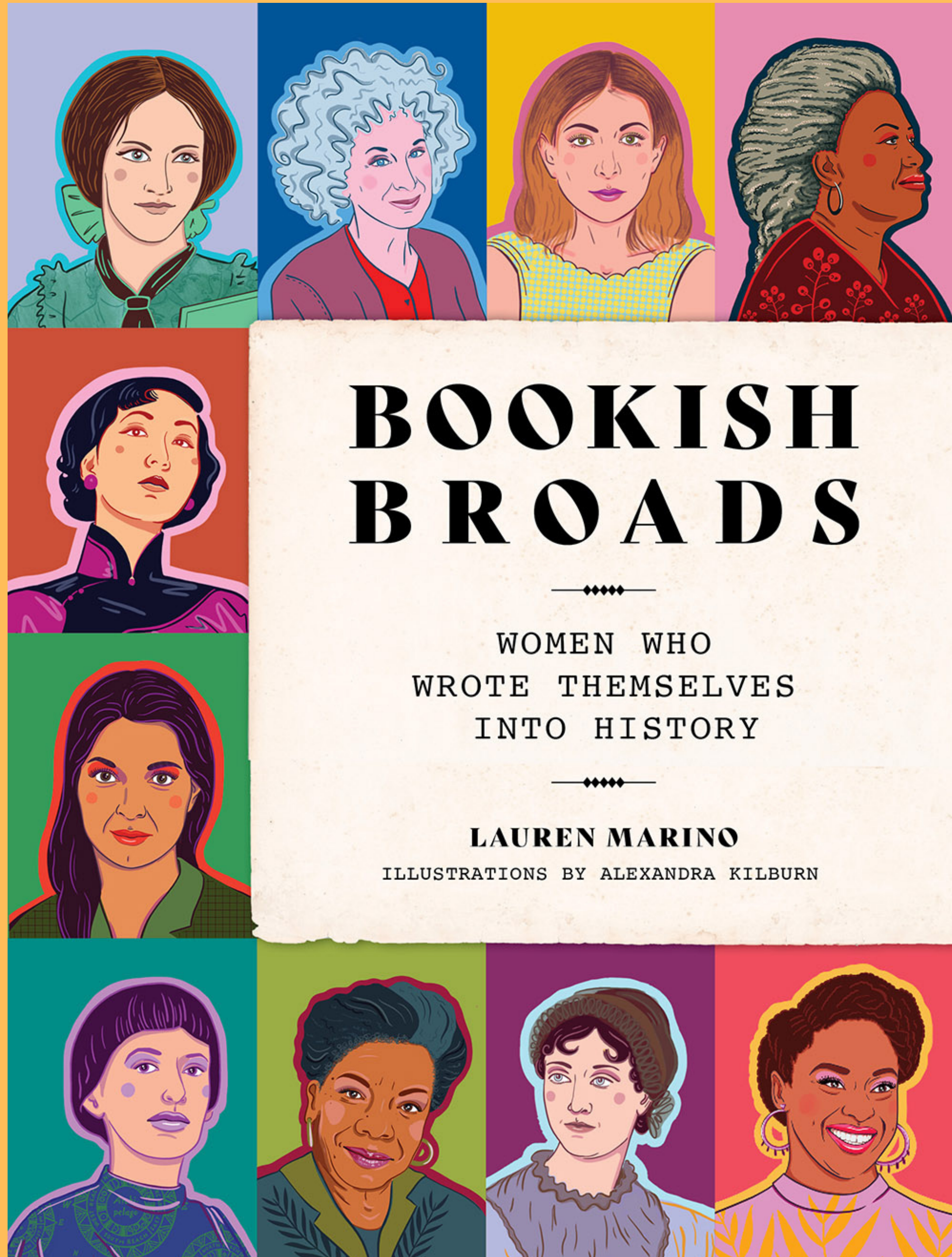


# Reading Group Guide



This reading group guide for *Bookish Broads* includes an Introduction, discussion questions and ideas for enriching your book club as well as an interview with the author. I hope these ideas will help deepen your conversations and lead you to further enjoyment of the book and to pursue reading some of these women and learning more about them.

## Introduction

Women have long exercised their power through the written word in times, societies, and cultures that have sought to silence them. These women dared to put pen to paper to express the multifaceted female experience, fearlessly addressing a flawed society and giving voice to feelings deemed unacceptable, such as rage, ambition, frustration, lust, and despair. In *Bookish BROADS: Women Who Wrote Themselves into History* writer Lauren Marino celebrates these fierce, trailblazing authors, reframing the literary canon that has long failed to recognize the immense contributions of women.

Featuring more than sixty brilliant and bookish broads, Marino's compendium cleverly illuminates the greats as well as the literary powerhouses that history has wrongfully overlooked. Each intimate portrait delves into the circumstances and passions that made them into writers as well as their unique contributions and the obstacles they had to overcome. Accompanied by artist Alexandra Kilburn's beautiful illustrations depicting each literary legend in her element and time, as well as suggested reading this book celebrates the female perspective and impact in literature.

## Featured writers in the book include:

Louisa May Alcott

Maya Angelou

Margaret Atwood

Jane Austen

Judy Blume

The Brontë Sisters

Octavia Butler

Willa Cather

Eileen Chang

Agatha Christie

Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz

Joan Didion

George Eliot

Frances Hodgson Burnett

Laura Ingalls Wilder

Jhumpa Lahiri

and many more...

Harper Lee

Ursula K. LeGuin

L. M. Montgomery

Toni Morrison

Zora Neale Hurston

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Anais Nin

Flannery O'Conner

Beatrix Potter

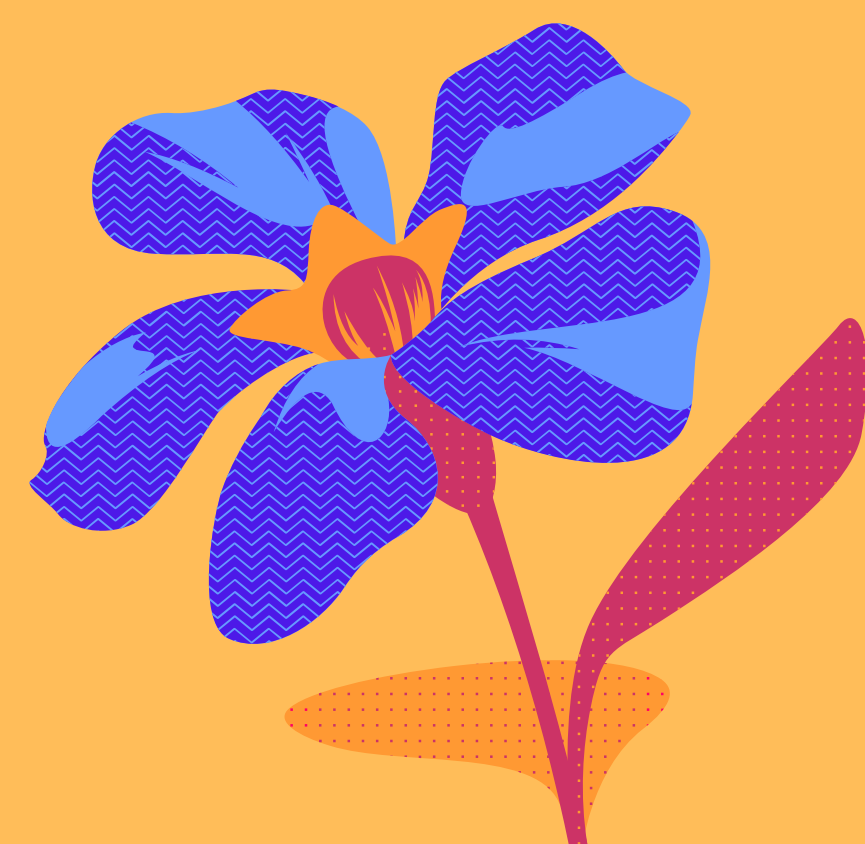
Mary Shelley

Murasaki Shikibu

Eudora Welty

Margaret Wise Brown

Virginia Woolf



## • **Topics and Questions for Discussion**

- *In the course of reading through these "stories behind the storytellers" did you learn anything new about some of your own favorite authors?*
- *Throughout history, what are some of the biggest obstacles women have faced as writers and as published authors?*
- *Given that women who wrote were considered immoral or unduly criticized or had their legacies destroyed after their death, do you think that you would have had the courage to put pen to paper and try to publish your own writing before, say, the 1970s, when things started to change a bit for female writers?*

- *When Virginia Woolf said, “A woman must have money and a room of her own in order to write fiction” what did she mean by that? Do you still think this is still true for female writers today?*
- *Female writers wrote specifically about the female experience and their own concerns –the inner life, domestic matters, love and children, which were not considered “serious matters” by the literary establishment. Do you think this is still true of many books written by women today, particularly romance novels and so called “chick lit”?*
- *Throughout history women writers have often re-discovered other, more obscure female writers and helped find a larger audience for them: Virginia Woolf said, “All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn, for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds.” Alice Walker found Zora Neale Hurston’s unmarked grave and brought her back “from the dead” by publishing an anthology and writing Looking For Nora. Why do you think its important to rediscover writers who passed into obscurity? Were there any writers you read about in Bookish Broads that you had never heard of? Are there ones you wish had been written about but didn’t make it into this book?*

- *Some of these authors are or were considered controversial for different reasons either in their own time or now: Kate Chopin was ostracized and criticized to the point that she stopped writing because of her subject matter; Judy Blume has been banned more than many other authors because she writes about many taboo topics of adolescence; Margaret Mitchell's great accomplishment has been diminished because she wrote about the Civil War from the perspective of an idealized antebellum South; J.K. Rowling has been "canceled" because of what people perceive to be anti-trans statements. Do you think it's important to still read authors who have been banned or cause controversy and to put them into the context in which they were writing? Even To Kill A Mockingbird is considered controversial today. Does that seem fair or do books and social trends always have their ups and downs? Are they still worth reading?*

## Fun Book Club Activities

- *Have each person in your group pick a favorite author from Bookish Broads and read one of her works then report back to the group on what you learned about the author and what you thought of the book or essay or story that you read*
- *So many of the works in Bookish Broads have been turned into movies: Gone With The Wind, To Kill A Mockingbird, Pride and Prejudice, Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights, Frankenstein, and many more. Plan a movie night where you watch the movie after reading the book, compare the two, and discuss which you preferred*
- *If you were writing during a time that required you to use a pseudonym to protect your reputation 1) what would you be writing about that would be considered so scandalous and 2) what pseudonym would you use?*



## **SOUTHERN REVIEW OF BOOKS interview with Lauren Marino**

**1. Where did the idea for this book come from? What inspired you to research and profile so many women writers? And how did you go about doing so?**

As a female writer I have always read other female writers because their stories resonate with me. As a long-time book editor I read the daily publishing trades and I read an article in *Publisher's Weekly* about a database in libraries worldwide that tracked the most circulated books in the world. I went to go see the results and it turned out that only 17 out of 100 were by women. From there I Googled "World's Greatest Books" out of curiosity and all of the articles and photos that popped up were by men. I found a website called [GreatestBooks.org](http://GreatestBooks.org) and the same stats were there. This is a website that uses an algorithm to create a master list based on how many times a book shows up in 129 "best of" book lists from the top newspapers, literary magazines and other credible, well established sources. I went through the list and counted. 14 of the top 100 were by women, the usual suspects: Charlotte Bronte, Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf, Emily Bronte, Toni Morrison, George Eliot, Harper Lee, Mary Shelley, Alice Walker, Margaret Mitchell, Edith Wharton, Margaret Atwood, Emily Dickinson and Daphne Du Maurier.

As a book publisher I know that 70-80% of books are bought by women so I couldn't understand why more weren't included in these important lists. I did some research and outside of some

feminist literary history and academic work from the 1970s and 80s there was no popular book celebrating female writers. I got the *Norton Anthology of Women Writers* to see what was considered the female literary canon and from there I went down the rabbit hole reading biographies, articles, websites as well as their work and started writing profiles. All in all I consulted 400 sources, all of which are posted on my website –there were too many to fit in the physical book. It was like getting a Masters in female literary history and I never had more fun in my life!

**2. In the course of getting acquainted and re-acquainted with your subjects, did you note any common attributes among these women writers? What did/does it take to become a history-making female writer?**

Women have always been writers since the beginning of time but they faced obstacles men didn't. Two things that weren't always available to women (or men in some cases) through history were literacy and access to books and an education. Wealthy women had governesses but they were learning what were considered feminine pursuits –pianoforte, languages and needlepoint. Until the early 20th century a woman had to have either a very wealthy or progressive father with a library and read a tremendous amount to self educate. Women like Mary Shelley, Jane Austen and even Virginia Woolf did not have formal educations or university education but they were huge readers and self-taught. Throughout most of history there were also forced arranged marriages –girls were married off as soon as they hit puberty and were probably pregnant and caring for children most of their lives, and of course childbirth was extremely dangerous and the leading cause of death for women. Female writers were also ostracized or called immoral and had their reputations destroyed if they published, which is why so many disappeared from history for centuries, like Aphra Behn, whose story is in the book. They were

also banned from being published –publishers wouldn't accept their work and people like Jane Austen and the Bronte sisters had to have their brothers secure a publisher for them and they had to use male pseudonyms or ambiguous initials. Even more contemporary authors like J.K. Rowling, Harper Lee and S.E. Hinton used male initials because the conventional wisdom is that women are expected to read books by men but boys or men won't read books by women. It's a cultural prejudice.

Like any good writer, all of the women I profile in the book were big readers and they were observers of what they saw as flaws in society. They had a sense of justice and they were frustrated by many of the limitations placed on them as women and that's what they wrote about. They satirized arranged marriages and women's dependency on marriage, they wrote treatises on the importance of giving girls an education equal to that of boys, and they wrote about their inner lives. They also created strong, independent characters –like Elizabeth Bennett –who are still beloved today. They had a fire in their heart, they found their voice and expressed it and had the courage and resilience to deal with the compromises and consequences of that.

### **3. What do we as modern readers have to learn from these profiles of women writers? How do the stories of these women empower you?**

These women were trailblazers and unconventional thinkers, sometimes revolutionary, in that they questioned the role of women in society and also showed the value and breadth of women's experience, which has always been belittled or ignored or shut down. Their intelligence and courage changed the way that women were viewed and their work paved the way for women writers today. Books can change lives and societies and I think it's incredibly important to see your own experiences depicted on the page. It makes us feel less alone, it reveals to us what we can each accomplish. In some cases it shows us what to avoid.

#### **4. Do you also hope this book will inspire more women to pursue their own literary ambitions as well? And if so, how?**

Absolutely! I had three goals in writing this book. The first was to celebrate these women and tell the stories behind the storytellers, which in a way becomes a history of the female experience through literature. The second was to bring more readers to their work, which is why I included suggested reading for each author I profiled. The third was to hopefully inspire aspiring and working writers to show that even the best, most well known writers struggle with insecurities and put in a tremendous amount of hard work to express themselves clearly on the page and to find a readership. I love Maya Angelou's quote, "Some critics review my work by saying, 'Maya Angelou is a natural writer.' Being a natural writer is much like being a natural open-heart surgeon." Being clear on the page and finding your voice are extremely difficult. It is a skill, a craft, and it is learned and can be difficult every time one sits down to write. I also think it's crucial, as a writer to have literary role models that are somewhat relatable.

#### **5. As you note in your introduction, your book is meant to be representative and not comprehensive. What was your selection process like? How did you decide which writers to include?**

The list was constantly evolving as I wrote the book. I started with the "have-to-include" and built the list out from there. I included some of my favorites out of pure selfishness. I also discovered many writers along the way as I was doing research. I wanted each woman to represent a specific time and transition in literary history or women's roles –I wanted to profile writers who broke new ground in some way. There could have been one hundred women or more but my publisher wanted a book that was a specific length and I had to cut a lot of people. I have several essays started that will stay in my computer and didn't make it into the book although they certainly deserve to be there as much as any of the other women. The women who ended up in the book versus what was in my original proposal is quite different. It became clear to me as I was writing the book that this was really a history of the female experience through literature .

The women who ended up in the book versus what was in my original proposal is quite different. It became clear to me as I was writing the book that this was really a history of the female experience through literature and so each woman who ended up in the book had to be someone that moved that forward in some way.

**7. Your book also has several sections devoted to understanding groups of writers—Medieval Mystics, Beloved Children’s Authors, and writers who made use of pseudonyms, as three such examples. What prompted you to highlight groups of women writers in these ways?**

One reason was that there were so many writers I wanted to include and I ran out of space and time. And there were certain periods in literature or history where there were bold things happening in a specific area or genre and it made sense to group those women together. For example, in the western world the first writers were the Medieval Mystics. The nuns were the only women during that time who had access to books or who learned how to read or write –it was in the convent where the sisters taught one another. Being a nun also helped a literary minded young woman escape the confines of forced marriage and endless, dangerous childbirth. They could also use divine inspiration as an excuse for writing. Since women weren’t allowed to write or express themselves these women became influential through their writing by saying that it was God speaking through them and therefore it was accepted.

There was also a sort of Renaissance in children's literature around the late 1800s, early 1900s where female writers wrote and published books that were written not as didactic lessons and cautionary morality tales but stories that would resonate with younger people. Beatrix Potter and Margaret Wise Brown were groundbreaking as writers, illustrators and publishers and created entirely new ways of writing for young children. Frances Hodgson Burnett and L.M Montgomery wrote some of the early Y.A. novels that are still read and beloved today.

**8. The collection is also beautifully illustrated, by Alexandra Kilburn, with striking color portraits of the featured writers. As the author, did you collaborate in this process at all? From your perspective, how do those illustrations add to the book?**

Yes, I would send Alex each essay as I completed it along with some ideas regarding themes of each woman's writing that could be integrated into the art somehow. And I would send a bunch of photographs or paintings of each writer to inspire her. I wanted the book to appeal to all ages and especially wanted to reach younger readers who I know respond to visual representation. I also wanted the book to be fun and accessible and to give a real sense of who these women were as individuals so the art helped accomplish all of that.

**9. One of the great strengths of your book is its inclusivity, particularly with regards to writers of color. What do you hope your own readers will glean from seeing so many diverse female writers in these pages?**

Women have always been oppressed throughout history and that oppression has been more harsh and soul breaking for some

cultures than others. It's one thing to rebel against being a Southern Belle, it's quite another to be a female slave whose ultimate act of sacrifice as a mother is to slit her own child's throat in order to save it from a life of slavery. It's one thing to be Virginia Woolf and not be allowed to get a university education despite your brothers and stepbrothers getting one and it's another to be Malala Yousafzai and be shot in the face for trying to go to elementary school. It's one thing to be called bad names for publishing something controversial; it's quite another to have your life threatened by a communist regime and be forced to leave your own country because of the books you write. Despite these differences in race and cultures and time periods I think there are universal experiences women have that are of an emotional nature, that are about women's inner lives and the importance of finding your voice and speaking not only of your own experience but having empathy and understanding for the experiences of others. That's what literature can do –it can bring people together.

## **1. Why is it essential to learn about these women, as well as other inspiring women throughout history?**

Women are more than 50% of the population and until the past century or so their stories weren't being told. That creates a very one-sided version of history, which is incomplete and therefore misleading. It's important for literature to reflect the experiences of all of humanity. Silence and ignorance is what perpetuates misunderstanding, misinformation, prejudice and inequality. One of the first female writers, Hildegard von Bingen, said it pretty succinctly in the 1100s, "we cannot live in a world that is not our own, in a world that is interpreted for us by others. An interpreted home is not a home. Part of the terror is to take back our own listening, to use our own voice, to see our own light."

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lauren Marino is a writer and longtime publishing executive. Prior to her current roles as Executive Editor at Hachette Books she was VP, Editorial Director of Gotham Books, where she was the founding editor in 2001, publishing multiple bestsellers and award-winning books. She is the author of *What Would Dolly Do? How to Be a Diamond in a Rhinestone World* and *Jackie and Cassini: A Fashion Love Affair*, and has collaborated with celebrities, doctors, entrepreneurs, psychologists, and experts on their books.

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