'Novels That Shaped the World: A Woman's Place' compiled by Ondrej Gomola.
S7L1-ENA 2019-2020

Today, one novel more than any other stands up for women's rights across the world: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, a dystopian story of state-sponsored female oppression published in and a rallying call for women everywhere ever since. We've seen those red-robed Handmaids at women's marches all over the world. We've seen them in London, and they were holding up placards that said, "Make Margaret Atwood fiction again," and "The Handmaid's Tale is not an instruction manual". What women have learned from The Handmaid's Tale is that we must never be complacent. The Handmaid's Tale is the #MeToo novel for this generation. Though loved by both sexes, the English novel is a predominantly female form. Women writers have been more prominent in it than in any other literary genre. Women readers, too. The novel has always strongly reflected women's concerns. But for some people, this strong female attachment to the novel was a matter for suspicion.

Novels were slightly frowned upon as being frivolous. Definitely for women. I mean, seen as being a sort of low entertainment for women to indulge in while men read serious history. In this film, we'll see how women's experiences, fears and aspirations have shaped the novel and how the novel has shaped women's lives and sustained them. A great novel makes you feel wonderful about being alive. It captures your heart and your mind.

In 1719, the first ever novel in English was published – Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. There were no real female characters in it. This was a bromance. But then it occurred to another male author that the female half of the population might just be interested in reading about themselves. He was right. *Pamela*, published in 1740, was the work of a London printer, Samuel Richardson. It sold like hotcakes. Women's love affair with the novel – and vice versa – was up and running. *Pamela* is when her lady employer dies and the son, Mr B, becomes her boss. The novel takes the form of a series of letters.

> [excerpt from the novel] Father and Mother, I was writing this earlier and in comes the young master of the house. He wanted to know who I was writing to. "Let me see how your writing is coming on," he said. He wasn't angry. Quite the opposite. "I see my mother's care in your learning hasn't gone to waste," he said. "You may read any of her books to improve yourself." I think he's the best of gentlemen.

I read *Pamela* at university – and I was absolutely riveted. And rereading it, I realised that it's a complete page-turner. It's got that thing that really great novels do, that you think about it when you're not reading it. And I actually found myself in the day going like, "Ooh, o'clock! "I'll go back and see what's happened." You know, like it's that sense of almost like a soap opera that you want to go back and see what the next development is.

> Your letter is both a trouble and a comfort to us. I hope the squire has no design on you. I don't like that he praises your coming on. We fear you may be too grateful and reward him with that jewel, your virtue, which no favour or riches can deserve. Father, you seem to mistrust the honour of your child. How could you? I trust I shall never find the young master behaving in a way that's unworthy of his character.

She finds Mr B very, very attractive – very sexually attractive – and she tells us that she has fallen in love with him. You know, he is Mr Darcy. You know, he's Colin Firth coming out of the water. That's the sort of person you're supposed to be imagining.

> You'll be wondering why I haven't written in weeks. A great sadness is the reason. Your cautions were well grounded. The gentleman has now showed his true colours. He tried to kiss me, saying he'd make a gentlewoman of me. When I refused, he was angry and called me names. But don't fear. I remain virtuous and honest. And may God's goodness keep me so.

It's sort of a story of sexual harassment in the workplace. Mr B repeatedly tries to have his way with Pamela, and she keeps resisting him. Now, this resistance was really striking and new and countercultural at this point – that women weren't supposed to resist men's advances, especially servant women.

> He came into the bedroom. The maid was there and I ran to her. Mother, please don't let Father see this part. He took my left arm and she held my right. Then he grabbed my waist and said, "Pamela, finally, the type of reckoning is come." I screamed out so loud. Nobody has ever heard the like. But there was no-one there to help. She was as guilty as him. I struggled, and then in my terror, I fainted away.

Pamela is really a very unpleasant story, unpleasant in that you're hoping that the master will rape the young, lovely Lady Pamela. It's a kind of totally queasy book, in my view, about power and seduction. To the modern reader, the fact that he is a sexual assailant – very, very nearly a rapist – who is stopped only by his own horror when she goes into something which may be like an epileptic fit or maybe a fantastically deep, stress-induced faint. You know, for the modern reader, it's... This isn't sexy. But if you're in the 18th century, you go, "This is completely thrilling." And it's got a happy ending – because at the very end of it, he goes like, "You are so fab that I don't want to rape you. I want to marry you. And I want you to love me." And she goes, "I've always loved you!" And that's a happy ending to the 18th century. *Pamela* lived up to its subtitle – *Virtue Rewarded.* It became the first English bestseller. And it was hyped, pirated and parodied, a publishing sensation. Male readers seized on it, too, and it was read out loud in early forms of book clubs. There's an account that, when Pamela eventually marries her employer, church bells rang out through the land as people celebrated, and it looks ahead to when Dickens writes the death of Little Nell and people are in mourning – that collective public response to a fictional character. Everyone was reading it and sermons were based on it, people were talking about it, and what I really love is that *Pamela* is the first novel to create this huge market in memorabilia. People wanted to read about *Pamela*, they wanted to talk about *Pamela* and they really wanted *Pamela* stuff. Ladies start wearing *Pamela* dresses. There's all sorts of things, like there's *Pamela* gardens, there's *Pamela* fans, where her story is painted on the fan. There's costumes and costume balls where people go as *Pamela*. I mean, it's really very funny. But it's also, in a way, a tribute that this middle-aged man has managed to create this fictional character of a very young, very innocent country virgin and make the world fall in love with her. Thanks largely to *Pamela*, the novel was now considered an essentially female form. Not everyone approved.

At the end of the 18th century, the author of the first great feminist statement in English, Mary Wollstonecraft, took women to task for their novel-reading obsession. She launches a really quite savage attack on women's habits for sort of sitting around in tight bodices, petting dogs and reading sentimental novels. You could almost level a charge of misogyny against her. The attack is pretty brutal. Ironically, Mary Wollstonecraft had written sensationalist, bodice-ripping novels herself – though this was in an unsuccessful attempt to get her philosophical ideas across to a wider public.

A novel did eventually succeed in this aim, one written by her daughter. This Mary was born in. At the age of sixteen, she eloped with the poet Shelley, who was married. Shunned by polite society, they lived hand to mouth. In May 1816, when Mary was eighteen, the couple were staying near Lake Geneva, close to a villa rented by their friend, the poet Lord Byron. Incessant rain confined them to the house. Sitting around the fire, Byron suggested a competition – who could write the best ghost story? She got quite stressed about this. You know, morning after morning, she comes down – "Still no ghost story, still no ghost story," you know, and she was getting quite anxious about it. And then she had this terrible dream about somebody who has assembled a sort of creature out of old body parts and they've managed to bring it to life. And in the dream, the newly-born figure sort of rears up and the creator kind of recoils in horror. And she wakes in a complete terror from this dream and comes downstairs and thinks, "Right, I've got it. "I've got the ghost story." It became the best-known horror story ever – thanks, but only in part, to one of Hollywood's greatest hits.

The scientist Dr Victor Frankenstein creates a humanoid which, though eight feet tall, he hopes will be attractive. It isn't. It's alive! It's alive, it's alive! It's alive! Frankenstein flees the laboratory. When he returns, the creature has gone. Highly intelligent, the monster – in revenge for being spurned by his creator – kills Victor's brother and frames their servant, who is hanged for the crime. And what is extraordinary is, is that the book and the film have almost nothing in common. I mean, I was so surprised to enjoy the book so much. It is so powerful, so brilliantly written, so original. Some people say it's the first work of science fiction ever created. And the writer, Mary Shelley, eighteen years old when she came up with it. I find that almost impossible to believe.

> Do not forget that you created me. If you are God...I ought to be your Adam. But I'm rather your fallen angel who you cast out, your Satan. Everywhere, I see goodness from which I alone am excluded. I was benevolent and kind! Misery made me a fiend. Make me happy. And I shall again be virtuous.

Mary Shelley's own life had been touched by tragedy. When she was seventeen, her daughter was born prematurely and died at the age of twelve days. Her own mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, died eleven days after Mary was born. What a burden to bear – to know that your birth had ended your mother's life. And I think that the trauma of destroying your creator is very much part of the Frankenstein myth. The fear of giving birth... This is a woman's book, a young woman's book, who actually was a mother, unlike many of the Victorian female writers. The fear of giving birth to something that isn't viable, that's going to be lonely and sad, that will have a terrible fate, and you are bound up with this terrible fate, it is about woman's destiny. I'm all alone in the world. No man will associate with me. No woman. But a woman as deformed and horrible as myself would not deny herself to me. She must be of the same species and have the same defects. This being, you must create. And the book is so articulate. You know, his plea for a mate is so heartfelt and so devastating. It's an infinitely more subtle and strange book – and I speak as a huge fan of at least thirty *Frankenstein* films – than it ever is a film.

Written at the height of the Romantic movement, *Frankenstein* is a philosophical work that questions the earlier propositions of the Enlightenment, that reason and science are forces for human good – touching on the themes of Mary Wollstonecraft's earlier work. Mary Shelley never knew her mother because she had died approximately ten days after giving birth to her. But she certainly knew her mother's work. She'd read *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* while she was writing *Frankenstein*. And in many ways, the monster can be seen as a sort of embodiment of that text, as a being who lacks human rights. I mean, she's amazing because she's writing about responsibility. She's writing about our responsibility for the things that we create and the things around us. And once you've read this book, you see echoes of it everywhere – not just *Frankenstein* movies, but, you know, young Blade Runner, when he meets his maker. It just resonates throughout the culture, particularly now, when we are creating machines that will be cleverer than we are. And what is our moral responsibility to that?

> All men hate the wretched. How then must I be hated, for I am miserable beyond all living things? Even you, my creator, spurned me. Yet we are bound together by ties that can only be dissolved by the annihilation of one of us. You want to kill me? How dare you sport with life? Am I the only criminal when all humankind sinned against me? Do your duty towards me and I will do the same to you and the rest of mankind. If you agree to my conditions, I will leave you all in peace. But if you refuse me, I will feed Death's ravenous appetite until it is satiated with the blood and flesh of your remaining friends.

Frankenstein was first published in in a print run of just copies, which are now collectors' items. So this is the first edition of *Frankenstein*, and this is how it was originally issued. It's in three volumes, as so many novels in the 19th century were, and we're asking £275000, for this set, this copy. It caused a small sensation on publication, in that everybody who was in the literary world wanted to know who'd written it. People assumed that it was a man. Some people wondered whether it was Walter Scott. Walter Scott wondered whether it was Percy Shelley. He came closest. But it was Mary Shelley, and her name doesn't appear anywhere on the title page. *Frankenstein* was strongly influenced by the immensely popular Gothic novels which had begun years before. They were written by both sexes, but they particularly chimed with women and were thus dismissed as frivolous. But perhaps women simply read more into them. In a Gothic novel, the women in it are always controlled and murdered and extorted and locked up and all of that stuff. It's exaggerated and far-fetched and sensationalised, but it actually connects with something real about women's fears. These novels were also expressing some of the dilemmas of women. The tropes of imprisonment, etc, could represent the restricted lives women had in the domestic space, whether it was in their father's home or their husband's home. That was a time when the novel was being looked down upon. It was regarded as a rather disreputable form, probably because there were so many women novelists and also so many women readers.

The frisson and unrealistic expectations of Gothic horror were parodied in the first novel written by one of the greatest writers ever, Jane Austen, the supreme chronicler of women's real lives. I think we can see Jane Austen as taking the novel into new territory. The novel of many of her contemporaries was still dealing with sensational events, improbable adventures. And what she decides to do with the novel is to look at the ordinary, probable events that happen in the real lives of the men and women around her. So she's moving the novel inwards. Virginia Woolf, who is one of the great disciples, I think, of Jane Austen said that what every woman needs in order to write is money and a room of her own. I think, in fact, Jane Austen did very well by not having a room of her own. Because she was sitting in the drawing room, she was always observing, she was listening in, and I think it's those encroachments – infuriating though they must have been – that actually give her style its naturalness and its accessibility. That desire to make great art about simple feminine experience, I think, is very important. And she is a great artist. I mean, one of the reasons why she's read for so long is not just that she talks about young women – and that nobody'd talked about them before – but that she does it in such a way and with such skill that I think it gives such depth to experience that makes it possible, really, to keep coming back and finding something new.

Jane Austen published four novels in her lifetime, all landmarks. Her first, written when she was 23, *Northanger Abbey*, was published after her death in 1817. Here, the clichés of the Gothic novel are playfully unravelled for a purpose. One of the things that Austen does in *Northanger Abbey* is that she dramatises how women's consciousness is partly formed by reading novels, that one of the chief activities of the heroine – Catherine Morland – who knows very little of life, she imagines other possibilities for herself through reading novels. So the novel itself can be a way of shaping female consciousness. No-one who had ever seen Catherine Morland as a child would have supposed her a literary heroine. Everything was against her. Her father was neither neglected nor poor. He was not in the least addicted to locking up his daughters. Her mother, instead of dying bringing Catherine into the world, as anybody might expect, lived to have six children more, to see them grow up around her and enjoy excellent health herself. The opening of *Northanger Abbey* is a bunch of negatives. Catherine Morland isn't beautiful, Catherine Morland really plays the piano very badly and the day that the music master left was the best day of her life. Real girls aren't like the heroines in novels. Jane Austen is saying, "This is what they're like." Catherine had neither a bad heart nor a bad temper. By, she began to curl her hair and long for balls. More promising.

But it was from 15 to 17 that things really started to mend. Catherine was in training to become a heroine. She read all such novels that heroines must read in order to supply their memories with quotations which are so serviceable in their eventful lives. Her deficiency was she had reached the age of 17 without having seen one amiable youth who inspired real passion. This was strange indeed. Then, fortune became more favourable for our heroine. She was introduced to a very gentlemanly young man as a dance partner. His name was Tilney. If not quite handsome, he was very near it. This looks like a little story about a courtship in Bath, in the season. Actually, it's about people growing into themselves, people understanding the limits of their own power, people growing up, literally growing up and becoming adults. So when people talk about, you know, Jane Austen being... It's just about little social mores and things... It's everything.

When someone delivers an incivility in a Jane Austen novel, the whole moral universe rocks. I consider a country dance as an emblem of marriage. They are such very different things. But you think they cannot be compared together? To be sure, not. People that marry can never part. People that dance only stand opposite each other in a long room for half an hour. Taken in that light, certainly the resemblance is not striking. But you will allow that, in both cases, the man has the advantage of choice, the woman only the power of refusal. Both are engagements for the advantage of each partner, and it's the duty of each to keep their imaginations from wandering to the perfections of their neighbours. You will allow this? To be sure, as you stated, it all sounds very well, but I cannot think the same duties apply. Our unlikely heroine, she actually marries the first man that she ever dances with, and she marries him within a year. So, you know, it's quite good going. They marry, Catherine has perfect happiness. And that is Austen poking fun, I'm sure, because it's a formulaic phrase – and Austen, of any writer, knows that marriage doesn't end in perfect happiness.

Jane Austen published anonymously. Later women writers employed male pseudonyms or gender-neutral initials. I think what this magnificent pile of books really shows is just how many books by women over the

last years of the novel's existence have been published either under pseudonyms, particular kind of false names, or really anonymously. Jane Austen's novels were published just as being "By A Lady". I think, typically, women would write under pseudonyms because of not wanting their kind of private, individual life to be associated with this novel that's out there in the world. Someone like, say, Charlotte Brontë and the other Bronte sisters in the 1840s, you know, really didn't want their identities as vicar's daughters – living in, you know, Haworth Parsonage in Yorkshire – to be associated with these often quite kind of racy novels.

One of the most important novelists of the 19th century was Mary Ann Evans – better known as George Eliot. Her great novel, *Middlemarch*, was published in 1871. I think Middlemarch is such a well-loved novel and a novel that is recognised as great because it does so well so many of the things which the novel as a form can do and which no other form of literature can do. So it's huge, it takes as its remit a place, a town, and it looks at the life of that town in a very panoptical way. Virginia Woolf called *Middlemarch*, famously, "The only novel in English written for grown-ups." And I think one of the wonderful things about *Middlemarch* is the way that it weaves together the stories of multiple different people and groups in this small, fictional, boring Midlands town of Middlemarch. And the wonderful thing about George Eliot's writing style is that she really gets inside everybody's head. What it demands of us, implicitly, is that we be wise to other people, that we not misread other people. So the narrator – because, as a classic realist narrator external to the novel is able to get into all of these hearts – is also able to show us how much these characters misunderstand each other, how much they don't understand of the suffering of the others, or why they are behaving as they do.

An editor, critic and translator, Mary Ann Evans chose a male pseudonym, partly because she wanted to distance her novels from what she regarded as frivolous women's fiction. One rather troublesome article she wrote is literally entitled *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists*, and it's basically a scathing attack on all sorts of novels that were being written at that time by other women. I suppose, really, she felt like they were sort of pulling down the quality of the novel as a form. Unfortunately, I think that's one reason why her novels have kind of fallen from popularity in the 20th and 21st centuries – because they are often so serious in tone, although there were definitely witticisms in there as well. George Eliot's last novel was published in 1876.

Until the end of the century, though women wrote bestsellers, the more critically acclaimed novelists seemed to be men, who also had the upper hand in real life. But women were beginning to demand equal rights, especially the right to vote. Such campaigners were dismissed as girlish and immature, suffragettes. The struggle turned militant, violent and tragic. In 1913, Emily Davison threw herself under the King's horse at the Epsom Derby. Suffragettes had begun hunger strikes, which were countered by forced feeding.

This is one of the themes of *No Surrender*, a novel written by Constance Maud in 1911 – part popular fiction, part propaganda. Well, her point about suffrage literature was that it was trying to penetrate the mass readership. It was trying to win hearts and minds, promote the cause of women's suffrage, particularly to lower middle class and working-class women. So one way of doing this was to wrap the suffrage story within a kind of like a romance novel – very popular at this time – and to kind of smuggle it in to the mass readership that way. Emily Wilding Davison, the famous suffragette who threw herself under the horse at the Derby, she actually had reviewed *No Surrender* and said it was marvellous, said it breathed life into the women's movement. So this absolutely vital, perhaps one of the most famous suffragettes, she herself saw *No Surrender* as a crucial document of the women's movement. What Constance Maud does very effectively in *No Surrender* is show how ordinary women become activists, and then we follow them to prison. Mary O'Neil was sentenced with other women. Jane Austen's sensitive English maidens, who went into fits of hysterics at the sight of a mouse, were transformed by rapid evolution and adjustment to a new environment, votes for women. Behind prison bars, these suffragettes protested to be treated as political offenders like the Irish. For this, they were permitted no exercise. With no fresh air, some women vowed to make their own. The cry of "No surrender!" rang out. And with shoes in hand, they smashed the windows of their cell. The air came in, but this meant the punishment cell. Mary O'Neil knew there was only one protest left after that. Constance herself was a suffragette, so the book that we have in our hands is a real historical account, with fictional characters, of what the suffragettes went through in order to win the vote for us women, including, you know, very horrifying torture.

> Mary lay on a plank only a few inches off the ground, fastened by chains to the wall. The big key turned and the warders entered. Mary had not touched her food again. It was the fifth day. "I shall not take it of my own will," Mary said. "You cannot force that. "But I am quite ready to tell you the reason. "I want you to understand."

You know, when somebody says "force-feeding", I knew that suffragettes had sometimes been subject to it, but I just assumed they held open their mouths and made them eat some porridge with a spoon. But this is far more physical.

> The doctors were summoned. Mary was placed on a chair, head thrown back, while four attendants each seized her limbs, so her body took form of a cross. One doctor pushed a rubber tube up the delicate nose of his victim, but it refused to pass. Mary's teeth were clenched in nervous contraction. He forced open her mouth and transferred the tube down her throat, causing a sensation of suffocation. The other doctor began to pour the contents of a jug down it, a quart of fluid. Mary felt like an animal in a trap – a terrible, living, thinking trap. She'd been a nurse, and she knew what a quart all at one would mean to a woman who has starved for five days. Just then, a voice called, "Doctor, you are wanted." "Who is there?", he answered hoarsely. It was the prison governor. The doctor put the jug down and hurried to the door.

No Surrender is a political novel. It is meant to create political unity. It is meant to get votes for women. So the idea that a novel could be, actually, just as effective in a way of getting women's votes as the placards, as the violent demonstrations, that's really radical, saying the novel will sway hearts and minds and will sway people towards thinking that women should have the vote. Time allows history, the past, to fade, but rights have to be won. And I think to remind all teenagers before they get to that point where they vote for the first time, to remind them of, you know, what's led up to that great sort of moment for them is something really worth doing.

Only in 1928 did women in the UK get to vote on the same terms as men. That same year, one of the most remarkable novels in English was published. *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf ends in the 1920s but begins in the time of Elizabeth I. Orlando becomes Ambassador to Constantinople.

> Some way into his tour of duty, he falls into a mysteriously deep sleep. On the seventh day of his trance, a bloody insurrection swept the city. Foreigners were put to the sword and rioters broke into Orlando's room. But seeing him to all appearances dead, left him untouched. Now, might we spare the reader and say that Orlando died and was buried? But alas, truth, candour, honesty, the gods that watch over the biographer cry, "No." Putting their silver trumpets to their lips, they demanded in one blast, truth. At which moment, Orlando awoke. He stretched and he rose up in complete nakedness. And we have no choice but to confess that he was a woman. No human being since the world began ever looked so ravishing. He combined in one form the strength of man with the grace of woman. Orlando looked himself up and down in the mirror without showing any signs of discomposure.

But the transgender element seems now to me to be remarkably prophetic, in that we have so much interest in transgender and undecided gender, fluid gender. And Virginia Woolf was there way before the mainstream of novelists. It's a very fluid world, the world she depicts in *Orlando*. Lots of things are possible. We're not restrained by the limits of reason, logic, what society tells us is normal. That's what the novel whispers into our ears. It's possible to dream bigger, wider, think bigger and to dare. He had become a woman. There's no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. His memory, or for convention's sake, we should say her memory went back through all the events of her past life without encountering any obstacles. Certain things had become a little dimmed, but that was all. It's got wit and verve and energy, and Orlando speeds through all these different time periods in a way that kind of makes your head dizzy, and it's enchanting. It's serious in what it has to say and what it wants to explore. But it's always serious without being solemn.

It was in the dress of a young English woman of rank that Orlando returned to England. When she sat on the deck, she could feel the coils of her skirts about her legs and the captain's attention on her, which made her realise at the start the penalties and privileges of her new position. When I set foot on English soil, she thought to herself, I shall no longer be able to crack a man over the head, or ram through him with my sword, or ride a charger down Whitehall. All I'll be able to do is pour out tea and ask if the Lords like it. Orlando was partly inspired by the family history and home of Virginia Woolf's fellow Bloomsbury group member, Vita Sackville-West. Her ancestors had been Elizabethan courtiers, but the main inspiration was personal. Virginia and Vita had been lovers for several years before Orlando was written. The book is dedicated to her. I think she wrote this book because she was very struck by the limitations of her own gender and her own prescribed sexuality in the world. She was married, but she was having a love affair with a woman. And I think maybe Vita Sackville-West affected her very, very deeply. And I think it might have been a love letter to Vita. She's trying to say, essentially, you're beautiful in every version of you. The masculine nature of you and the feminine nature of you. Nobody is quite what they seem. Everybody's gender is in play. The whole thing is fluid in a way which seems impossibly modern, almost years, I guess, after it was written. All of Orlando's loves had been women, and now, though she was a woman herself, it was still women that she loved. If the consciousness of being in the same sex had any effect at all, it was to deepen those feelings she'd had as a man. And with this thought, the obscurity which divides the sexes was removed. It reminds us that, as human beings, each and every one of us, whether we're men or women from the east, from the west, doesn't matter, each and every one of us contains multitudes inside. And that's what the human being is.

In 1929, a year after *Orlando*, Virginia Woolf published *A Room of One's Own*. This famous essay, a vindication of the rights of women writers, argued that all authors needed professional conditions to work in. The fact that these had been denied to women in the past explains why relatively few female authors had been able to publish. Woolf's work is absolutely informed by a sense of what she is having to fight by virtue of being a woman, before she can even sit down at her desk that day, and she never really lets you forget that. And it's incredibly important for women artists who have followed her. However, high or low art might have been, having somebody have sat down and said, you know, I need a room of my own. I need the space to work. I need space in my mind. I need space in the world. It should be automatic, but it isn't. Until she said it, people hadn't very much said it.

As the feminist movement grew in strength in the 1960s and 70's, interest was focused not just on new women's writing, but also on that of the past which had been dismissed, or forgotten, or both. A group of female-run publishing houses, most notably Virago, now decided to excavate the literary past and breathe new life into some of these lost women's classics.

There's the bit. Here is the vital bit, which is the actual title of the book. I just became conscious that women's lives were the pits and something had to be done about it, and that there must be a better way of living. And I thought what I want to do is publish books that illuminate and celebrate women's lives. And that's what I want it to be. Virago published a list of eleven books, and there was a press conference and they were launching these eleven books. And one journalist at the back sort of put his hand up and said, "And where are you going to find your next eleven books?" And they obviously thought that was hilarious, because there was this idea that there were only eleven sort of reasonably good women's books that needed to be kind of published by this kind of specialist feminist imprint. And then everybody could just go back to proper literature, which is, you know, the way things were done. Christina Stead. Angela Carter loved Christina Stead. There was a whole culture of women's novels that I read, my mother read, my friends read, but they weren't available in book shops or on publishing lists. The writers were ones like Rosamond Lehmann, Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, and Stevie. Margaret Atwood and Stevie Smith were right at the beginning. Antonia White. That's a pretty good cover still, isn't it? Even though it's how many years old now? '98, 2008, 2018. It's forty years old. Can you believe it? Feminism was just like sin against the Holy Ghost, you know? We got terrible press coverage, but the people loved it. The beauty of an imprint like Virago is it looks for books that once had their moment or maybe even didn't have their moment. They were neglected. They were overlooked. They briefly flared and then they disappeared. And they can bring new eyes to them, bring new attention upon them.

Among the many disregarded novels reprinted thanks to this renewed interest was Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, first published in 1937. Zora Neale Hurston was born in 1891. All four of her grandparents had been slaves. She studied as a postgraduate at Columbia University in New York and became a star of the African-American Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and '30s. She'd grown up in the oldest self-governing black township in the USA, Eatonville in Florida. It's one of the main settings for *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Zora Neale Hurston was an anthropologist, a novelist and an ethnographer. She is very interested in writing about everyday people. She was so far ahead of her time that she was one of the first to think about taking the anthropological ideas and analysis and applying them to her own community and her own culture. It is not a book about slavery, and it's not a book about the oppressive white world. It is fully and totally this self-sufficient black town. In addition to that, she places a black woman at the centre of her narrative. It's an absolutely extraordinary novel, and what happened to it is almost as extraordinary, because Zora Neale Hurston eventually fell into neglect and she died in obscurity in Florida. And by that point in the 1960s, her novel had been forgotten.

The writer Alice Walker was instrumental in resurrecting Zora Neale Hurston's literary reputation. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was reprinted in 1978. It's now seen as a classic of African-American women's writing. The same status has been accorded to Alice Walker's own novel, *The Color Purple*. Like *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, it's set within a rural African American community. In this case, in Georgia in the first decades of the 20th century. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, which was published in 1982, was the first novel by an African American woman to win the Pulitzer Prize. It very much follows in a similar kind of pattern to the one that Zora Neale Hurston set out in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, but in much more dramatic and extreme terms.

The Color Purple is told through the eyes of Celie. When we meet her, she's fourteen and she is abused by her stepfather. She's forced into a marriage, and her husband also abuses her. She gives birth to children. Her children are taken away. We enter the world of the text through letters that Celie is writing to God, because she has no-one else to talk to.

> Dear God, he never have a kind word to say to me. Just say, "You're going to do what your mammy wouldn't." When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying, "You better shut up and get used to it." But I don't never get used to.

The female black voice of the 1920s, '30s. That's what Alice Walker produced in *The Color Purple*. I've read many times about the horrors of slavery. It's the first time I've really been subjected to the horrors of just living in your community if you're female.

> Dear, God. He took my other little baby, a boy this time. But I don't think he kilt it. I think he sold it to a man an his wife over Monticello. I got breasts full of milk running down myself. He say, "Why don't you look decent? Put on something." But what am I supposed to put on? I don't have nothing.

But what happens over the course of the novel is that gradually Celie finds her voice, gradually Celie finds empowerment, and she finds empowerment through the other African American women around her, in her family and her extended family and through friendship, and eventually through a sexual relationship with another woman, who actually opens up to her possibilities of tenderness, opens up alternatives to a heterosexual life that, for Celie, has been nothing but abusive. The impact *The Color Purple* had on me is discovering female black sexuality and desire. And for me, that was quite hidden in the novels I had read up to that point, especially set in that period. That part of the novel I found fascinating. You know, you can imagine how such a story might be received even today. In 1982, it was highly controversial indeed. So it was both prize-winning and it was instantly subject to censorship and to all kinds of controversies where people tried to have it banned. And it continues to be a novel that certain communities try to have banned. In *The Color Purple*, women are abused by individual men.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, they are abused by order of the state. Published in Canada in 1985, Margaret Atwood's novel is set in a totalitarian theocracy ruled by men. We're in a dystopian version of America known

as Gilead. There is a huge national crisis regarding fertility. Pollution and chemical spills have caused the vast majority of the population to become infertile. Women who are fertile are farmed out to rich and wealthy families, where they are forced into a breeding programme to have the offspring of the most rich and powerful people in America. The story is told through the eyes of an everywoman, Offred.

> Time to take stock. I must forget about my old name and all ways back. My name is Offred now, and here is where I live. This is the heart of Gilead, where the war doesn't intrude except on TV. I'm years old. Stand five seven without shoes. I have viable ovaries. I have one more chance. We are handmaids. We serve the commanders. We're two-legged wombs, that's all. Sacred vessels. There's no such thing as a sterile man any more, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren. That's the law. Give me children, or else I die.

Offred, who's the central character, she has to become a sex slave. Really, a baby slave. She's put into a house to have a baby for that family. And the novel really tracks the gradual erosion of her rights. And then she becomes more and more imprisoned, and finally ends up even losing her name. So Offred means she is of Fred. One of the things I attracted me to it was that it was about religious fundamentalism running the show in the US, and what I do recall is I was excited by the idea of someone depicting that. And I was surprised then that it was about, so much of it was about the role of women and of motherhood. Because I was so used to any depiction of a dystopia was basically men fighting each other. Yeah, that's right. Yeah. Men in loin clothes fighting each other. I do like that bit of it. The novel charts the gradual erosion of women's rights, starting with the right to work. It was after the catastrophe when they shot the president and the army declared a state of emergency.

> "Keep calm", they said on TV, "Everything is under control." Then one day at work, the director came in. He looked terrible. He laid all us women off on the spot. "You can't just do that", the woman next to me said. "It isn't me", he said, "They're outside." "If you don't go, they'll come in themselves." I could see two men in uniforms with guns. "Just leave the machines", he said, as we were filing out. As if we could have taken them.

The thing for me in this book that is so chilling is that when she wrote it, she decided she was not going to put anything in it that hadn't happened already, or that the seeds of which had not already been planted. And when you know that, and when you read it, it's just a very frightening book.

> Women can't hold property any more. It's all over TV, a new law. They'll transfer your account number to your husband or male next of kin, that's what they said. We're up against the wall. When Luke came home, I was sitting at the kitchen table. "We'll get through this", he said, "it's only a job." But something shifted so that when he put his arms around me, I thought, "He doesn't mind this. He doesn't mind this at all."

By the 1990s, and not for the first time in the history of the novel, its readership was increasingly polarised on gender lines. More women were reading novels than were men. Cue the familiar backlash. What we see are these books about young women finding their way, trying to find an identity, find true romance, and they are dismissed and denigrated as chick lit. And the word chick lit implies throwaway, irrelevant, frivolous. It's going back to those old times in the 18th century, when the novel was lesser because women liked it.

The biggest hit of so-called chick lit was Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*, published as a novel in 1996. A homage to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, it riffs on the same subjects – love, friendship, family – that have always drawn women to the novel form. It's such a particular book, *Bridget Jones*. It's great. And it did something that was, I guess, ground-breaking at the time, which was just to present the female experience at all in that way in a book. It had the diary element, it had the honesty. Bridget Jones was compared to Jane Austen. Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* was the first, a huge phenomenon. This flawed heroine, this wonderful heroine who tots up how much she eats, what she drinks, quite a lot, all her cigarettes. And really she lets us into her actual inner world. The closely observed, finely rendered, female-oriented literary terrain that Jane Austen mapped out is still central to the women's novel.

We get a fresh take on it in a book published in 2019. One of relatively few novels written about a black British woman by a black British woman. Candice Carty-Williams's *Queenie*. Queenie is a twenty-five-year-old black woman living in South London. And we basically come to her at the beginning of what is a quarter life crisis, and this is triggered by a nasty break-up that's kind of confusing to her, but not to everyone else who kind of understands what's going on.

It's funny, but it's pretty bleak. I've been to the therapist. Janet she's called. It's a room in her home where she does it. We've been through my past. And today she says your upbringing wasn't one you should have had, Queenie. You should have had love and care, and I'm sorry you didn't.

I worked in the publishing industry, and I realised really quickly that I was not represented at all. When you don't see yourself, you begin to feel invisible. And I think we are in a time at the moment where young people, young black people, their stories and their narratives are being told by people who are not them. And that is a real problem. It's not your fault, I told her. These things happen a lot in my culture. Us black girls were always meant to know our place. Janet asked why I trapped myself in that view. How could I not be trapped in it? The depictions of black women are usually sassy, strong, loud, angry, sexy, and I really wanted to make someone who wasn't those things. A lot of the time, the character Queenie is making other people feel comfortable with their own viewpoints. She's often saying, "Oh, you just embarrassed yourself a bit, by being a little bit racist and a little bit sexist towards me." And now we're in this awkward moment. So how can I just chill the whole thing out, no matter how ridiculous or disgusting their behaviour? I don't really know many women who are together. I think that's a realistic thing. And I really wanted to show that. And I think people like how messy she is, and how fragile she is, and how vulnerable she is. My white friends get chatted up by guys who say, "I'd love to take you out for dinner." They come over to me and tell me that they want to fuck me over the sofa. That's me – fuck option, not love option. But after years of being told I was nothing, years of being ignored, I'll take any attention I can get. That's what I told Janet. You're saying to Queenie, often, "Don't go and do this." "Don't get involved in another terrible sexual encounter "by your own admission, that you feel is not something you want right now." Whenever that happens, instead of judging her for it or how she got herself into that situation, you're feeling for her.

She tried to calm me down. "Remember your breathing", she said. "Dammit, Janet", I said. And she looked at me. "Is that in reference to the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*?" Something her daughter used to say, apparently. "I didn't know you had a daughter", I said. "I'm sorry, was this her room?" "Did she pass away?" "She works away in Hong Kong. "You've got to stop thinking the worst, Queenie." Although I felt exhausted, I felt like a weight had been lifted. I didn't feel brighter, just lighter.

From its earliest beginnings, the novel has portrayed women in all our infinite variety. Women writers and women readers have always underpinned the novel's success, and still do. Next time, we look at the British Empire as a mainstream literary theme from Robinson Crusoe right up to today. Three centuries that transform the novel, eventually giving voice to the empire's former subjects, and enriching the literature of half the world.