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Female Authors of the Twentieth Century

She ran her hand along the fuselage of the P-51. It was still warm from the ferry that began in Tampa and would end in Berlin. It had been two years since she flew over Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941 and where she saw the three, bright red dots on the wing of another aircraft stare back at her. Taunting her. She flew on.

On March 8, 1912 in London, England Alice Morgan Wright was placed in solitary confinement for refusing to wear the prison uniform of Holloway Jail. For two years, Wright was forced into hard labor and lived in cold, underground cells. Assigned to Holloway for violent protests that included shattering a window, Wright lost her freedom to protest, but not her liberty to be an artist and a leader of the women's suffrage movement. After smuggling art supplies into Holloway, Wright crafted sculptures and busts of her prison inmates. With her freedom to protest now restricted, Wright used her mind to express frustration and anguish over women's struggle to stand shoulder-to-shoulder to men in such a simple act as voting. She became a leader in the Futurist art movement. "The Fist," a sculpture made from green plaster, shows soft angles of tightly formed bodies huddled together in a display of solidarity. Enveloping those human bodies is a tightly wound grip that overpowers the bodies, perhaps a show of a powerful state against a struggling society. But this grip also looks to be slipping; a small fragment of the sculpture shows a way out, a moment of freedom. "The Fist" is an image of

movement – all the lines run together, all the angles drip and the mind is constantly struggling with the end.

The P-51 Mustang fighter was a simple plane. The single-seat aircraft had a large capacity for fuel with a Rolls-Royce engine. It's predecessors, including the P-47 Thunderbolt and Spitfire, were quick, agile, and played much in the theatre of WWII. But there was one problem: they couldn't endure long flights. They were built for power, for speed, they were masters of dogfights, but fickle. The P-51 was a steady choice. A reliable option. Though not the most imposing of aircraft, it surprised and surpassed those who needed its consistency.

By the early 20th century, Virginia Woolf had perfected the English essay and dug deep into the human mind. She wrote by avoiding angles and ridges, making sentences that lingered in thoughts and challenged convention: "She had come to the surface of the dark, sticky pool, and a wave seemed to bear her up and down with it; she had ceased to have any will of her own; she lay on top of the wave conscious of some pain, but chiefly in weakness." She wrote along-side men, often sitting in their shadows, quietly observing their habits: "In talk his charm & niceness, his integrity, his brightness, all make him a very nice, dear, delightful, memorable (yes, but not interesting) human being." Then she took a large idea and made it effortless. Woolf accepted every struggle, turned it on its side, and rolled it over and over until it became malleable enough for a reader to chew and understand the constructs of the human mind. She used her imagination to dive through pools and notice the pebbles at the bottom and the grains of

sand that float to the shore. It was the turn of the century and with it came new ways of writing, new art, and soon, new liberties for women. (Woolf, 404)

A report from Paris reads: “Yvette Gullbert, the French music hall singer and dancer, is certain that art is almost dead in the English speaking countries, because the truths of life are suppressed by false prudery, hypocritical modesty and musty puritanism, ‘which is anything but pure.’” The year was 1911 and the subject was truth in art, which Gullbert declared, “art in truth is life, falsehood is death.” After all, was not Shakespeare a truth teller first? If artists were to be kept to the restraints of moralists, art could not flourish because artists are not moralists, they are representations of society with all its flaws. Gullbert called on artists from France to England to America to be truth tellers. Two writers answered her call. They were Katherine Mansfield and Colette. (San Francisco Call)

“None of us can put into words why we fly. It is something different for each of us. I can’t say exactly why I fly but I know why as I’ve never known anything in my life. I knew it when I saw my plane silhouetted against the clouds framed by a circular rainbow. I knew it when I flew up into the extinct volcano Haleakala on the island of Maui and saw the gray-green pineapple field’s slope down to the cloud-dappled blueness of the Pacific. But I know it otherwise than in beauty. I know it in dignity and self-sufficiency and in the pride of skill. I know it in the satisfaction of usefulness.” (Fort)

She studied men’s writing, but she wrote like a female. Inspired by Chekov, Katherine Mansfield imitated his writing style by using the poor as central objects in her

stories. She relied on dialogue to reach the reader and she kept opinions to herself. This is where she pulled a curtain between her and Chekov – creating a clear divide between her style and his. He, like many male writers, infused his stories with thoughts and reflections and imagery: “Beyond the gardens, the ground sloped steeply down the river, like a cliff, with huge boulders sticking out of the clay.” And the scene would linger and the children played and the characters lamented on the heavens and “so much open space.” Mansfield also liked visions, but of a different kind: “The lane began, smoky and dark. Women in shawls and men's tweed caps hurried by. Men hung over the palings; the children played in the doorways. A low hum came from the mean little cottages.” Rather than the place revolving around the people, the people move within the place. The lane is only noticeable because women in shawls and men in caps tread on it. Chekov wrote from a universal perspective. He wrote like a man. Mansfield wrote from a humanistic perspective. She wrote like a woman. Like Chekov, the grit and grind were left in tact and laid bare. But unlike Chekov, Mansfield penetrates a bit further beyond the flesh of her female characters. Chekov wrote:

...perhaps even they imagined, for one fleeting moment, that they mattered in that vast mysterious universe, where countless lives were being lived out, and that they had a certain strength and were better than someone else. They felt good sitting up there, high above the village and they smiled happily, forgetting that eventually they would have to go back down again. (Chekov, 263)

And Mansfield answered:

They were like bright birds that had alighted in the Sheridans' garden for this one afternoon, on their way to - where? Ah, what happiness it is to be with people who all are happy, to press hands, press cheeks, smile into eyes. (Mansfield)

She wrote of women as though the women were alive and not caricatures. And with that came the exposure about a disease of the mind. In *A Woman at the Store*, Mansfield tells a story of a poor woman who has killed her husband and is supporting a troubled young, but artistic daughter. Mental illness was displayed not just through the woman, but in the child as well; suggesting that mental illness is genetic and can start at a very early age. Drawing, writing and other artistic mediums reveal the mind of the artist; the practice of art shows how the thoughts of that person work. Are they clever and thoughtful? Are they detached and abstract? In this case, the girl is capable of art, but her art is not beautiful. It is descriptive, accurate and relative to the girl's life. Much like how this story is. It is not beautiful; it is not a pleasurable experience. But it is authentic, disturbing, and evocative. It is truth. (Mansfield)

They never saw combat. Women were considered too emotional. Too temperamental. They could hardly handle the stress of flying, never mind ammunition and bombs. So they were tasked with ferrying P-51's, the B-29 four-engine Superfortress, and the B-17 heavy bomber to areas where male combat service pilots were stationed. The men would mount the aircraft, sit in the same cockpit, under the same controls, and fly over the same waters.

Colette unleashed new ideas that challenged traditional social institutions. Instead of an older man seducing a young and subservient girl, Colette creates stories where the women attract younger men and those men hold less intellectual capacity than the women. In *Cheri*, the woman, Lea, is the prudent one for both herself and her lover. He pursues her. She leads him along - at her will and on her terms. This experience gives Lea authority and confidence. She developed throughout the story as one who thought she needed Cheri. She is, after all, human and she demands affection just as everyone does. But rather than waiting on a relationship to come to her, she established it herself. That submissive young girl who gnaws over her synthetic older lover now appears to be not so appealing anymore; her allure begins to wane. For now there is a woman who has conquered the male and can own him just as he once owned her.

The fatal accident rate for Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) during training was .032 per 1000 hours. The fatal accident rate of men during training and in the same period was .034 per 1000 hours. “The fatal accident rate among graduates was .081 per 1000 hours..... Among the AAF male pilots, the fatal accident rate during the same period was identical.” (Dameron)

“I’ve never had exactly what I’d like to have in life, although I think I’ve had my share of trouble and of strife: I’ve never had a chance to see the things I’d like to see; Somehow the good things all run out before they get to me: The stronger I reach for a thing, the further it gits.” 33 years after Bob Cole sang “Gimme de leavins,” Zora Neale Hurston wrote a novel where she not only utilized the colloquial sounds that Bob Cole,

Earnest Hogan, and James Reese Europe sang with, she embraced it. “The” became “de,” and “let’s go” was written as “less go intuh Palm Beach and spend some of our money.” Vowels were shortened: “Git uh move on yuh, and dat quick,” and words were condensed: “Still and all, she’s her own woman. She oughta know by now whut she wants tuh do.” The African American voice changed little from 1904 to 1937 – it’s as if those who spoke it did so with such authority and confidence that they felt little need to make their sounds more crisp or their sentences longer. The voice that emerged during Hurston’s hour, the Harlem Renaissance, was different. It was quick. Rhythmic. Pure. The person speaking was not a person who stuffed their hands in their pockets and shuffled their feet or walked into a church with apprehension. The African American in Hurston’s novels and those that sang with Bob Cole were gallant, eager, and emotional. They would not walk into a church and sit in the last pew. They walked past every pew and sat down in the choir and when it came time to sing praise for the so little they had, they roared, they chanted, they danced, they rose their hands and shut their eyes. And they did it in unison. One voice. One world. And their sounds resonated through the church and into literature and we are now the lucky recipients of such a movement.

Toni Morrison matched Hurston’s story with a novel that is read better aloud and preferably on a front porch with a few friends on base. The novel is *Jazz*, the place is Harlem and the language is music. *Jazz* is a novel told in rhythm and sound rather than a narrative with a nimble plot that shifts and surprises. It is about music and the mood of the Harlem Renaissance. It is about jazz. There is a subtle plot: a man kills his mistress and his wife spirals into obsession. But that part of the story sits in the background and rotates around the language. The few characters: Joe Trace (the husband), Violet (his

wife), and Dorcas (the mistress), are all props and accessories to the music that accentuated the Harlem Renaissance.

While Joe Trace is coping with a distant wife whom he married more out of convenience than love, “young men on the rooftops changed their tune.” While Violet consumes herself with Dorcas’s life before she was killed, young men “blew out their cheeks - it was just like the light of that day, pure and steady and kind of kind.” While Dorcas’s aunt, Alice Manfred, laments over the loss and seeps into despondency, hope emerges with “men playing out their maple-sugar hearts, tapping it from four-hundred-year-old trees and letting it run down the trunk, wasting it because they didn’t have a bucket to hold it.” The music saves the people. When anguish seems to greet them every morning, they are torn between anger and loneliness, like the sharp contrast between a clarinet and brass.

The small cast that made up *Jazz* was deliberate. A jazz band is made up of a few instruments that randomly yet magically work when the music is in synch. No sheet music. No conductor. Just pure and unadulterated sounds that come from within. Where the players, whose training come from the soul and their practice starts with joy, play for the sheer pleasure of unanticipated and untamed music. It is sporadic. It is accidental. It is jazz.

The role of Zeina Bint Zeinat in *Zeina* by Nawal El Saadawi is significant. She is introduced as a girl who stands thin and tall and ambivalent. No husband, no lovers, no children, no clear tie to the state or to a religion. “She had no father, elder brother, uncle, grandfather, lover or husband. Only music was her love.” As a musician her music

sustains her. It is her mosque and her Qur'an. Her child and her trade. "Zeina Bint Zeinat lived through music." (Saadawi)

While Saadawi was writing *Zeina*, the uprisings in Egypt were at their peak. *Zeina* is just one of the many results of that uprising: freedom for a woman to write openly and honestly. If thousands of stifled people can overthrow evil, then women too can overthrow her own shackles. The freedom of the Egyptians signaled not just freedom for a country, but liberty for the individual mind. The uprising stands out as another character because it is constantly in the background and mentioned. It is a chaotic time for Egyptians. Some are fighting to keep tradition and others are sacrificing their lives for a progressive state. The two sides are at war much the same way the female is at war with her faith and her own thoughts.

For every moment that Saadawi questioned Islam and Christianity in *Zeina*, Flannery O'Connor stood rooted in confronting Christianity. In her short story *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, the characters are strikingly similar to *Everything that Rises Must Converge* and *Revelation* to name just three of her many short stories. There is usually a female protagonist who is either a mother or a grandmother and she is a traditional southern Christian believer who breathes in a world of black and white. There is good and evil. Christians and non-Christians. White's and African American's. There is no compromise between the two binary worlds. You are either saved and going to heaven or your are a sinner and going to hell. O'Connor paints this stark contrast to make a point: to confront the institution of Christianity that it might allow the weak to walk with the strong, the poor with the rich. The irony here is that some may not see that as O'Connor's ultimate agenda. If you are a Christian, you will read of the grandmother in

A Good Man and nod your head in agreement in everything she does and say “amen” or “that’s right” and stay isolated. If you are not a Christian the grandmother will be a familiar image to you as you stand on the opposite side of the fence never enticed to climb over to see what joy or grief or might lie beyond.

The characters are grotesque. They are not enjoyable to read but often disheartening, agitating, grating and haughty. But are they? O’Connor, like Mansfield, writes of everyman. She takes the people in society you would otherwise never notice and she creates a typical story behind them. But it’s the sheer fact that what she chooses to write about makes her writing provocative. Why write about small town racism in *Everything that Rises* and why make the reader cringe when the mom gives over a penny to an African American? Because the little stories are representative of the larger ones. That penny to the African American is Affirmative Action to others. The small town racism is the proliferation of abuse a female politician endures from the media when running for the same office as a male. O’Connor’s response in her own words to those that question why she writes about what she does was simple. She was:

...tired of reading reviews that call *A Good Man* brutal and sarcastic," she writes. "The stories are hard but they are hard because there is nothing harder or less sentimental than Christian realism... when I see these stories described as horror stories I am always amused because the reviewer always has hold of the wrong horror.

She returns to her faith, just as Saadawi referred to hers, as the basis for her writing. The characters in O’Connor’s short stories meet their demise either through humility (as in *Everything that Rises*) or death (*A Good Man*). Whereas Saadawi’s characters come to

an understanding about their beliefs – they either accept them or leave them. O’Connor’s characters are more unsettling. There is no finality. As if the religion itself still has to prove itself and that the people that God has set out to save need more convincing.

There was freedom up there. Defiance, transperence, pure, sweet and heavenly liberty. The wings of the aircraft cut through space like a blade to a feather. So small the earth looked below. Such madness on one side and despair on the other. Up above it all blends together. The earth far below is opaque and dense, rife with war. But above, you’re swimming in God’s arms. How to get there if you don’t have wings.

If there were one word that was needed to describe *Runaway* by Alice Munro, it would be lean. Everything from the language to the construction of the sentences to the stories themselves are spare, at times slow but meditative, and flat. Like with Flannery O’Connor, her characters are your next-door neighbors. You can identify and imagine them instantly because they are the couple that boards Thoroughbreds down the road, they are your first grade teacher or the young women at the front desk in the hotel with that relaxed smile. Alice Munro’s characters are like her sentences. They are not prosy and lengthy. They are short and crisp.

In *Runaway*, Carla, the protagonist, is struggling with her marriage, has thoughts of attraction towards another woman and is the anchor that keeps her small business alive. Her femininity is obscured, marred, and triggered with a lust for freedom. Carla’s world is a world where the institution of marriage is not fulfilling nor can it be trusted.

Where people have flaws and husbands are manipulative. It is a world that lives on because there is no end or finality.

Cornelia Clark Fort survived that day on Pearl Harbor. But on March 21, 1943, a young cadet clipped the wing of her BT-13 during formation a few miles south of Merkel, Texas. Only her clothes made it back to her bunk – they sat there for days, blood caked and ruined. Then they disappeared. She was twenty-five years old and flew over 1000 miles in every major combat aircraft.

The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath is a non-linear novel based on the author's real-life struggle with depression and her subsequent attempts at suicide. Much of the narrative weaves in and out of the life of Esther Greenwood. Written in first person, the story reads like a diary. Boys are fickle, men are masters, girls are silly, friend's are flighty. The characters, including Esther, are colorless and generic but the novel was provocative in 1970 because of the mention of electric shock treatments which Sylvia Plath herself received in a psychiatric institute. The treatment took the humanity out of the human. Instead of looking at a person with a disease, the disease was treated with the person as an appendage.

Esther tried to commit suicide first by hanging using a silk necktie. Then she tried to drown herself in pills and then water. But those too failed. Esther had an abundance of resources within her reach – tall, attractive, intelligent, a career in writing, awards for poetry, boys fawning over her, friends tripping for her attention. And yet, it

was the silence and stillness of death that she coveted. That deep and penetrating slip into a world of the unknown.

She ran her hand along the fuselage of the A-10. It was still warm from the ground support mission over Baghdad on April 7, 2003. “Captain Kim Campbell, suffered extensive flak damage to her A-10. Enemy fire damaged one of the A-10's engines and crippled its hydraulic system, which required the aircraft's stabilizer and flight controls to be operated via the back-up mechanical system. Despite this damage,” she flew on. (Hagg)

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