

Unbox Your Words:

Unwritten Women - Filling History's Gaps

Unbox Your Words

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From: On This Day She by Jo Bell, Tania Hershman and Ailsa Holland

How To Leave Women Out of History

after Joanna Russ, author of science fiction and the brilliant How To Suppress Women's Writing (1983)

- She wasn't there.
- She was there but she didn't do anything
- She was there and she did something, but she was only the wife/ mistress, courtesan/ girlfriend/muse so she doesn't count
- She was there, and did something, but it wasn't her idea, she was just his assistant, so he should get all the credit and win the prizes
- She was there and she did it and it was her idea and no-one else helped, but it was at home so really it was a hobby/craft/ so it wasn't important
- She was there and she did it but only because she was very masculine, she insisted on wearing trousers, for goodness' sake, so she was pretty much a man anyway
- She was there and she did it but we didn't write it down in the important books these things must always be written in, so later we decided a man must have done it first
- She did it but she was hysterical so we thought it was best to put her away somewhere to calm her down and then we forgot about her and celebrated some man who did it after her
- She did it, but the business was in her husband's name so she had no idea how it all worked until the moment he died when she instantly knew how to run everything and did so efficiently and successfully for many years.
- She did it but she only did it for people who looked like/came from the same background as her unlike the important people in history who did things for themselves and for other important people they knew and are therefore more important.
- She did it but she wasn't perfect/made some bad decisions/murdered people and therefore we should forget her and remember instead the imperfect/evil and fascinating men who screwed up royally and murdered millions of people because that's frankly more impressive.
- She did it but then became a mother so that was clearly her true calling all along, not being a painter/ composer/ teacher/writer and so she can't be called those things because she can't be both and anyway that's what she would want because don't all women want to put their children first and if not what kind of a bitch was she?

What Will Happen

for Kathrine Switzer

by Helen Mort

If I run too far, too quickly, my breasts
will drop to my kneecaps and my uterus will fall out.
My light hair will grow heavy,
My hips will drag along the floor.
Don't I know the rules of gravity?
Didn't they teach me what my body was
at school? I should be stowed
away from direct sunlight, saved from rain.
Who told me it was possible
to run out of my skin,
outsprint the stewards,
on the Boston sidewalk
breathless, waiting
for the world to catch up?

From 'No Map Could Show Them", by Helen Mort (2016)



On April 19th, 1967, Kathrine Switzer ran the Boston marathon, a race only open to men. She crossed the finish line, despite being accosted a few miles in by a race official who tried to tear off her bib number. Five years later, women were officially allowed to enter.

Suffragette

by Kim Moore

And if you saw her hiding in the air ducts of Parliament
it was only to listen to the speeches.

And if she set fire to post boxes and burnt letters,
it was only certain envelopes she put pepper in.

And if she threw a rock or two, at one carriage
or another, they were, at least, wrapped in words:

rebellion against tyrants is obedience to God.
And if, being imprisoned, her and a thousand like her

went on hunger strike, at least no one died -
the Cat and Mouse Act of 1913

sent the starving women out on licence,
and brought them back when they were well again.

And if an angry guard forced a hose inside her cell
and filled it with water, at least she didn't drown.

And if she hid in a cupboard in the House of Commons
the night of the Census it was only to claim it

as her official residence. And if her friends delivered
themselves as human letters to Downing Street,
but were sent back, unopened, at least they made
the news. And, not knowing whether she chose

to die or whether in her dreams, she saw the king's horse
flying through the line, her sash around its neck,

at least we know of the bruised shins of the horse,
of the jockey, 'haunted by that woman's face.'

From The Art of Falling, Kim Moore, Seren 2015. Emily Davison was a militant suffragette: arrested nine times, seven times on hunger strike, force-fed forty-nine times. She died after being hit by the king's horse in the 1913 Derby while trying to wind a sash round its neck.

SEVEN STARTS TO THE WOMAN WHO WENT OVER THE FALLS IN A BARREL

Annie Edson Taylor, 1901

by Frankie McMillan (Clever magazine)

1

Picture the cold dark inside of the barrel. Annie feeling her way over the padded mattress to a harness hanging from the side. The barrel sways in the water. Picture her fastening herself upright into the harness, pulling the leather strap tight across her chest. Picture Annie flailing about, she can't find her lucky heart-shaped pillow. Now picture the barrel picking up speed, with the current, heading straight towards the falls.

2

It's not as if falling was something new. Early on, I fell from my crib, I fell through haystacks, I fell from grace, I fell behind the church to kiss the bridesmaids, I fell between heaven and hell then into marriage and when my good husband was taken off to war I fell into despair. When cholera came and took the baby I fell so low I did not know I'd fallen. I fell short of loving men. I fell into debt. I fell about the house; birds beat against the windows, mold grew upon the cheese. Yet in the dark I dreamed that fame could come with falling.

3

Us boatmen watch the wind fall. Then we anchor by Goat Island so we can get Mrs. Taylor and the barrel ready without too much sway. When she begins undressing, we turn our backs. Let the oars rest in the locks, listen to the falls. We'd done talking. We'd told her *no one* has ever survived going over in a barrel, it was madness it was. She was killing herself and on her *birthday*.

We turn around. She stands there, a man's coat flung over her shoulders. A big flowery hat on her head. Can't help but stare. The long barrel begins bobbing alongside the boat. Later it'll have white letters painted on it. *Heroine of Niagara Falls*. But we don't know that now.

We spit on our thumbs, hold them up to see which way the wind's coming.

4

If I hide my grey hair under a hat, if I lie about my age, I have my good reasons.

5

My poor head is full of measurements. The length of the barrel staves, the circumference of the iron hoops, the position of the bunghole, the exact weight of the anvil at the bottom so the barrel floats upright during the ride. I look the barrel maker in the eye. I tell him I have every expectation of surviving.

Night comes. I talk to my lucky heart-shaped pillow, I talk about the barrel maker, the boatmen, the beef-faced newspaper men, I talk about their buffoonery, their banter, and blather, I talk about the Buffalo Exposition, the crowds that await me, how lucky the timing was for my stunt, and I go on

talking while candlelight gives such a ruby glow to the pillow I push my cheek into the plump mounds of silk and *Maude, Maude, Maude* I breathe though I don't know any Maude, not even a bridesmaid Maude and later, to knock some sense into my God-fearing self, I draw my knees up to my chin, listen to the noise of the falls and *brace, brace, brace*, I cry.

6

A huge crowd had gathered on the Goat Island bank. Some had been there the previous day when the wind got too fierce to get the barrel out. Over the noise of the falls, we hear snatches of a voice shouting from the wharf. *Mrs. Taylor, refined teacher of New York ...What are the bets ...Will she take the plunge...* We head around the inlet into view. The crowd erupts in cheers. Horns blast the air. We pause a bit as Mrs. Taylor stands in the boat, big hat on her head, her arms held out to the falls.

7

The noise from the falls grows louder. You are in a barrel heading for the plunge. You are still upright in the harness, arms crossed over your chest. Your lucky heart-shaped pillow, wedged under your chin. The barrel begins to spin. You are prepared, you tell yourself. You have planned for this. Below the boatmen are waiting. Below is your new life, fame and fortune. The noise is deafening. Happy birthday, you breathe into the red silk pillow. Happy birthday, you.

Madge Syers



<https://www.teamgb.com/article/how-history-maker-madge-syers-transformed-the-world-of-figure-skating/7HAyl9weosqTqT0n09AyLe>

At just 20 years old, British figure skater Madge Syers entered the 1902 World Figure Skating Championships, with women not officially banned from competing. Instead, there was purely the assumption that women would not compete, but Syers proved them wrong, going on to win silver. Furthermore, many believed she should have taken gold, with skater and judge T.D Richardson later writing, "Rumour, nay more than rumour - a good deal of expert opinion - thought she should have won."

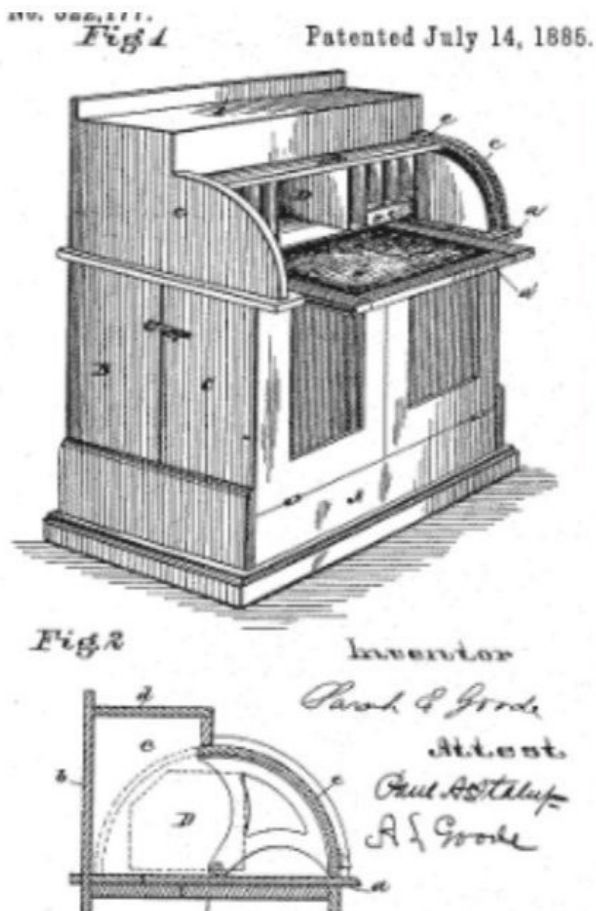
While the gold medallist, Ulrich Salchow of Sweden, is reported to have presented his medal to Syers as a sign of his respect for his competitor.

Women were almost immediately **banned from competing at the championships** until, in 1905, a women's competition was introduced. One of the reasons for the ban was that women's long skirts restricted the judge's view of their feet. This was despite Syers competing in a skirt that ended at her mid-calf, as her penchant for pushing boundaries also included fashion. With women finally able to compete again, Syers convincingly won the 1906 and 1907 women's world championships, although these were only retrospectively recognised as official World Championships in 1920.

Her crowning moment came at the place where her figure skating love began, the Prince's Skating Rink, as it hosted figure skating at the 1908 London Olympic Games. The event's inclusion marked the first time a winter sport had been included in the Olympics and is the only time an Olympic event on ice has been held in Britain. Syers comfortably won ladies' singles gold, adding mixed pairs bronze with her husband later in the day, to **make further history as the first woman to win two medals at the same Olympic Games.**

For Syers, her international competitions ended with her gold medal in London, and she passed away due to heart issues aged just 35. In 1981, she was inducted into the World Figure Skating Hall of Fame, and her legacy lives on every time women take to the ice or, indeed, challenge the usual world order.

Sarah E Goode



After the American Civil War ended, Sarah E. Goode, born into slavery and later granted her freedom, got married and moved to Chicago, opening a furniture store. Hearing from her customers about issues of space at home at a time when average sizes of tenements were 25 feet by 100 feet, she invented a cabinet bed which folded easily like a desk, with storage. **On this day in 1885** she received patent #322,177 for her invention, more than 20 years before the popular Murphy bed, patented in 1911.

Goode was not the first woman awarded a US patent: Mary Dixon Kies received one in 1809 for a process of weaving straw with silk or thread for the hat industry. While Goode was the first African-American woman named in a patent, the first African-American woman known to have received one was Judy W. Reed the previous year – but she signed her patent, for a dough kneader and roller, with an X and not her signature. Until around 1840, only twenty other patents are known to have been issued to women, for inventions related to clothing, tools, stoves and fireplaces. There may have been more who didn't sign their patents and whose names have been lost to history.

Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven



Fountain, the porcelain urinal which launched the field of 'readymades', sculptures made of items from daily life – and which, in 2004, was voted the most influential modern artwork of all time – may not in fact have been created by Marcel Duchamp, the French artist it was attributed to. An **April 1917** letter from Duchamp to his sister implies that it was in fact his colleague, the colourful German avant-garde artist and poet Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, who submitted the urinal, under a pseudonym, to a New York exhibition. Although she never publicly claimed *Fountain*, her piece, *Enduring Ornament* (1913), a rusted metal ring, was labelled as 'art' a year before Duchamp created his first 'readymade', a term he coined.

Von Freytag-Loringhoven's life is the stuff of fiction: as a teenager she ran away to act in Berlin's vaudeville theatres before several affairs took her across Europe, where she helped her second husband fake his suicide. After a brief marriage to a Baron in New York, she became a vital and outrageous part of the Dada movement, legendary not just for sculptures and poetry but also her outfits and seduction techniques. Often bizarre, her sculptures were sometimes incorporated into pieces of clothing. In later life, Von Freytag-Loringhoven lived in poverty, often arrested for shoplifting. While few of her artworks survive, in 2011, 'Body Sweats: The Uncensored Writings of Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven' was published by MIT Press.

'Do what you will! This world's your oyster, Pet.
But be forewarned. The sea might drown you yet.'

Rita Levi Montalcini



Born into a Jewish family in Turin, Rita Levi-Montalcini fell in love with science in her twenties and decided to study medicine after her beloved governess died of cancer. Receiving her degree in 1936, she began working as an assistant to her professor, a neuroscientist.

After the fascist Italian government passed antisemitic laws in 1938, Levi-Montalcini could no longer work in the university and so she set up a laboratory in her home. When Turin was bombed by Allied forces in 1940, she and her family fled to Florence, where they lived for the rest of World War II under assumed identities. In September 1946 Levi-Montalcini was invited to Washington University for a one-semester fellowship and ended up staying for 30 years, becoming a full professor.

In 1986, together with biochemist Stanley Cohen, Levi-Montalcini was awarded the Nobel Prize,, for a discovery that began in her home lab in Turin: nerve growth factor is a protein which helps stimulate nerve cell growth. It is a vital part of current research into Alzheimer's disease, cancer, Parkinson's disease and muscular dystrophy. In 1975 Levi-Montalcini was the first woman to join the Vatican's Pontifical Academy of Sciences, and she became the oldest living Nobel laureate when she turned 100. "After centuries of dormancy," she wrote, "young women ... can now look toward a future moulded by their own hands."

Writing Exercise: Take inspiration from one of more of them in any way you like!

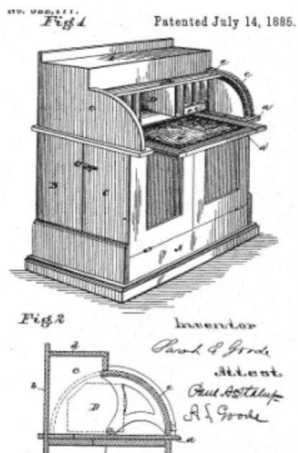
Madge Syers, Figure Skater



Rita Levi Montalcini, Nobel prize winning scientist

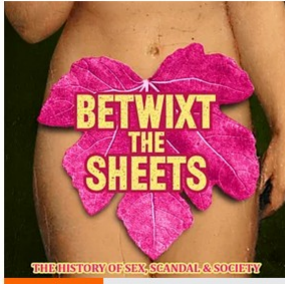


Sarah E Goode, inventor of folding bed



Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, artist





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Betwixt The Sheets podcast: Who Was the Husband Poisoner of Renaissance Italy?

Dr Kate Lister talks to author Cathryn Kemp <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p0mjfcqm>

Transcript:

4 mins 26 - 8: 50

Cathryn Kemp: At that time I was still just doing non-fiction...So I kind of thought I'll make a non-fiction book about Giulia Tofana, that would be the obvious choice. So I spent months and possibly years trying to research her and trying to find primary sources that evidenced her, and it was so patchy. There was really nothing very substantial. There has since been stuff that have come to light, but at the time it was like, well this is where a novelist goes to work, in these spaces created by the fact that women weren't documented back in those times, the fact that their lives were largely unrepresented. You might have a birth certificate or a death certificate but that's really it, if it's not a woman from a high class family. So at that point I decided that I was going to write Julia.

Kate Lister: For anyone who is listening who perhaps hasn't heard this name before, there may be some people out there going, Giulia who? Could you give us an overview of who this woman is and why she's so notorious?

CK: Julia Tofana, or the legend of Julia Tofana, was that she was a 17th century Italian poisoner. And along with her circle of poisoners, that included other outcast women, healers and herbalists, and midwives, they created an undetectable poison that they would dispense to the downtrodden women of Naples and Rome, in order for those women to cure their bad marriages - by getting rid of their abusive husbands. Because these were the days when women had no agency, no choice very often about who they were married to, and domestic abuse wasn't illegal. So women were treated pretty appalling. Italy at the time was renowned for its poison, it was the kind of where poison was crafted. It was called an "Italian divorce". But Julia herself became someone that women went to for that very specific purpose, to get rid of their husbands.

KL: I'm not advocating this, right, to anyone listening, but I am just going to say that I can understand how this particular demand arose, because you've got a situation where, as you say, women very often don't have a choice. Whether their marriage is arranged, or even if it's not, you kind of have to get married because you can't possibly earn your own money. Once you're there, you're married, usually very young, you can't go anywhere. You can't get divorced. I think divorce was a possibility but you had to be rich enough and the Pope had to say... It's just not happening for normal people. There's no rights in law, domestic abuse is completely common, I mean you'd have to be really really extreme for people even to notice it at the time. So where are you going to go if you're married to a dickhead who is making your life an utter utter misery? Hello, Giulia...

CK: Yes, exactly.

KL: I'm not condoning it.

CK: We live in a different age now, where we hope there are resources and there is support there for people who need it. In those days that simply wasn't there. Women were, as you say, you had to marry for some kind of protection and for money to be able to live, and often that went terribly wrong and there was no other way out, so what do you do? Julia's circle was actually called the Saviour of Women, that's how women referred to this group of women. What was interesting about them - and you've got Giovanna di Grandi, you've got Graziosa Farina, you've got Laura Crispoldi, you've got Gironima Spana, thought to be Guilia's daughter, but there's no evidence for linking them, and Maria Spinola, and the legend of Guilia Tofana - these women, they were dealing with women from all strata of society. From the very highest - Anna Maria Aldobrandini, who was a duchess, was supplied with the poison, and washerwomen at the washing streams were supplied with the poison. The way they did their business was that there was a place in Rome that legend says that was an apothecary shop for the circle of poisoners, and by day they would give out simple herbal remedies, and of course it only takes a few times to say, What are those bruises? and to see women in a great deal of distress. So they kind of had connections across the whole social sphere of Rome in those days. That's what fascinates me, it's not just women at the very bottom who were doing this. It went all the way up to a duchess.

11 mins 44 - 13 mins 11

CK: I love this mystery around all of this, that we can't be sure about anything, and that's when it becomes about more than the story of this story. It becomes about defiance, and sort of rebelling against their social strictures, and rebelling against the 'natural order', which is that men are above women, and above them is God and that's that. And you don't mess around with that. It became such a threat that the Pope Alexandro VII actually got involved.

KL: Wow. What did he get involved in? Was he the one involved in taking all the documents and... Because there were trials, weren't there?

CK: Yes, that's right. Leading up to 1659 there were trials, and there were 46 other women who were supposedly interred or banished.

KL: That's quite a lot.

CK: It's a lot of women involved, but the only women who were killed were the ones who dispensed the poison, they weren't the ones who actually killed the men. So they went right to the heart of it, and Alexandro VII, he was an inquisitor, he was the Inquisitor of Malta, and he had a pretty scary reputation. He had a thing about witches and heretics, because the whole thing, they were all mixed up together. So it was both a secular and a religious crime, this kind of melting pot of sin, really. So he had the Governor of Rome, Stefano Bracchi, personally hunt these women down, into the stews and the brothels and the backstreets of 17th century Rome, finding these women.

How To Dress

by Helen Mort (from No Map Could Show Them)

“A lady’s dress is inconvenient for mountaineering.” – Mrs Henry Warwick Cole, 1859

Your fashionable shoes
might be the death of you.

Your hemline catches stones
and sends them plummeting.

Below the col, set down your parasol,
put on the mountain’s suit –

your forearms gloved with permafrost,
your fingers lichen-light,

your mouth becoming fissured
and your ankles malachite.

Slip on a jacket made of shale,
cold stockings from a forded stream.

Take off the clothes they want
to keep you in. The shadow of the hill

undresses you. The sky
will be your broad-brimmed hat.



Frau Roentgen's Left Hand

by Anita Goveas (*Flashback Fiction*)

The thumb is indistinct, mid-sized and slender. If it were a tree limb, it would reveal I was fifty years old. It can't sense I have twenty-eight years before I die of intestinal cancer. It is doubtful the powerful rays had lasting impact. On me, not on history. But in the future, there will be more protections.

The forefinger contains the minerals that show the people who study these things that I was born in Zürich, lived in Vienna, ate well. But not yet. At this moment, the electrons exploding from the cathode ray tube show the outline, not the context. In the translucent flesh, there are other molecules lurking. Mine are only passed down through my beloved niece, who I adopted. There will be many kinds of invisible light.

The middle finger has the callous from writing that changed the shape of the top joint. All the odes I copied for my uncle, the poet. All the orders I recorded for my father, the cafe-owner. All the records I transcribed for my husband, the pioneer. All the letters I wrote for myself.

The fourth finger is dominated by the rings, the social contract. We met in my father's cafe, he was a gentleman. I never asked his hobbies. When he said to me 'Anna, I need your help', I did so willingly. While I stood for an hour with my hand on the photographic plate, we discussed images and luminescence. It repelled me. It repelled me to be allowed to see what was usually revealed only by death.

The little finger holds the tiny mark from stabbing myself with a sewing needle. I always made my lace myself. I will make the dress I wear when Wilhelm is awarded the first Nobel prize, for this first x-ray we capture. The award for realising this exposure of my inner self will save lives.

The whole is surrounded by shadows of flesh and cloth. The granite-like bones could belong to my mother. They could belong to Queen Victoria. They could belong to Sarah Bernhardt.

The glow of this process brings out similarities, singularities. In the shadows, the wives of science provide tools and structure, but stay hidden.

For Eliza (My great-grandmother)

by Katrina Naomi

'Go home and darn the old man's socks.' – Popular anti-Suffragette insult

You ran away to north London,
never spoke of home, fled as a child
from that gap on the form
where your father would have been;
a mother you rarely mentioned. You ran
to a life of needles and silks, martyred
your eyes for those who could pay,
embroidering a cape for the Coronation;
never a dress for yourself.

When you straightened up,
out of the poor light, you thrust a pin
through the crown of your best straw hat,
worked among those with a larger vision.
I can't know what my Great-Grandfather said
of your views as you patched his shirts,
kissed him off across the Channel;
or where you were when the telegram messenger
came running, just days before you won the vote.

The Edinburgh Seven



On July 6th 2019 the trailblazing students known as the Edinburgh Seven were posthumously awarded medical degrees, 150 years after they entered Edinburgh University. Seven women currently studying medicine represented them.

In 1869 no woman was allowed to take a university degree, but Sophia Jex-Blake wrote to ask if she might attend medical lectures at Edinburgh University. She was refused, after 200 male students petitioned to keep her out. Nevertheless, to coin a phrase, Jex-Blake persisted. Her supporters, including the *Scotsman* newspaper, asked for more women applicants. Later that year Jex-Blake did enrol with six other women – Mary Anderson, Emily Bovell, Matilda Chaplin, Helen Evans, Edith Pechey and Isabel Thorne. They were the first women registered at any UK university.

The discrimination they suffered was like that faced by many other pioneers; not life threatening but wearisome, stressful and humiliating. They were compelled to organise their own lectures. They were bullied, and had doors shut in their faces. Male students bayed at them. What happened when they arrived for their landmark anatomy exam is now known as the Surgeon's Hall Riot. Hundreds pelted them with mud and a live sheep was driven into the exam hall.

The women were not allowed to graduate. Several went to Paris and Ireland to earn qualifications that would allow them to practice medicine. All seven worked in or established new women's hospitals, from London and Edinburgh to Bombay and Tokyo.

The University of Edinburgh's first woman doctors graduated in 1896. They still had to organise their own tuition.

Some of Tania's Recommendations for Further Reading & Inspiration

You can find them all in my Bookshop.org shop under 'On This Day She' here <https://uk.bookshop.org/shop/taniahershman> - and you'll find most of them in your local library too!

Bitch: A Revolutionary Guide to Sex, Evolution and the Female Animal, Lucy Cooke

Bluestockings: The First Women's Movement, Susannah Gibson

Eve Bites Back: An Alternative History of English Literature, Anna Beer

Ladies Can't Climb Ladders: The Pioneering Adventures of the First Professional Women, Jane Robinson

Legenda: The Real Women Behind the Myths That Shaped Europe, Janina Ramirez

On This Day She: Putting Women Back Into History One Day at a Time, Jo Bell, Tania Hershman, Ailsa Holland

Rebel Women Between the Wars, Sarah Lonsdale

Ultra Women: The Trailblazers Defying Sexism in Sport, Lily Canter and Emma Wilkinson, 2025