

A Brief History of Zines

by [Cathy Camper](#)

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A few issues of Cindy Crabb's *Doris*

Courtesy of Cindy Crabb

Self-publishing and small publishing by marginalized people have always taken place outside of the mainstream, even before the word *zine* existed. Examples include Ben Franklin's *Almanac*, scrapbooking by Victorian women, and pamphlets and fliers supporting Cesar Chavez's grape boycott.

In the 1930s and 1940s, science fiction fans created the first fanzines, small self-published magazines, sharing stories, poems, and art about science fiction they loved, which were traded at science fiction conventions (an earlier version of fan fiction). In the 1970s, another fringe group—punks—used the concept of the fanzine to share info about their music. Punks coined the word *zine* and connected publishing with DIY culture.

In the 1980s and 1990s, self-publishing took off with the growth of photocopying

technology and of copy shops like Kinko's, providing access to inexpensive copy machines. The 1990s also supported the rise of perzines (personal zines), which, like diaries or blogs, share one person's thoughts and opinions.

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Two long-running zines, Cindy Crabb's *Doris* (1993) and Aaron Cometbus's punk zine *Cometbus* (1981), set examples of how autobiography could work as serials. Review zines like *Factsheet Five* (1982), *Global Mail* (1990s), and *Action Girl Newsletter* (1992) shared

zine reviews and created networks for zinesters to find each other. Before the internet, many folks relied on zines to network. Queercore zines like *J.D.s* (1985) and *Homocore* (1988) inspired AIDS activism, increased positive queer visibility, and shared events at a time when homophobia was rampant.

In the 1990s and into the 2000s, the riot grrrl movement in the Pacific Northwest emphasized activism and feminism. BIPOC zines like Mimi Thi Nguyen’s *Evolution of a Race Riot*, Osa Atoe’s *Shotgun Seamstress*, and Eric Nakamura and Martin Wong’s *Giant Robot* pushed for representation and voice in the mostly white zine landscape.

The 1990s also saw distros, small distribution centers, disseminating zines at concerts and via the mail. Then, the option of home computers and printing meant zine publishing could happen anywhere. The 2000s brought a rise of disability, health, and mental health zines like E.T. Russian’s *Ring of Fire*, Ben Holtzman’s *Sick: A Compilation Zine on Physical Illness*, and works by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha.

While blogs and online zines provide faster ways to connect, paper zines endure, offering a hands-on, creative alternative to screen time.

Cathy Camper is an artist, librarian, zine creator, and author of books for children and teens.



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