

“This Book Is An Action”: The Grand Experiment of *Sisterhood is Powerful*

By Jennifer Gilley

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Robin Morgan's 1970 anthology *Sisterhood is Powerful* (*SIP*) was a landmark work of the second wave feminist movement and a major popularizer of radical feminism outside the limited scope of urban-based women's liberation groups. As Morgan notes in her memoir, it became "the 'click,' the first feminist epiphany for hundreds of thousands of women, and the staple of mushrooming women's studies courses around the world."¹ Indeed, the New York Public Library picked *SIP* as one of its Books of the Century, one of 11 books listed under the heading "Women Rise." As an anthology of radical feminist essays, some of which had already been published as pamphlets or by the movement press, *SIP*'s purpose was to collect in one place the diverse voices of women's liberation to enable distribution, and thus radicalization, on a massive scale. Morgan achieved this purpose by publishing her collection with Random House, who had the marketing and distribution reach to get copies into every supermarket in America, but radical feminism and Random House made strange bedfellows to say the least. Random House was the very figurehead of what June Arnold would later call "the finishing press" (because it is out to finish our movement) and Carol Seajay would dub LICE, or the Literary Industrial Corporate Establishment. Why would Random House be interested in being the ones responsible for mass distribution of essays like "Notes of a Radical Lesbian," "The Politics of Orgasm," or "The SCUM Manifesto"? How did such a radical book end up being published by "the Man?"

The story begins in 1968, as Robin Morgan first came to national prominence as one of the organizers of and participants in the protest against the Miss America Pageant in Atlantic City, an event that would thereafter be termed by the media as “the birth of the feminist movement.”² Following this event as well as her participation in the Women’s International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell protest of the Bridal Show at Madison Square Garden, Morgan began popping up in the pages of the *New York Times* frequently, culminating in the February 9, 1969 article “Meet the Women of the Revolution.” The *NYT* love affair with Morgan probably stemmed from the fact that she had been a child star, playing Dagmar on the TV show *Mama*, and was therefore already a celebrity as well as being adept at handling media attention. The February 9th piece features a glamour photo headshot with the caption “Says Robin Morgan, former child actress: ‘We will have a revolution in this society.’”³ This article launched Morgan as a media darling two months before her Random House contract was signed.

In addition to being known in the New York press and having legitimate movement bona fides as a prominent member of several women’s liberation groups, Morgan worked in publishing herself at Grove Press (before being fired for trying to organize a union), and had a contact she could call at Random House: John Simon, who became the chief editor of *SIP*. Morgan’s proposal for an anthology of writings from the women’s liberation movement must have felt like the right opportunity at the right time for Random House: Morgan was both famous and a women’s liberation insider, and in 1969 “women’s lib” was trendy enough to make even such a radical book profitable. Random House said yes, but Simon warned Morgan “to get the material in fast because six months down the line there might not be any interest.”⁴ Taking this news back to her feminist group, where she anticipated working on the project as a collective, Morgan was surprised to run into stiff opposition from group members based on issues of

money, editorial control, and the feeling that Morgan was on a “personal star trip.”⁵ She then determined to edit the collection by herself, but was profoundly aware of the political objections to her undertaking. These objections are best summarized by Ann ForFreedom’s article in *Everywoman* after the publication of *SIP*, asking “How can an institution based on competitive individualism promote cooperative collectivism? If *Sisterhood* is a collective action, why is only one name on it, that of Robin Morgan?”⁶ Ideals of collectivity are anathema to traditional publishing processes, but Morgan did her best to meet this challenge with an experiment that was unique in second wave publishing history.

First, Morgan declares in the opening line of her introduction that “This book is an action. It was conceived, written, edited, copy-edited, proofread, designed, and illustrated by women.”⁷ Both for the purpose of protecting the political integrity of the message and for the purpose of promoting the position of women within Random House, Morgan had insisted on working only with women. This part of the experiment did not run as smoothly as hoped, as it quickly became clear that the two female editors Morgan was working with had no “real power in the male-dominated hierarchy of the house, and so were forced into a position of ‘interceding’ with those who could enforce the decision—men.”⁸ The second part of *SIP*’s “action” was Morgan’s negotiation that the book be released simultaneously in paperback so that more women could afford it. This move is very rare in publishing because the publisher wants to make maximum profits off the hardback and wait until interest dies down before releasing the cheaper paperback. Instead, *SIP* was released simultaneously as a hardback for \$8.95 and a Vintage paperback for \$2.45 in September of 1970. Ultimately, though, Morgan’s most innovative and radical intervention into the traditional capitalist publishing machine lay in her decision to use the royalties for the book to set up a Sisterhood is Powerful Fund that would pump money

directly back into the movement. She was passionately committed to the collectivist roots and purpose of the anthology and wrote in a letter to contributors: “I consider the book as belonging to the Movement.”⁹

In consultation with some of the contributors, Morgan decided on a process for the disbursement of funds that was, as she called it, “ultra-egalitarian.”¹⁰ Each royalty check would be divided into seventy portions, one for each contributor, and each portion would be distributed to the “group or institution of the Women’s Movement” of the contributor’s choice. There were two ground rules: that money was to be distributed to groups, not individuals, in the collectivist spirit of the project, and “the groups had to be women’s groups concentrating on issues that were of concern to women (no caucuses in male organizations.)”¹¹ All contributors had received one-time fees for their writings up front, as is usual, but their input and involvement with royalties on the back end was highly unusual and, in fact, proved untenable. After the first royalty check was distributed in this way, the process was dropped due to unreachable contributors, contributors who could not or would not pick a group, and contributors who chose male-left groups instead of women’s groups. Beginning with the second round of royalties, Morgan began distributing money to any group that wrote in (and met the ground rules) on a first-come, first-served basis. This allowed for a non-hierarchical but easier to administer process. This entire process was carried out through strict business channels via a corporation Morgan and her lawyer Emily Goodman set up called Sisterhood is Powerful, Inc. Morgan was insistent that Random House send royalty checks directly to SIP, Inc. and that records relating to the fund’s disbursement be made public, all so that she would not appear to be personally giving “her” money away, which, she wrote, “smacks of charity.”¹² In a letter to potential fund-seekers dated June 10, 1973, she argued, “This should NOT be charity; these monies belong, in fact, to the Feminist

Movement.”¹³ The fact that this viewpoint was somewhat unique among other feminist authors/editors did not go unremarked. Morgan also pointed out in that letter “that only a few [other feminist] authors (Shulman, Chesler) have contributed any portion of their monetary gains to the Movement, and even that was not done in a regulated way that anyone could check on.” Further, Morgan had sarcastically commented in an earlier letter after the lengthy frustration of getting SIP, Inc. legally set up, that “It certainly would have been easier to abscond with the funds and build a mansion in Jamaica, like Germaine Greer is doing.”¹⁴

Thanks to all the hard work and dedication, however, the Sisterhood is Powerful Fund had disbursed \$23,000 in direct grants to women’s liberation groups by 1974.¹⁵ In this way, Morgan’s declaration that “This book is an action” took on its deepest and most provocative meaning.¹⁶ Although Morgan’s creation of the SIP Fund with her royalties did not alter the traditional publishing contract in any way, and therefore did not effect any kind of political change at Random House, it did pioneer a way in which the resources of a corporate press could be harnessed to benefit feminism, not just as a distributor of ideas, but as an economic engine. Digging more deeply into the workings of SIP, Inc. reveals that its underlying ideological project was at heart one of repurposing “publishing feminism” (by which I mean the publishing of feminist texts by mainstream publishers) for the direct benefit of feminist publishing. While popularly known as the SIP Fund, SIP Inc. actually had to be set up as a business corporation because the money was “openly going to political destinations,” and therefore could not be a foundation or non-profit.¹⁷ Morgan decided to set it up as a publishing business that would pay “consultation fees” to groups for information and feedback that they could use to create successive editions of SIP. Seen this way, the Sisterhood is Powerful Fund was essentially supporting feminism so that there would still be a movement underway to report on in the next

edition. In more practical terms, fully one-third of the groups receiving money from the Fund were feminist publishers.¹⁸ In her memoir, Morgan realizes the impact of this specific aspect of the whole *SIP* project. She notes that the fund gave “seed money grants to what [would] become a massive alternative feminist media: newspapers, magazines, publishers.”¹⁹ *SIP* as an anthology not only reached the mass audience that only a corporate press could provide, but also generated monies that were funneled directly to feminist presses, who would be free to publish things Random House would not.

This awkward but idealistic phenomenon survived from the fall of 1971, when the first royalties came in, to the fall of 1973, when Lucinda Cisler, one of the book’s contributors, filed a federal suit against Random House and Robin Morgan for allegedly plagiarizing her pamphlet “Women: A Bibliography” in *SIP*’s bibliography.²⁰ Morgan claims that Cisler had called her and, in need of money, asked for some of the *SIP* royalties. Morgan turned her down due to the policy of not granting funds to individuals, and a month later, Cisler launched her suit. She also details the process by which the *SIP* editorial team came up with their own bibliography and notes that Cisler had never, in the 3 years since the book was published, said a word to Morgan about the bibliography being plagiarized. A feminist media frenzy ensued as *Off Our Backs* covered the lawsuit, including letters from both Cisler and Morgan, and various prominent feminists wrote letters in defense of one or the other.²¹ The outcome of the case was that Random House, against Morgan’s wishes, settled with Cisler out of court for \$10,000 and immediately froze the royalties for both *SIP* and Morgan’s book of poetry *Monster*, until this amount, plus the legal fees in the amount of \$13,356.92 could be recouped.²² The entire cost of the lawsuit came out of the royalties, not out of Random House’s profits, as stipulated in the original contract. With no royalties coming in for at least three years (\$23,000 was the same amount of money that

the Fund had distributed in its first three years), Morgan was forced to shut down SIP Inc. because it would not be able to pay its yearly taxes, and thus, the grand historical experiment was ended. Because *SIP* stayed in print for at least thirty years, royalties must have been resumed at some point, but Morgan never brought the SIP fund back to life.

¹ Robin Morgan, *Saturday's Child: A Memoir*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. p.296

² Morgan, *Saturday's Child*, p.263

³ Peter Babcox, "Meet the Women of the Revolution." *New York Times Magazine* February 9, 1969. P.34

⁴ Susan Brownmiller, *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution*. New York: Random House, 1999. p.69

⁵ Brownmiller, p.69

⁶ Ann ForFreedom, "Review of Sisterhood is Powerful." *Everywoman* 2.1.12 (Jan 1, 1971: 10.

⁷ Robin Morgan, "Introduction." *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement*. Robin Morgan, ed. New York: Random House, 1970. p.xv

⁸ p.xviii

⁹ Robin Morgan, Unpublished letter to contributors, dated Dec. 21, 1971. Robin Morgan Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University

¹⁰ RobinMorgan, "The Destruction of Sisterhood is Powerful, Inc.: A Report to the Women's Movement." Unpublished Manuscript. August 1974. Robin Morgan Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University. p.3

¹¹ Morgan, "Destruction," p.3

¹² Robin Morgan, Unpublished letter to fund-seekers, dated June 10, 1973. Robin Morgan Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Robin Morgan, Unpublished letter to contributors, dated Dec. 21, 1971. Robin Morgan Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University

¹⁵ Robin Morgan, "SIP Fund, 1970-1974. Rough Statement." Unpublished Manuscript. Robin Morgan Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University

¹⁶ For further discussion of the multiple meanings of "This book is an action," see: Jennifer Gilley, "This Book is an Action: A Case for the Study of Feminist Publishing." *International Journal of the Book* 9.1 (2012): 1-9.

¹⁷ Robin Morgan, Unpublished letter to contributors, dated Dec. 21, 1971. Robin Morgan Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University

¹⁸ Based on listing of recipient groups in Morgan, "Destruction," p.5-6.

¹⁹ Morgan, "Saturday's Child," p.307-308.

²⁰ For full details of the case, see: Morgan, "Destruction"

²¹ See October 1974 *Off Our Backs* for overview and December 1974 *OOB* for Cisler and Morgan letters.

²² Morgan, "Destruction"