

EDITOR'S
NOTE

This week we have Julia Bell's fantasy reading list for Women and Literature-101; Saad Hossain's emphasis on the necessity of adding cyberpunk to our library and Marzia Rahman's consideration on where Bangladeshi women writers stand today. If you're raring for some interesting summer reads, grab a comfortable chair and note down the recommendations. In case the writer in you is feeling neglected, don't forget that the SLR writing competition ends in one week. Send your submissions to DSLitEditor@gmail.com

MUNIZE MANZUR

TEN BOOKS BY WOMEN

that everyone should read

JULIA BELL

There are many perplexing moments in teaching creative writing, but perhaps none more depressing than the admission from some of the male students that they haven't read many—or in some cases any—books by women. This also goes, I might add, for some of the female students. I often ask them to tell me which female writers they have on their shelves and some might come back with the lone copy of *Pride and Prejudice* or *To Kill a Mockingbird* that they were forced to read at school but it's surprising and depressing to realise how true Grace Paley's statement is, "Women have

sional prose and her essays and diaries as there is in her novels. The sheer level of poetry and clarity in her work still sings to us down the years. Start with *To the Lighthouse* and then the essays and then Mrs Dalloway, *The Waves*, *Jacob's Room*. You can't have pretensions to be well read without having absorbed some of her beautiful and complex prose.

2. Anais Nin – *Spy in the House of Love*

The original provocateur, sexual adventurer, and lover of Henry Miller and his wife—among many others—was Anais Nin. You could do worse than start with

my favourites in this vein is Rebecca Solnit who writes with great passion and intelligence about politics and creativity and her own life. Her best book for creatives everywhere is the sublime *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*—a series of meditations on life and art and living the creative life, which is like a box of gifts. To be read slowly and meditatively.

4. Jeanette Winterson – *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit/Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*

Where would a list like this be without Jeanette Winterson? The Po-Mo high priestess/provocateur who is at her best when tackling her real life. The novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* and then the companion piece the memoir—*Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*—are the pieces which will outlast her in popular memory. Both accounts of her strange childhood, snapshots taken thirty years apart, one fiction and the other memoir, which ask all kinds of interesting questions about art and lies (another of her subjects). The rest of her oeuvre seems too directed inwards—at the academy—rather than a more general readership and steeped in the fashion for the postmodern—something which in our more anxious confessional times seems out of date.

5. Toni Morrison – *Beloved*

Beloved is her best novel, but *The Bluest Eye* is also heart-breaking. Like many women writers she tackles identity, and the search for selfhood in an environment that denies it. In *Beloved* the central character would rather kill her own child than have her taken into slavery. Written in a gauzy, poetic style which expresses too the difficulty of achieving identity in a world that denies your voice.

6. Rachel Cusk – *Arlington Park*

One of the commonplaces of gender politics in literary studies is the notion that men write about the world while women write about the domestic, and why would the kitchen be interesting to men? Rachel Cusk might be persuasive on this point. She brings the death ray of her intellect to play on the middle class mothers of *Arlington Park*, one of her most satisfying novels and she has written controversially in memoir form

about her own difficult experiences of motherhood. Like Lionel Shriver, she is a divisive figure, but with good reason because she punctures so wholeheartedly the idea of the domestic goddess (what Virginia Woolf calls *Killing the Angel in the House*) with a sharpness and a clarity of expression that is often coruscating, but always invigorating.

7. Hilary Mantel – *Wolf Hall*

Then we have a whole slew of novelists who stick pretty much to the 19th C model of the form: Margaret Atwood, Sarah Waters, Hilary Mantel. Works of huge imaginative scope and range that the reader can get lost in. Yes Margaret Atwood dabbles in speculative fiction and Sarah Waters' work can sometimes feel like an ersatz Wilkie Collins. Of these Mantel is for me the contemporary genius—the use of free and indirect speech in *Wolf Hall* is astonishing, as is the breadth of her imagination. Donna Tartt is in the mix somewhere too for the sheer chutzpah of taking ten years to write a novel as big and ludicrous and as grandly imagined as *The Goldfinch*.

8. Lorrie Moore – *Self-Help*

Women write great short stories too . . . Alice Munro is the acknowledged queen of the form, her work is so full of beady insight into human motivation and what she can do with time in a short story is astonishingly difficult to achieve. There is also the work of Lydia Davis whose short 'flash' fictions can pack as much of a punch as any longer work. Woolf's contemporary Katherine Mansfield is as much of a mistress of the story as Chekhov too. But my choice here would be Lorrie Moore, but only because she has a new collection of stories out this year, and the seminal *Self-Help* is still inspiring generations of new writers and readers.

9. Clarice Lispector – *The Hour of the Star*

Into this mix we must consider the writers who create their own forms. Clarice Lispector, a Ukrainian Jew raised in Brazil, danced entirely to her own tune. She started writing and publishing in her 20s and became friends with another difficult writer, the poet Elizabeth Bishop. Lispector's work is both tart and surreal without being

whimsical and is newly republished by Penguin Modern Classics. The place to start would be with *The Hour of the Star*—her strange and haunting last work about poverty and identity.

10. Shirley Jackson – *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*

Another republished author set to make waves this year, Shirley Jackson is the author of *The Lottery*—the most controversial short story ever published by the New Yorker. If you haven't read it, read it before you read about it, the story depends on a clever twist that shocked and outraged the contemporary audience. Her novels are being republished this year to coincide with a new biography, but like the equally twisted Patricia Highsmith, Jackson's work is dark and unsettling. *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* is one of the creepiest books I have ever read and I am looking forward to reading more this year.

Acknowledged omissions — no 19th C novelists — well that would be a reading list in its own right: Austen, George Eliot, The Brontës, Mrs Gaskell, Charlotte Perkins Gilman (some might start a 20th C reading list with *The Yellow Wallpaper*), and of course many of the mid-century writers like Elizabeth Taylor, Barbara Pym, Muriel Spark, Iris Murdoch . . . and European authors like Tove Jansson, Selma Lagerlof, Herta Muller, Elfriede Jelinek, or the young adult fictions of Sonya Hartnett, or the nature writing of Nan Shepherd, or women who write as men like Annie Proulx. And no I haven't even started on the poetry - Carol Ann Duffy, Gillian Clarke, Elizabeth Bishop, Emily Dickinson, Anne Carson, Wendy Cope, Sharon Olds, Dorrianne Laux . . . I could go on (and on) and give you a hundred books, two hundred books in many interesting configurations of theme, genre or subject. What seems clear is that there is no shortage of great women writers but when we get to the place of selection and assessment - reviewers, critics, academics, the marketplace—the people who create and curate the cultural space, the landscape starts to get a lot more tricky.

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always done men the favour of reading their work—the favour has not been returned."

If you're looking to expand the territory of your reading material, and read more women in 2014, you could do a lot worse than starting with some of these—which in a way also makes up a fantasy reading list for a course in Women and Literature:

1. Virginia Woolf – *To the Lighthouse*

Perhaps starting with the obvious, but this is work from one of the most fluent prose stylists, ever, period. There is as much joy for the reader in her occa-

Spy in the House of Love—a modernist text drenched in symbolism and sexuality but the diaries are worth reading too as works of intense self-analysis as well as the erotica which is actually radical and sexy. Interesting that she should be back in vogue again too in the age of the 'selfie'.

3. Rebecca Solnit – *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*

There is a rich vein of poet philosophers among women writers from Simone Weil to Sara Maitland to Diane Ackerman (whose *Natural History of the Senses* didn't quite make the list)—one of

William Gibson, Bangladeshi Women Writers

Master of Cool

SAAD Z HOSSAIN

William Gibson coined the word 'Cyberspace'. His first hit novel, *Neuromancer*, pretty much invented the genre of cyberpunk. What else is there to say? How many authors have had the balls to invent a genre?

The reality of science fiction is that too often, there are grand and sweeping concepts, breath-taking technical innovation, yet the writing itself is perfunctory. This dearth of stylistic quality is perhaps the result of a kind of shorthand which exists between the readers and authors, an instinctive understanding of warp drive technology, terra-forming, gross biotech modifications. Science fiction is a guild, and its members are complicit in a jargon which doesn't require beautiful words.

Gibson is on a different level. His writing is stark, beautiful and simplistic in ways which are accessible to the general population. He is, on a basic level, a writer talking about technology, rather than a technophile writing fiction. The distinction is important.

I read some of his books in my early twenties, and the work stuck with me. He is a bit like a cyberpunk Hemingway. His novels are short, unlike the doorstep volumes most space opera artists churn out, but re-readable. I was forced to track down everything he had ever written. I loved all of it.

His cyberpunk novels are awesome, and a necessary part of any library. It's an acquired taste perhaps, although I can't imagine it would take too long to get accustomed. The book I would recommend first is from his last series, based loosely in modern times, luxuriously exploring the quirks of capitalism, nosing out weird secret worlds and obsessions. Pattern Recognition is, without a

doubt, a work of genius. It is so far removed from any genre that I am tempted to make a new category just for this. The main character, Cayce, is a pattern hunter, a girl who is so sensitized to the world of street cool, that big companies hire her to figure out whether their products will work or not. The meat of the story is about the 'Footage': shards of mysterious images followed by obsessive techies who endlessly debate its provenance. Cayce is a footage head. In the underground world of footage heads, she is the star who finally tracks down the auteur.

This is essentially a story about weird and wonderful ideas, held together by wisps. The beauty is in the peculiar details, bits of random, esoteric knowledge, such as the tale of Cayce's MA-1 Buzz Rickson WW2 American Bomber jacket, faithfully reproduced by Japanese obsessives, turning a utilitarian pre-war garment into a museum worthy piece of style as far removed as possible from the commercial, derivative fashion of the modern world.

In a final sense, this book is really about coolness. Gibson is clearly interested in obscure, *cool* things, and this comes through in a most natural way, woven around the characters, crafted into the very fabric of the story. This is an indictment against the cookie cutter world shoved down our throats by corporations and marketing agencies. It makes you want to go out into the world and discover something secret, something *real*.

I recommend reading this book once a year to counter the corrosive effects of consumerism.

Saad Z Hossain is an entrepreneur and author of "Baghdad Immortals". He is currently working on his second novel.

MARZIA RAHMAN

During the early half of the twentieth century, fiction writing by Muslim women in English remained somewhat of a rarity. Interestingly, among the very few exceptions the pioneer was a Bengali woman, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, who wrote her first story in English *Sultana's Dream*.

After Independence, the first generation of Bangladeshi women writers in English includes some poets. Razia Khan's poetry books *Argus* *Under Anaesthesia* and *Cruel April* bear the stamp of her supremacy in this genre. Another distinguished poet is Farida Majid who is also a deft literary translator. A collection of Bengali poems translated into English called *Take Me Home*, Rickshaw adds to her credit. Notable mention must be made of Niaz Zaman, English Professor of Dhaka University, who has edited an array of both local and foreign literary works. Her own publications include the prize-winning study *A Divided Legacy: The Partition in Selected Novels of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh*, *The Crooked Neem Tree*. Niaz Zaman has edited several anthologies, including *Under the Krishnachura* and *From the Delta*.

And now a diaspora of Bangladeshi women writers have emerged in the international stage with strong voices. Through their contributions they have taken Bangladeshi English writing to

a new height. Let's have a look:

Bangladeshi-British author Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* has been much appreciated in both England and United States of America and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2004. Its success brought renewed attention to Bangladeshi writing in English.

Then Tahmima Anam came into the scene with her debut novel *A Golden Age*, centered on the independence war of Bangladesh in 1971 which made her a winner of the 2008 Commonwealth Prize. She was nominated for the Man Asian Literary Prize for her second novel *The Good Muslim*.

In 2011, Ruby Zaman's *Invisible Lines* was published by Harper Collins. Powerful and evocative, this first novel explores the atrocities that went hand-in-hand with the liberation war of Bangladesh, the rebellion that created a country even as it tore its families apart.

Bangladeshi-Canadian writer Neamat Imam's first novel *The Black Coat*, a highly political novel, was published by Penguin Books India in 2013. *The Black Coat* is a controversial historical novel which presents a dark and dystopian portrait of Bangladesh under Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The Sunday Guardian commented that it is 'destined to be a future classic' and will be used as the 'gold standard for any book which seeks to engage with south Asian politics or history.'

Shazia Omar, a social psychologist whose

debut novel *A Diamond in the Sky* was published by Penguin India in 2009. It received praise for taking on the dark world of drugs and addressing the issue with frank sensitivity.

With her debut novel *Hope in Technicolor*, Srabonti Narmeen Ali approaches the dogmas that correlate life and our social expectations from it. The author gracefully weaves her story around the ironies found in Dhaka life.

Many have also brought out anthologies of short stories:

Munize Manzur's *Voices* is a collection of genuine stories of the layperson filled with narrative detail of scenes, senses and the sanctity of life. Sharbari Zohra Ahmed's *The Ocean of Mrs. Nagai*, set in different places tell us about love, displacement and the agonies of childhood. Farah Ghuznavi's *Fragments of Riversong* showcases a dozen stories that bring alive the beauty and chaos of contemporary Bangladesh. Among the poets, we have Sadaf Saaz Siddiqui's debut poetry collection *Sari Reams and Rahnuma Ahmed's Tortured Truths*, both published in 2013.

Every year with new women writers in the horizon, Bangladeshi English writing is poised to extend far beyond.

Marzia Rahman completed her MA in English Literature from the University of Dhaka. Her articles, translations and book reviews have been published nationwide.



ABUL HOSSAIN (1922-2014)

We mourn the loss of eminent poet Abul Hossain who died on 29th June in Dhaka. The poet has been honoured with many awards, including Ekushey Padak, Bangla Academy Award, Padabali Award, Nasiruddin Gold Medal, Mazharul Islam Kobita Puroshkar and more. He helped initiate modern trends in Bengali Literature in the forties and remains an inspiration to many in the contemporary era. Duswapna Theke Duswapne (1985), Haoa Tomar Kee Dussahos (1982), Ekhone Somoy Ache (1997), Aar Kisher Opekkha (2000) are among his most notable literary works. We remember him today in his own words from the poem *On the Death of A Poet-Playwright* (Translated by Kabir Chowdhury, Padma Meghna Jamuna, SAARC, 2009):

Suddenly the lights went out on the stage. Row after row Of men look all around. Strange, the hero himself Is not on the stage. The play has ended And the crowd looks about with tearful eyes.