

Her Story

Once upon a time, there was a damsel in distress waiting to be rescued by her Prince Charming, but she soon got tired of waiting and decided to put pen to paper and write her own ending.

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Women were writing cookbooks long before Martha Stewart or Donna Hay ever entered a kitchen. In fact, it is widely believed that jotting down recipes was the first female foray into the publishing world. Women would often keep a record of their culinary delights and share them among family and friends much the same as they do today. And while it's wonderful that such an iconic part of women's lives was recorded, one might be curious about everything else they did and why it was that the only early documentation we have of women was written by men.

A wise history teacher once pointed out to me the constituents of the word history. Breaking it down to 'his story', suddenly everything became clear – there was no space in history for women. Before women gained a voice, we were only privy to a male-dominated account of the world and as far as I know, there are no 'herstory' classes in high schools. Sadly, writing was a domain that was long left to men as it was considered to be something too complex for women. Therefore, men detailed the only accounts of women and consequently, depictions of them were wildly simplistic and inaccurate – that's if they appeared at all.



But the status quo changed when bold women such as Jane Austen decided to pick up a pen and write for themselves. Suddenly an insight into the inner lives, ambitions and motivations of women was on offer, effectively women were given a voice. But that's not to say that they had never before shown such initiative – as Virginia Woolf said, “for most of history, Anonymous was a woman.”

One of the first topics addressed in women's literature was their absence from the chronicles of history.

“But history, real history, I cannot be interested in ... I read it a little as a duty, but it tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me.

The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all – it is very tiresome,” wrote Austen in 1817.

Satisfying as it may be to read such an acknowledgment – chastising men was not the only theme explored in the texts of female writers. Mary Wollstonecraft lived in the late 18th century and was one of the first feminist writers and philosophers. Many of her ideas seem timid by today's standards, but in their time they were revolutionary and shocking. One of her most poignant contentions was for the independence of women. “I do not wish for women to have a power over men but over themselves,” she wrote.

In the following century, Louisa May Alcott – author of *Little Women* – addressed what she saw to be an injustice between the roles of men and women. “I believe that it is as much a right and duty for women to do something with their lives as for men, and we are not going to be satisfied with such frivolous parts as you give us,” she stated. With those words, she rejected notions that



pushed to chase their dreams. To think that not even a decade earlier most women's only ambition was to marry!

Louisa May Alcott also spoke freely about her goals and pursuits and in doing so provided others with inspiration. "Far away there in the sunshine are my highest aspirations. I may not reach them, but I can look up and see their beauty, believe in them, and try to follow where they lead," she wrote.

In the movie *Dead Poet's Society*, English professor John Keating jokes to his classroom of teenage males that writers write "to woo women". The scene is set in 1959 and promotes the myth that writers are supposed to be men. While the film may be a classic tale of maintaining individuality, it is sadly mistaken on this point. Writing, in its many forms, was long believed – by men – to be beyond the capabilities of the female brain, but thanks to the determination and perseverance of great women, this misconception has been shattered.



the female sex was naive and feeble-minded and implored women to assert themselves and make their mark.

Having heeded Alcott's message, many women went on to continue her legacy – but not without ongoing struggle. It became apparent to female writers that they faced quite a large mountain on their climb to recognition. "A woman has to be twice as good as a man to get half as far," mused Fannie Hurst in the early 20th century. But they did not turn away from the challenge they faced. A determination to pursue her craft was evident in the poetry of Sylvia Plath, "let me live, love and say it well in good sentences," she beseeched.

As time went on, the message filtered through the generations, passed on by mothers to daughters and sisters to sisters – and the sentiment was loud and clear. Zora Neale Hurston wrote of this phenomenon in 1942, "Mama exhorted her children at every opportunity to 'jump at de sun'. We might not land on the sun; but at least we would get off the ground," she penned. Women were encouraged to dream and furthermore,

