

# *75 Books by Women Whose Words Have Changed the World*

*Selected by members of the Women's National Book Association  
in Observance of Their 75th Anniversary  
Annotated by Adeline Oakley / Boston Chapter WNBA*

**JANE ADDAMS.** *Twenty Years at Hull House.*

She launched her settlement house in a Chicago ghetto, not as a mission for derelicts but as a forum for diverse nationalities to learn from each other. Popularizing practical methods and encouraging self-reliance, she brought hope to the newcomers and revolutionized attitudes toward the poor.

**LOUISA MAY ALCOTT.** *Little Women.*

Because her family needed money, Louisa reluctantly wrote a story for girls. "We really lived most of it," she said; "If it succeeds, that will be the reason." And so, her alter ego Jo, never out of print, rebelling against girlhood's restraints, still engages her readers.

**ISABEL ALLENDE.** *The House of the Spirits.*

This experienced journalist left Chile when her uncle, President Allende, was assassinated. Using real events as background for her novel, she wrote about a patrician family in an unnamed country, splintered by opposing political and social forces.

**MAYA ANGELOU.** *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.*

Painful memories in her autobiographical novel are softened by the tribute to her grand mother who gave her security and banished her self-doubts. She dedicates the book to her son and "to all the strong black birds of promise who [like herself] defy the odds and the gods."

**HANNAH ARENDT.** *The Human Condition.*

Her book grew out of lectures said to combine "tremendous intellect with great common sense." She separates human activity into labor, necessary consumption; work, creating durable objects; and--the most Important--classic Greek polis, or action, what we do for the common good.

**JANE AUSTEN.** *Pride and Prejudice.*

She changed the rules for writing fiction; let the dialogue carry the plot and, with detached irony, pointed out the folly of trusting first impressions in choosing a mate--the only choice a girl of her time could make for herself.

**SIMONE de BEAUVOIR.** *The Second Sex.*

Global examination of historical and contemporary records supports her premise that women were forced by tradition into making choices from a secondary or inferior position in relation to men. Neither petulant nor emotional, this logical treatise postulates that pervasive injustice vitiates relationships between the sexes.

**RUTH BENEDICT. *Patterns of Culture.***

Her benchmark book on the nature of Man compared primitive societies: Kwatutls are competitive; Dobus, hostile; Zunis, peaceful, traits found also in advanced cultures. She concluded that values are relative, not absolute.

**BOSTON WOMENS HEALTH COLLECTIVE STAFF. *Our Bodies, Ourselves.***

Carefully searching medical and popular literature, 12 young staff members gathered facts on women's physiology and psychology. Their footnotes and bibliography are worthy of a Ph.D. thesis; their digressions are as frank as Masters and Johnson and as supportive as Planned Parenthood.

**CHARLOTTE BRONTE. *Jane Eyre.***

Saying "A heroine can be interesting without being beautiful," she made Jane small and plain like herself. Then, shockingly, Jane diverged from her creator's realism and in wild melodrama began to love Rochester instead of merely being loved!

**EMILY BRONTE. *Wuthering Heights.***

Knowing little about the ways of the world and fed by Gothic romance, she created as hero a vindictive villain of the moors and a passion reaching beyond the grave into the next generation. A superlative account of the battle between good and evil.

**SUSAN BROWNMILLER. *Against Our Will.***

In her psychosocial history she explores the concept of woman as property--the warrior rapist and ostracized victims from biblical times to Vietnam, decrying pornography and prostitution. Her main thrust is to strengthen legal and judicial systems and teach women to fight effectively.

**PEARL BUCK. *The Good Earth.***

Child of missionaries, "mentally bifocal." she was more than qualified to interpret Chinese peasant life, hitherto unknown to Western readers. With biblical simplicity, she chronicled the hardships and Joys of Wang Lung and O-Lan, devoted to their children and the land.

**RACHEL CARSON. *Silent Spring.***

Warning that the balance of nature is affected by fallout, pesticides, weed-killers, and industrial waste, she was the first to foretell the possible loss of beauty in the world. Her view of song-birds silenced and nature decimated became the most credible and eloquent defense of our natural heritage

**WILLA CATHER. *My Antonia.***

Prairie fiction brought fame from Antonia's "rich mine of life"; but when Cather turned to other themes, the reviewers continued to praise her "faithful use" of the frontier realities she was trying to escape.

**MARY BOYKIN CHESNUT. *A Diary from Dixie.***

The governor's daughter was accepted everywhere; her husband was a senator, aide to Jefferson Davis and heir to a great plantation. In her lively, keenly observant diary, she gives an insiders view of the Confederacy and expresses her hatred of slavery and her sympathy for black folk.

**KATE CHOPIN. *The Awakening.***

Her marriage to a Cajun widened her horizons. A realist scorning local color, she was precursor to other Southern writers. Her novel about a woman's feelings, published in 1897, was praised technically but censored. She never wrote again. The book's revival in 1970 was considered "timely and interesting."

**AGATHA CHRISTIE. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd.***

Dedicated to those "who like orthodox detective stories," her book was hailed as a masterpiece by many and challenged as unorthodox by some "whodunit" purists. But Dame Agatha remains popular and her readers still join Poirot and Miss Marple in unraveling intricate clues.

**EMILY DICKINSON. *Complete Poems.***

She signed her letters to Higginson, "Your scholar," but he abandoned "all attempts to guide - - this extraordinary nature." She was reclusive, but she loved family, friends, and correspondents, and, above all, her poetry--dialectical, never sentimental nor didactic, rich in experience, sensitivity, and intellect.

**MARY BAKER EDDY. *Science and Health.***

When a passage from Matthew brought swift recovery from an accident, her ideas about God and Mind coalesced in a creed that sustained her in "gentle power" in her lifetime, and a book (the official statement of Christian Science principles) that upholds her teachings still.

**GEORGE ELIOT. *Middlemarch.***

As editor of an intellectual journal, she learned new ideas about motivation and inner life and felt concern that women's idealism was wasted in trivia. Her Novel about unhappy marriages in a provincial town was hailed by Virginia Woolf as "one of the few written for grownups."

**FANNIE FARMER. *The Boston Cooking School Cook Book.***

She banned "butter the size of an egg" and introduced tablespoons and cups. In 1896 this "Mother of Level Measurements" wrote and published at her own expense the first distinctive American cookbook. Revisions have appeared ever since, the latest including metric conversions.

**FRANCES FITZGERALD. *Fire in the Lake.***

As a freelance reporter in Saigon after Indochina studies at Yale, she interpreted Vietnamese culture and analyzed our intervention. Considered the best scholarly effort by an American, her book has also been praised for her empathic anecdotes about American soldiers trying to fulfill their mission.

**DIAN FOSSEY. *Gorillas in the Mist.***

Fending off poachers, she reestablished boundaries of the gorilla mountain sanctuary in Rwanda. For 15 years she lived with free-roaming families, studying and writing about patterns of gorilla behavior never before recorded. When the slaughter began again, Dr. Fossey, primatologist, reverted to Dr. Fossey, conversationalist, and was, herself, slaughtered.

**ANNE FRANK. *Diary of a Young Girl.***

For two years she and her parents and five other refugees hid from their Nazi pursuers in a warehouse attic in Holland. Eventually they were found and sent to concentration camps. Only Anne's father survived. He salvaged his daughters remarkable diary, the record of a sensitive adolescent in starkly oppressive times.

**BETTY FRIEDAN. *The Feminine Mystique.***

She succumbed to the postwar push to be a suburban housewife, but eventually analyzed those pressures in her book. Friedan helped launch the women's movement and also founded NOW. Her writings transcend polarization and caution that to denounce men is counterproductive.

**EMMA GOLDMAN. *Living My Life.***

When she went to America to escape a forced marriage, she had already embraced the populist ideas of her Russian schoolmates. Moved by the martyrdom of the Haymarket anarchists, she joined Alexander Berkman in the struggle against capitalism. They were deported, but she continued to fight for her beliefs.

**GERMAINE GREER. *The Female Eunuch.***

Her manifesto was considered the most realistic and least anti-male. Never advocating violent action, she believed that subservience deforms body and soul and that slaves enslave their masters. She urged women to counteract domination and to share experiences with each other.

**RADCLYFFE HALL. *Well of Loneliness.***

This first definitive novel of love between women shocked British society and was banned for a time, its notoriety disproportionate to the significance of the book. Reviewers in America called it a passionate plea for the worlds understanding and sympathy.

**EDITH HAMILTON. *Mythology.***

From early youth she loved the classics and taught them well. At age 63 she retold the classics for us--creation, gods and heroes, love and war. In recognition, she was made an honorary citizen of Athens.

**BETTY LEHAN HARRAGAN. *Games Mother Never Taught You.***

An independent business, counselor with years of experience, she specializes in integrating women into the workforce. For those who feel trapped in their jobs, she pinpoints assumptions that undermine progress, stripping away every shred of self-pity, playing the corporate game to win.

**KAREN HORNEY. *Our Inner Conflicts.***

The first psychologist to challenge Freud's ideas about women, she shifted emphasis from biologically driven infantile deviation to interaction with cultural and social factors. Her book describes four "solutions" used in conflict and warns against adhering to them rigidly, as neurotics do.

**ZOLA NEALE HURSTON. *Their Eyes Are Watching God.***

A child with no permanent home and no schooling, this survivor studied with Franz Boas at

Barnard and won a fellowship to collect folklore. Her books reflect her preferred lifestyle: southern, rural, all-black mature characters not reacting to racism and using dialect with pride.

**HELEN KELLER.** *The Story of My Life.*

As Annie Sullivan spelled "W-A-T-E-R" into her hand while she pumped the handle, "that living word" awakened her soul. With sign language, Braille, and Annie's alphabet, Helen graduated cum laude from Radcliffe and went on to devote her life to the blind.

**MAXINE HONG KINGSTON.** *Woman Warrior.*

Her book describes the "ghosts" who haunted her childhood: figures from Chinese cautionary tales and white-faced Americans whose "otherness" frightened her immigrant parents. Retracing the legends, she has come to terms with ghosts and feels the blood of the Woman Warrior in her veins.

**ELIZABETH KUBLER-ROSS.** *On Death and dying.*

Her interdisciplinary seminars taught the steps from fear of death to acceptance., vanquishing the conspiracy of silence that once shrouded hospital terminal wards. As leading advocate for the Death Awareness movement, she added to our knowledge of thanatology and lifted a social taboo.

**FRANCES MOORE LAPPE.** *Diet for a Small Planet.*

Searching for ways to wipe out famine, she learned that in agribusiness nutrition is not a priority. Here she deals with protein and how we squander it in our devotion to the "fatted calf." She offers recipes, charts, and cost comparisons of non-meat, high-protein cooking.

**HARPER LEE.** *To Kill a Mockingbird.*

In this deft, mature handling of the novels theme, racial inequality in the thirties, a child witnesses the trial in which her father, a Southern lawyer, defends a black man accused of rape.

**DORIS LESSING.** *The Golden Notebook.*

She weaves a five-point Journal into an intensely personal novel "to keep the plan of it in my head." The main character is in analysis, a writer trying to deal with a materialistic world and concerned about aging, politics, and conflict between generations.

**ANNE MORROW LINDBERGH.** *Gift from the Sea.*

Explorer, aviatrix, and mother of a large family, she is the epitome of modern womanhood. Her auto-biographical musings use the seashell and the tides ebb and flow to symbolize stages of divergence and accommodation in the struggle for self-identity.

**AUDRE LORDE.** *The Cancer Journals.*

After cancer surgery she rejected wearing a prosthesis; and "in the name of asymmetry" like a one-breasted Amazon warrior of Dahomey, became a better warrior. She is committed to bridging differences of race, gender, and personal idiosyncrasies that lock up people into conflict.

**KATHERINE MANSFIELD. *The Garden Party.***

She wanted to capture moods in words as Debussy captured them in music--with impressions, not unusual incidents. In her title story, a girls first grownup party contrasts with a nearby house of mourning; "life in the midst of death"--an epiphany for Laura.

**BERYL MARKHAM. *West with the Night.***

Racehorse trainer and bush pilot scouting elephants for safaris, she was the first person to fly the Atlantic from east to west. With a poets love for Kenya, she wrote her memoirs "to bring back a good life and a good country."

**CARSON McCULLERS. *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter.***

Physical incapacity isolated her, and her themes reflect that deprivation, but she was a friend to many. Although she wrote no happy endings, her characters, drawn sympathetically, are thwarted in their attempts to find love, not by human adversaries, but by Life.

**MARGARET MEAD. *Coming of Age in Samoa.***

As custodian of Ruth Benedict's field notes, she continued the study of relationships between culture and personality, setting new standards of analytic thoroughness and refuting a theory that adolescence is universally accompanied by stress. Her work helped make anthropology accessible to the nonprofessional reader.

**GOLDA MEIER. *My Life.***

Her remarkable odyssey took her from Cossack pogroms and hazardous flight from Russia to America. Working with Zionist leaders in Milwaukee, she, her sister, and their husbands were emboldened to emigrate to Palestine. There she rose from planting saplings in a kibbutz to serving as the democratically elected prime minister of Israel.

**EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY. *Collected Poems.***

Happily burning her candle at both ends in Greenwich Village, this "sophisticated innocent" became the envoy of "flaming youth." Prolonging her popularity, subversive stanzas overshadowed her noble sonnets; but we recognize now her mastery of traditional verse forms and claim her as a great lyricist.

**MARGARET MITCHELL. *Gone with the Wind.***

Reviewers questioned her ambiguity toward Scarlett when she said, "Had she ever understood Ashley, she would not have loved him; had she understood Rhett, she would not have lost him." Nevertheless, her Civil War novel became the best-selling book in America, second only to the Bible.

**MARIANNE MOORE. *Complete Poems.***

Friends of the busy editor of Dial had to "pirate" her poems to get them published. Awards and recognition from T.S. Eliot and other poets followed; but, more important, she won a host of enthusiastic readers who enjoy her satirical "personalities" in which she compares animals with humankind.

**TONI MORRISON. *Song of Solomon.***

As university lecturer and senior editor at Random House, she helped many young writers. Her own work upset the dominance of black male writers and ranks highly in American and African-American literature. In this maturation novel, readers share in the protagonist's search for identity.

**LADY SHIKIBU MURASAKI. *The Tale of Genji.***

Written to be read aloud to Empress Akito's court, her manuscript survived for a thousand years; and now, in translation, ranks as high as any great modern novel. Prince Genji's adventures and romances, complicated by court intrigue, are told with sensitivity, interspersed with poems, evoking Japanese traditions.

**ANAIS NIN. *The Early Diary.***

Covered in this section of her legendary diary are her four years in Paris and London as a young bride and budding author. She is torn between wifely duties and the urge to write as a poet "in the framework of prose."

**FLANNERY O'CONNOR. *The Complete Stories.***

Called one of our funniest writers, she is also described as "Christ-haunted." She never preaches but using techniques of distortion and grotesque exaggeration, she peoples her tragicomic "morality plays" with self-centered southern characters "for the purpose of revelation."

**ZOE OLDENBOURG. *The World Is Not Enough.***

This young Russian scholar, living in France, recreated the life of knights and ladies in medieval castles and crusaders in the Orient in the 12th and 13th centuries. Praised as both chronicle and rewarding fiction, her book focuses on a rough, cruel age.

**TILLIE OLSEN. *Silences.***

Rejecting the platitude, "where there's a will there's a way," she lists the circumstances that inhibit the creative process: class, race, censorship, an unacceptable vision, and--particularly--gender. She teaches writing and women's studies, helping to discover and restore many silent voices.

**ELAINE PAGELS. *The Gnostic Gospels.***

A professor of religion at Princeton and editor of the texts, she explains why the papyrus scrolls were buried in the early days of Christianity. With careful scholarship, she illuminates the meaning and significance of these gospels for understanding the origins of Western religion.

**EMMELINE PANKHURST. *My Own Story.***

A meeting with Susan B. Anthony transformed this born crusader into a militant suffragette, arrested and imprisoned on several occasions. With her daughters Adele, Christabel, and Sylvia, she helped secure women a suffrage in England.

**SYLVIA PLATH. *The Bell Jar.***

The narrator is a talented, achieving young woman who slips down into madness but recovers at

the end. Not so with the author who committed suicide shortly before the publication of the book. Plath's major theme--troubling in spite of its wit--is the hostility between men and women.

**KATHERINE ANNE PORTER. *Ship of Fools.***

Borrowing title and theme from Sebastian Brant's 16th-century verses, she explored the ethos of diverse passengers sailing from Vera Cruz to Bremerhaven on the eve of Hitler's accession. She leaves the reader with this caveat: "evil is always done with the collusion of good."

**ADRIENNE RICH. *Of Woman Born.***

As scholar and writer, she studied at Radcliffe and Oxford and had her first book of poems selected by W.H. Auden for a Yale series. As mother, she had three sons, "a radicalizing experience." Here she describes her attempt to resolve the conflict between writing and motherhood and "to understand what guilt is all about."

**MARGARET SANGER. *An Autobiography.***

Her mother died leaving 11 children, and she worried about immigrant women she nursed, unable to control the size of their families. Hearing about contraception in France, she persuaded doctors to help her and, despite jail sentences and legal battles, established the first birth control clinic.

**SAPPHO. *A New Translation.***

In Greece she was called "the poetess" and "the tenth muse" and, with only fragments and two intact poems to judge by, modern scholars honor her, too. She led a group of young devotees of music and poetry, and many of her lyrics celebrated their festivals and weddings.

**MAY SARTON. *Journal of a Solitude.***

She called her yearly series, written day by day, "sketches for an autobiography." Written in conversational style, each was enriched with little essays examining motive or belief or musings on pain and joy.

**MARY SHELLEY. *Frankenstein.***

Titled "The Modern Prometheus," hers was the best of the supernatural tales written in friendly competition with Byron and his companions. Her monster is the embodiment of evil in man for which Frankenstein, his creator, cannot escape responsibility.

**SUSAN SONTAG. *Illness as Metaphor.***

First used in political rhetoric in the French Revolution, disease imagery continues in modern psychological explanations for illness. The author turns a "moralist's Scorn" toward the misleading use of tuberculosis and cancer as metaphors.

**GERTRUDE STEIN. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas.***

Supposedly ghostwriting her companion's autobiography, she produced an engrossing account of expatriates in Paris. Encouraged by William James at Radcliffe to experiment with words for their associational qualities, feeling like a creative kindred spirit, she befriended Hemingway, Picasso, and other writers and artists searching for new forms.

**HARRIET BEECHER STOWE. *Uncle Tom's Cabin.***

Aroused when runaway slaves were pursued almost in a trance she wrote about a slave beaten to death by the plantation overseer. A million people read her novel. On meeting her, Lincoln is reputed to have said, "So you are the little woman who started this big war."

**BARBARA TUCHUAN. *A Distant Mirror.***

Likening the 14th century to our own with its breakdown of authority, she studied the great Froissart's documentation of that period. With spotlight on de Coucy, the most experienced knight in France, she brought time, place, and hero alive in a brilliant novel about an unfamiliar period.

**SIGRID UNDSSET. *Kristin Lavransdatter.***

Archeologist's daughter and cultural historian, she turned to 14th-century Norway, in transition from the Viking age to Christianity, to mirror modern conflicts. In their passage from passionate youth to final resignation and peace, her main characters are fully developed, credible, and unforgettable.

**ALICE WALKER. *The Color Purple.***

Child of sharecroppers, world-wide activist, editor, and professor, she brings to fiction the strengths of black idiom, musical and easy to read. In this epistolary novel, Celie's letters to God and to her sister in Africa help her surmount her degrading circumstances.

**EUDORA WELTY. *Delta Wedding.***

For her, atmosphere is the most important element in a story. At this gathering on a Mississippi plantation, very little seems to be happening; but through the impressions of a young girl listening to shifting points of view, we witness disagreements resolved and family ties renewed.

**EDITH WHARTON. *Ethan Frome.***

When critics called this New England tragedy her best book, she was displeased and said that *The Age of Innocence* about New York society was much more characteristic of her work. Readers, however, respond to the realism with which she depicts human nature, regardless of the setting.

**PHILLIS WHEATLEY. *The Collected Works.***

Mastering English and Latin at age eight, this slave child became the first woman poet of her race in the United States. General Washington praised her patriotic themes, and she was feted by the lord mayor of London. Eventually her poems gained full recognition at home and abroad.

**MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman.***

She studied the French Revolution on the spot, founded the woman's rights movement and, with Thomas Paine, William Godwin, and others, worked to "end blind obedience" by educating women. She married Godwin and died in childbirth, their daughter destined for fame one day as Mary Godwin Shelley.

**VIRGINIA WOOLF. *Room of One's Own.***

In this feminist critique, she is sympathetic to expressions of rage in women; but as an artist

discussing fiction, she warns that it is fatal to stress any grievance, "that bias is doomed to death. It cannot grow in the minds of others."