noted that "although we branched out into selling socialist and gay men's books, it was still the feminist theory, lesbian and women's fiction which paid the rent."²

By that time, Common Woman Books had relocated to 109 Street in the Garneau Theatre building. With their inventory expanded, more volunteers were needed, a bigger board was formed, and the bookstore added "The Radical Bookseller" to its name. Volunteer Sheryl Ackerman remembers how Common Woman Books was the "first bookstore in Edmonton that used the word 'Lesbian' for its section on lesbian resources and fiction".³

Common Woman Books closed down thirteen years after beginning with one bookshelf in Freeland's home. Readings, book launches, and other drop-in programs were just some of the events in Common Woman's line-up of community activities. They eventually relocated back to Whyte Avenue, although more commercial bookstores had begun to carry feminist literature. This competition, combined with "the usual problems" such as economic

recession and the introduction of the GST, contributed to Common Woman Books finally closing its doors. Freeland remarked how the store was always struggling against people's fear of "feminism and political activism," causing the store to "struggle to exist, right from the beginning."⁴ Their contributions to Edmonton's LGBTQ2 history paved the way for other places to follow in their footsteps.⁵



One such place was Orlando Books, which opened on Whyte Avenue in 1993. Jacqueline Dumas opened this activist bookstore intending to carry "progressive political books; feminist books; poetry; a good selection of international literature; books from small, independent presses – and books by queer writers, of course."⁶ At the time, Jacqueline was in the process of coming out, and couldn't find either books about that, or other Edmonton

1 Common Woman Books 1983 Catalogue, 3.

2 "Common Woman Books by Sheryl Ackerman," Edmonton Queer History Project, July 29, 2015, <https://edmontonqueerhistoryproject.wordpress.com/2015/07/29/common-woman-books-by-sheryl-ackerman/comment-page-1/>.

3 "Common Woman Books by Sheryl Ackerman."

4 "Alternative bookstore closes its doors for good after 13 years in business," Toronto Star, January 18, 1992, G8.

5 "Common Woman Books by Sheryl Ackerman."

6 "Orlando Books (1993-2002)," Edmonton Queer History Project, January 1, 2015, <https://edmontonqueerhistoryproject.wordpress.com/2015/01/29/orlando-books-1993-2002/comment-page-1/>.

lesbians.⁷ Named after Virginia Woolf's gender-bending bestseller, Orlando Books "became a gay bookstore by default."⁸

This was both a positive and a negative for the bookstore. Jacqueline had created the space to be a community hub, and that it became, helping raise money for *Vriend v. Alberta*⁹ and *Ms. T v. Alberta*,¹⁰ participating in the Silly Summer and Pride Parades and hosting meetings of the Edmonton Rainbow Business Association in their upstairs "Room for Change." This upstairs area also hosted readings for writers from across the country, such as Daphne Marlatt, Dionne Brand, Gail Scott, Nicole Brossard, Shani Mootoo, Patricia Nell Warren, Paula Gunn Allen, Ivan Coyote, and Taste This.¹¹ The store also promoted events for lesbian entertainers like Cris Williamson and Suzanne Westenhoefer. Dumas along with a group of educators authored "Safe and



Caring Schools for Lesbian and Gay Youth: A Guide for Teachers", which was eventually published and distributed by the Alberta Teachers' Association.¹² A University of Alberta undergraduate student entrance award named after the bookstore was also created, with selection based on demonstrated leadership qualities and involvement in school and community activities and preference given to students who have demonstrated commitment to the advancement of LGBTQ communities.¹³

The drawbacks to being increasingly known as a gay bookstore were also, sadly, many. The queerer it became, the more marginalized it was. Media attention came to Orlando for queer issues only, never for the other literary

events happening in the space. Bestseller lists stopped being included in the mainstream press, like the *Edmonton Journal*, and the store was subjected to homophobic graffiti.¹⁴

One of the major financial challenges that faced Orlando Books was an ongoing battle with Canada Customs. As Dumas recalled, "certain titles – primarily leather books from the US – were routinely stopped at the border, and when that happened our entire shipment of books would be stopped, which meant that dozens of titles (including customers' special orders) could be held up for months because of one title."¹⁵ This was around the same time that Vancouver-based Little Sisters Book and Art Emporium was engaged in a decade's long battle challenging Canada Customs over LGBTQ2 censorship, which was eventually found to be discriminatory by the Supreme Court of Canada.¹⁶ This was a fight against more than just censorship, but also against government-sponsored homophobia and for the visibility and recognition of LGBTQ2 communities.

In the end, Orlando Books experienced many of the same challenges other independent booksellers suffered from, which included major changes in the publishing industry as a result of the advent of big box outlets like Chapters, and the rise of online book retailers such as Amazon. Independent bookstores across the world became a dying breed.

Following the closure of Orlando Books in 2002, Dumas began to work at Audreys Books, an independent bookstore on Jasper Avenue. There, she created the "Orlando Corner". The February 2003 launch of this designated LGBTQ2 corner featured music and refreshments as Audreys welcomed Orlando customers into their space.¹⁷ In this corner, customers could find "the best in queer literature, erotica, sexuality, humour, books on coming out, relationships, and more."¹⁸

The Orlando Corner continues to this day, despite the continuing rise in online shopping and bigger bookstore outlets. That Audreys continues to support and provide a home to the Orlando Corner is a sign of the importance of these spaces for Edmonton's LGBTQ2 communities. The ongoing presence of the Orlando Corner is also a testament to the dedicated legacy of the queer and feminist bookstores that went before it, going back over forty years.

In 2018, Jason Purcell and Matthew Stepanic founded Glass Bookshop, a new space focused "on Canadian writing with special attention paid to queer and racialized writers, as well as the independent publishers who help to produce

7 "Orlando Books," produced by Edmonton Public Library, August 13, 2020, YouTube video, 11:57, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fcTl29JtMhY>.

8 "Orlando Books (1993-2002)."

9 Paula Simons, "Paula Simons: How the *Vriend* case established LGBTQ rights 20 years ago in Alberta – and across Canada," *Edmonton Journal*, March 15, 1998, <https://edmontonjournal.com/news/insight/paula-simons-how-the-vriend-case-established-lgbtq-rights-20-years-ago-in-alberta-and-across-canada>.

10 In 1997 an Edmonton woman known as "Ms. T", who was an exemplary foster parent for 17 years and opened her home to 74 children, was denied status as a foster parent when she left her heterosexual relationship and came out as a lesbian. Ms. T took the Alberta Government to court and won her landmark legal battle in 1999, which made same-sex adoption legal in Alberta. See: "Nov. 26, 1999 Decision makes adoption a reality for same-sex couples," *CBC News*, November 24, 2016, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/nov-26-1999-decision-makes-adoption-a-reality-for-same-sex-couples-1.3865894>.

11 "Nov. 26, 1999 Decision makes adoption a reality for same-sex couples."

12 "Nov. 26, 1999 Decision makes adoption a reality for same-sex couples."

13 The Orlando Books Collective Entrance Award is offered by the University of Alberta and was endowed by Dr. Dianne Oberg, a long-time University of Alberta education professor and one of the authors of the ATA guidebook developed by the Orlando Books Collective.


14 "Orlando Books."

15 "Orlando Books (1993-2002)."

16 See this detailed summary of *Little Sisters v. Canada*: https://web.archive.org/web/20031118113138/http://www.mapleleafweb.com/scc/public3/decisions/2000_2scr_1120_02.html. See also Bruce Ryder, "The Little Sisters Case, Administrative Censorship, and Obscenity Law," *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* 39 (2001): 207-228; Karen Busby, "The Queer Sensitive Interveners in the Little Sisters Case: A Response to Dr. Kendall," *Journal of Homosexuality*, 47, no. 3-4 (2004): 129-150.

17 "Times.10," February 2003, p. 15, MS-595, Series 13, Box 79, File 405, Edmonton City Archives, Prince of Wales Armouries Heritage Centre, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

18 "Times.10."



their work."¹⁹ Purcell and Stepanic aimed to create an entirely accessible "place that will uplift and make space for other voices."²⁰ After a period of online-only operation and two temporary downtown locations, Glass Bookshop finally opened in its permanent location on 76 Avenue in 2022. The legacy of Common Woman Books continues as queer books and voices continue to grow and find space and place in Edmonton and beyond.

¹⁹ "Glass Bookshop," <https://www.glassbookshop.ca/>.

²⁰ "On the Arrival of Glass Bookshop," SNAP <https://snapartists.com/snapline-article/on-the-arrival-of-glass-bookshop/>.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Learn more about Common Woman Books: <https://edmontonqueerhistoryproject.wordpress.com/2015/07/29/common-woman-books-by-sheryl-ackerman/>

Watch founder and owner Jacqueline Dumas describe the history of Orlando Books: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fcTI29JtMhY>.