

# A beacon for poets, Louisa Solano, 80, ran the historic Grolier Poetry Book Shop

By [Bryan Marquard](#) Globe Staff, Updated April 23, 2022, 3:53 p.m.



Ms. Solano (pictured in 2004) ran the Grolier Poetry Book Shop in Cambridge for 32 years. JANET KNOTT/GLOBE STAFF/FILE

While parlaying a love of reading into owning and running the nation's premier all-poetry bookstore for 32 years, Louisa Solano wrote poems now and then, though she downplayed those efforts.

Her true literary legacy was turning the [Grolier Poetry Book Shop](#) in Cambridge into a more welcoming place for writers and readers as she made room on shelves for those whose books hadn't found a home

with the previous owner's preference for poetry's white male pantheon.

Life in the shop, meanwhile, became its own living, breathing poem.

"I know so many creative people and have so many intense conversations," she told the Globe in 1981. "So most of my lines are verbal, rather than written down."

A shopkeeper who often made do with a meager living as she offered a launching pad for poets, [Ms. Solano died](#) from complications of Parkinson's disease Wednesday in the CareOne at Brookline.

She was 80 and had lived nearly her entire life in Cambridge, where she found her calling when she stepped inside the Grolier at 15.

"I fell in love with this store the moment I walked in the door," she told the Globe in 2001.

She soon returned on Saturdays and after school to help out [Gordon Cairnie](#), who owned the store and paid her with tea and cookies.

For years, she supported herself with other jobs, always returning to assist on weekends, she said in a [1984 interview](#) for Charles Kuralt's CBS "Sunday Morning" program.

When Cairnie died in 1973, "and I was unemployed and without any money whatsoever," Ms. Solano told CBS, "ten of his customers got together, got a bank loan for me, and I got this store."

Poetry is rarely a path to riches, and that was true for Ms. Solano.

The year before the CBS interview she made "between \$100 and \$150 a week," she said, adding with a smile that "now it's about \$175."

What couldn't be quantified was the pleasure of her pursuit, and the joy poets took in having a place of their own.

"Louisa rescued one of the greatest institutions in Harvard Square," Cambridge poet [Gail Mazur](#) wrote in an e-mail.

“It seems, in retrospect — it seemed then — that it was a miracle, that a tiny bookshop adamantly dealing only with poetry, could survive into the era of crazy rentals and transient businesses,” Mazur said. “We who loved the Grolier were grateful, and awed!”

Lloyd Schwartz, a poet who was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for his [music criticism](#), recalled that the store “before Louisa seemed to be a private club. Once Louisa took over, it just seemed like a much more welcoming place.”

Poets and readers literally rubbed shoulders inside the tiny shop. And Ms. Solano made sure the work of a greater diversity of writers could be found on the shelves.

“It’s a conscious, political belief,” she said in 1981. “I’ve conscientiously stocked poetry books by women, gay people, Black people, and other minorities — people who were never represented in my predecessor’s collection.”

[Robert Pinsky](#), a former US poet laureate who teaches at Boston University, wrote in an e-mail that “when Louisa Solano took over the Grolier, the place became brighter, fresher, more friendly, and more alert. With all respect to the founder Gordon Cairnie, the way Louisa dusted and cleaned the place felt like a symbolic renewal. She removed the seedy old couch, and in its place she put a shelf with current issues of poetry magazines.”

Ditching that musty sofa to make way for more words was, for Ms. Solano, a step toward her vision of what the store should be.

“I’d be very upset if the store ever went back to the old way, with the couch and a number of men sitting around drinking and smoking and uttering great thoughts about poetry — because it excludes so many people,” she said in the 1981 Globe interview.

“It was good for those men, but was very bad for a lot of people,” she added. “I think the fact that the store embraces a much wider range of poetry and a wider range of customers is very good.”

Born in Cambridge on Nov. 22, 1941, Louisa Solano was a daughter of Louis Solano, a professor of Romance languages at Harvard, and Clelia Capelli Solano, who had been a ballet and folk dancer. One of

five daughters born to Louis and Clelia, Louisa also had two half-siblings from her father's previous marriage.

"The house was full of books," said Louisa's sister Karina O'Malley of Green Bay, Wis. "All of us were readers."

And their mother remained a dancer, even if no longer on stage.

"She would just skim across the kitchen floor in her house dress and apron," Karina said. "It was like she never touched the ground."

Throughout her life, Ms. Solano forged her own path.

"I always thought of her as a force of nature, actually," said her sister Cecilia of Winston-Salem, N.C.

Ms. Solano graduated from Cambridge High and Latin a couple of years after first discovering the poetry bookstore. She worked at the Cambridge Public Library and at Goodspeed's antiquarian bookshop in Boston, while assisting Cairnie, who had cofounded the Grolier in 1927.

Taking many classes at night, she graduated from Boston University and, in 1974, became sole owner of the Grolier.

Two marriages to men who were unaccommodating of her devotion to the store both ended in divorce.

"My first husband thought it was a total waste of time, something I'd grow out of," she told the Globe in 1981. The second "thought a woman should support the man's creativity — he wanted me to sell the store and become a secretary."

Instead, she became a beacon for poets in Greater Boston, across the country, and around the world, launching a reading series and a poetry prize in the store's name, and even lending the store's name to a peace prize.

An antiwar activist, she "more recently was pretty involved in climate change issues," Cecilia said.

Ms. Solano also organized well-attended book-signing events to launch poets.

“She gave me my very first book-signing party — and then my second, and then my third,” Schwartz said with a chuckle.

“At the time of my first book I was very grateful to Louisa,” Pinsky said. “I still am.”

A memorial gathering will be announced for Ms. Solano, who in addition to her sisters Karina and Cecilia leaves two other sisters, Teresa Neighbor of Atlanta and Marie-Dolores Solano of Cambridge; and two half-siblings, Louis of Martinsburg, W.Va., and Francesca Schomberg of Sacramento, Calif.

In 2006, Ms. Solano sold the Grolier Poetry Book Shop to Ifeanyi Menkiti, who died [in 2019](#). His family still runs the store.

Before selling, [Ms. Solano donated](#) more than 50 years of the Grolier’s files, correspondence, and recordings to Harvard’s Houghton Library.

She also [had donated](#) signed first editions and papers to the Cambridge Public Library, which has hosted a reading series in her name. [In 2008](#), the city installed a plaque in her honor at the corner of Bow and Plympton streets.

During her 32 years as owner, Ms. Solano turned the Grolier into “kind of a magical place,” Schwartz said.

“I suppose my mission in life is to make sure that poetry stays alive in America,” she said in 1981. “I’ll do everything I can for it.”

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