WOMEN AND THE JOY OF BOOKS: dangers, desires and developments

IWD generally focuses on the working conditions and achievements of women. And the garment workers of New York helped to start this tradition when, on March 8th 1905, they took to the streets to protest against their appalling working conditions.

And - their miserable lives.

For even then, those exhausted women insisted that they wanted - bread AND they wanted roses!

They wanted more money, and shorter hours, of course -- but they also wanted a more meaningful and enjoyable existence. And today I want to break with the tradition that usually concentrates on the bread – and talk instead about the roses.

In this case the roses are women’s books, and the extraordinary role they have played in explaining and enhancing women’s lives.

Books by women and about women have for centuries shaped women’s behaviour - and been their major source of knowledge about the world. This is why women today have a special relationship with books – particularly with those written by women.

Women are the ones who buy the books, and who are the audience at literary festivals; women are the ones who form the book clubs –

And women are the ones who positively swear - ‘This book changed my life’ (Not a claim – I might add -- we are accustomed to hear from many men!)

But books today don’t serve quite the same purpose in women’s lives as they did in past centuries. What we have to keep in mind is that it is little more than one hundred years since education was opened up to women: before that, women’s knowledge was pretty much confined to any books they could get hold of – and even getting them wasn’t easy.

Historically, women were not encouraged to read books: indeed quite the reverse. Until the 19th century it was considered dangerous to teach women to read; many public figures argued that once women learned from books how others lived, they would become discontented: they would get ideas – and who knows where it would all end!

(Like the USA – where it was illegal to teach the slaves to read and write – for the very same reasons.)

Another threat to patriarchs who wanted women’s complete attention, was that when women were reading – they were ‘unavailable’: they were not being dutiful housewives and mothers. They were not making men feel better.

And books were not good for women’s health either.
Florence Nightingale for example, until she was too old for marriage, was obliged to lead a life of ‘enforced idleness’.

She was not allowed to read for herself. (She could have some one read selected material to her, on occasion.) And while she described this awful existence as ‘death by intellectual starvation’ – novel reading was regarded as an even more pernicious malady by some members of the medical establishment.

In the late 19th century, the health enthusiast Dr Kellogg declared that novel reading was the greatest cause of uterine disease among young women.

And he was probably right. For at that time it was believed that the uterus was the source of desires and discontent in women, and there was no doubt that the evidence of women’s dis-ease was everywhere.

Women who read books – became restless and critical; they made demands, asked awkward questions: they grew emotional and were soon unmanageable. (I won’t go into the horrendous measures that were sometimes taken to cure women of such unladylike symptoms.)

Despite the many difficulties, women’s passion for books persisted. The yearning to get beyond the here-and-now of their own lives did not diminish. Rather, they taught themselves to read – often under the most remarkable circumstances – (Mary Wollstonecraft – ‘I taught myself to read - at the age of four - from the dictionary’).

They went to all sorts of lengths to get books, and devised all sorts of ruses to get ‘time out’ for the dangerous act of reading them - .

Women flocked to lending libraries to borrow the latest Bronte novel that described the numbing conditions under which governesses worked: they fought over the political ‘triple deckers’ of Mrs Gaskell who confronted them with the graphic detail of the horrors of women’s lives in the textile mills of northern England.

And they took themselves off quietly to reflect on Jane Austen’s savage ironies on women’s fate of having to obtain a living - by obtaining a man.

These books became the basis of their education – and for some - their emancipation.

Women queued on the docks of New York waiting for the first copies of George Elliot’s novels that explored women’s identity - in a man’s world. To avoid detection they had novel pockets sewn into their voluminous skirts so that they could quickly hide their books and appear to be domestically occupied - if ever they were ‘caught’ in the act of ‘reading rebellion’.

For women in the Anglo world who had access to books and were fortunate enough to be able to read – books were the roses.

Not that I knew any of this history when I enrolled to do English at Sydney University – last century!!

I must admit that at the outset I was shocked to find that there was only one woman writer on my course – Jane Austen. I did go so far as to ask (as some others have done recently) – why only one woman?

And I was informed in no uncertain terms that Jane Austen was the only woman writer ‘worth studying’. Not that she occupied the same status as the many, many men who commanded our attention. She was there as a
contrast; to make it clear that women wrote about the peripheral world of women -- and that it wasn’t the real thing.

At that stage of my life I was in no position to query this literary truth: and what I learned from my education then was that all the great writers had been men.

And that if women were - ever - to be great writers – it would be a at some distant time in the future. ….. Perhaps.

Needless to say this was not a strong position from which to argue that women’s achievements were equal to those of men.

Let me now fast forward to London in the early 1970s, when women’s liberation was in the air, and I made my first visit to the London Library.

I had never seen so many OLD books and as I checked out all those shelves – I actually wondered - how many of them are written by women? And I asked the Librarian.

Again, it was a bit of a shock to find (as I had much more recently when I asked about how many homeless women?) – that there were no lists based on gender.

Think of this. In the 1970s, in England, there was no list – anywhere- of women writers. Countless lists, histories, books, courses, criticisms, reviews etc – on literary men: no list on writing women.

Well, I decided. I can do something about this! Though I had no idea what I was taking on. I didn’t think for a moment that I would be working on the list for the next few years.

Going through the shelves of the London Library was the dirtiest job I have ever done – but in the end, it was one of the most satisfying and rewarding.

For 6 months I turned up every day in old clothes, (relatively speaking), with dusters and a notebook (pre-computer!), and I took down the title and author of every book on the fiction shelves to see if it had been written by a woman.

And there were complications. Because until very recently, for women to go public, to have a ‘reputation’ whether as a woman or a writer, was such a ‘no-no’, that hardly any women wrote under their own names: (Currer Bell, Ellis Bell and Acton Bell: George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) to name but a few).

And ‘ANONYMOUS’ was certainly a woman, the most prolific author in the English language. (Presenting themselves as anonymous was not the preference of many men….)

The whole process of identifying women was made even more difficult by what I see as a patriarchal plot – that has women changing their names on marriage. This might sound like nit picking, but all these conventions contributed mightily to women authors’ invisibility and disappearance.

One thing I did find interesting and deliciously gratifying was that some of the so-called women writers actually turned out to be males. I then discovered that by the end of the 19th women were seen to dominate the writing scene to such an extent - that some male writers thought that they would have a better chance of publication -- it they used women’s names!
But what I would like to convey to you now is the sheer joy of my discovery of those women writers - and their books.

First of all – I found hundreds of women writers who had been published, and many were more successful and sold more books than most of the ‘great men’ with whom we are all familiar.

And I started to tell as many women as I could about this literary heritage.

My position on women writers changed dramatically. It simply wasn’t true that women hadn’t written – or that they hadn’t written amazing and marvellous books that explored the human condition and lifted the spirit.

It had been a great con trick to have me accept that we had to wait for the good women writers to appear. The evidence of women’s achievements was everywhere: as was the proof that women’s books had been written out of literary history by the exclusively male scholars and critics.

The first book that I wrote based on ‘the list’ was *Mothers of the Novel: 100 good women writers before Jane Austen*.

And the list of the women and their works appeared on page 119 – 136 – so that women could photocopy it and wave it about as proof that there had always been women writers – they just weren’t part of the university curriculum.

But for me there was much more involved than a list. It was the books themselves that got me in. These were the real joy – and the real education.

Can you imagine my amazement when I found for example, the writings of Aphra Behn: (1640 – 1680)

Aphra Behn was born in 1640 and the life she led would have been extraordinary in any age; she undertook the long and dangerous voyage to the West Indies, became involved in a slave rebellion there, and visited a tribe of Indians who had never before seen Europeans.

She was a spy for Charles II against the Dutch. She was a debtor imprisoned for expenses incurred in the services of the King.

She was a feminist who vociferously defended the right of women to an education, and the right to marry whom they pleased or not at all. …. She was a political activist and an early abolitionist whose novel *Oroonoko* contained the first literary portrayal of the horrors of slavery.

Finally, she was a writer who not only insisted on being heard but successfully forced the men who dominated the jealous literary world of restoration England to recognise her as an equal. In a London that boasted of only two theatres she had 17 plays produced in 17 years - she wrote 13 novels - 30 years before Daniel Defoe wrote the ‘first’ novel – and she published several collections of poems and translations.

No man ever came close to her achievements.

I am not making this up.

And this was just the start. From this wonderfully rich tradition I can mention only a few of the women’s books that changed the lives of women in their own day – but which our generations have not had the chance to read. And almost without exception they are about the sexual double standard – and women’s need for liberation. Sometimes stated satirically (Jane Austen) and often rebelliously.
Eliza Haywood (1693-1756)

I have here a list of her publications – all 94 of them! (p108) But I only have time to talk about 1 of them

*The History of Betsy Thoughtless* 1751

How can I give you some idea of the state I was in when I discovered this gold mine of women’s creativity and analysis. When I sat there on the floor reading the 600 pages of Betsy Thoughtless, I roared with laughter, and I cried, as I realised how little women’s experiences had changed over the last 250 years.

Betsy was the first hugely popular modern heroine (as distinct from high born ladies wandering through pastoral scenes): and she was so very thoughtless that she didn’t even manage to recognise Mr Truelove when he first appeared.

So she thoughtlessly marries the wrong man (the stuff of today’s tabloids!) and then agonises over whether she is justified in getting a divorce – on the grounds that her husband is boring.

She goes ahead!

Reading this I thought - OH NO! there will be retribution.

She’ll get hit by a bus.

But no – she goes on to be happy ever after – to be rewarded, completely undermining the ‘wisdom’ of the day – that women who behaved badly would end badly.

And in this witty novel, the issues from abortion to the sexual double standard appear on almost every page. There is a moving analysis of how women can be limited by marriage – and what they might do about it ……. It is a warning – buyer beware!

Where do I start and where do I stop?

- More than 300 years,
- hundreds of women,
- thousands of books?

All part of women’s heritage – but a legacy that is still virtually unknown to most ‘educated’ women today.

What about Fanny Burney (1752-1840) whose step-mother made her burn her scribblings as her writing behaviour was so unseemly. Not only did she write (among others) *Evelina*, one of the best novels in the English language – she also wrote diaries and letters.

Her account of her mastectomy – the removal of her breast without anaesthetic – performed by surgeons in her own bedroom - is etched in my soul – and is another link between women’s past and present.

If I had a full day I couldn’t begin to map the extent of the heritage that 21st century women don’t know about. But I cannot let the opportunity pass without referring to some of the Australian women writers that I literally discovered on the shelves of the London Library and who had been international best sellers in the late 19th century.
Not a whisper of their existence or achievements in Australian education. Yet these were women who explored what it meant to be an Australian female – in the colonies; the physical and intellectual deprivations, the limitations of marriage – and the opportunities in a country redefining its conventions.

Ada Cambridge, Tasma, and Rosa Praed

Ada – (1844-1926) migrated from England as a the wife of a clergyman – who did not see her role as running a parish: she wrote reams – sometimes exploring the issues of convict ancestry in ‘polite’ society, but more often her thoughtful novels concentrated on the compulsory nature of marriage and its lack of fulfilment for women. She was – understandably - hugely popular at the time – in Australia – and London.

Tasma – (Jessie Couvreuer – 1848-97)

Arriving in Tasmania in 1854, ‘Tasma’ ‘made a good marriage’ – but then got a divorce: she too went on to a more exciting life – and another husband – in Europe! She was the Brussels correspondent for the London Times and she wrote some magnificent novels, one of which Uncle Piper of Piper’s Hill was hailed by The Spectator as one of the three best works to have come from the colonies; my personal favourite was The Penance of Portia James! Which suggested that the inequality of the sexes was just too great for women and men to be able to form a decent relationship!

Best known abroad however, was Rosa Praed: she was born in 1851 on Gold Coast) and lived in some of the most isolated and far flung places in Queensland for 25 years, when she left for London, and established herself – amazingly - as one the international best selling novelists of her day. Her mother suffered and died young and her father became a member of the first Queensland parliament – with Rosa as his hostess. I have to say that I was delighted when I read Policy and Passion, (1881) her account of political shenanigans in the young state.

Not only does she have a young woman at the centre of the drama, but the dubious character of the premier – and the issues of political corruption - are as colourfully dealt with as the restrictions on women’s lives. (Publishers always wanted her to tone down her prose.)

(Miss Jacobsen’s Chance, Lady Bridget of the Never Never)

She wrote more novels than I can count and one in particular proved spectacularly successful; it was entitled The Bond of Wedlock and its theme was whether a woman was obliged to keep her marriage vows – when her husband beat her. (The novel was adapted for the west end stage and ran for ages.)

Here I have to draw the line. I can’t even give you a genuine glimpse of the books that were so important in women’s lives in the past- and which are forgotten today. Women who would have been doctors, lawyers, events managers, scientists etc now – would have had no avenue then for their abilities outside domesticity - except to write. Or to read. This is women’s history.

And I would dearly love to big it up to date, to cover the more recent past: all those books of the 70s that have also disappeared in 30 years. And even though IWD is a celebration of women’s achievements, I am afraid I can still be overwhelmed by the sense of women’s losses.
One of the most distressing things about women’s exclusion from power over the past centuries has been that women have not been the record keepers. The history of humanity - and of literature – has been written primarily by men.

And if and when women appear, it is in relation to men; a footnote, or else a reference to the peculiar world of women – rather than the real thing. So the only authentic women’s voices we have - the only accounts of women’s wit and wisdom – come from women’s books. And as we move more into the age of the internet, all of them are at risk of permanent disappearance.

How do we find an authentic voice in this new digital world? Women may now use the internet as often – or more often – than men, but we haven’t created the comparable content – the experience of women that resonates across the ages and illuminates our lives.

Which is why on this IWD I’d like to put the sequel to women’s books on the agenda; for we can no more live without the roses than the garment workers of 1905 – yet at the moment the precious roses of women’s books -- are an endangered species.

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