

EDITOR'S NOTE

In continuation of last week's page, SLR presents Part-II of inspirational women writers or poets, as selected by some of our favourite authors.

MUNIZE MANZUR

IN HER WORDS: INSPIRATIONAL WOMEN WRITERS AND POETS (PART-II)

NIRUPAMA SUBRAMANIAN

It is a universally acknowledged truth that a reader of novels must have, at some point of time, read a book by Jane Austen. My first Jane Austen novel was "Pride and Prejudice" during my adolescence. Later, when I moved on to her other works, it was the cool wit of her prose, her wry yet compassionate tone, the keen observations of human behaviour that drew me into the story. Her heroines were real women, endowed equally with vices and virtues, vulnerable yet valiant in the face of misfortune; they blundered but redeemed themselves. I cringed at Catherine Morland's absurd flights of fancy, chided Emma for meddling in other people's lives and warned Marianne Dashwood against throwing herself foolishly after an obvious rake.

I rediscovered Jane Austen when I was trying to write my first book. I hoped to write a worthy book, a sweeping saga that gradually unfolded the travails of several generations of a dysfunctional family or a searing incisive allegory on our society, a novel with loads of angst, lashings of magical realism, devious sub texts and carefully crafted paragraphs. It would be an Important Serious Work. But I didn't have a single noteworthy idea and could not come up with even a profound first sentence. The only story that I thought I could tell with any degree of conviction was based on my own observations and experiences of the world, a story that seemed trivial and fluffy compared to the great tome that I wanted to pen.



Austen herself had to contend with the public opinion at her time that novels were a trivial pursuit compared to serious essays, diaries and poetry that were in vogue. She did not publish under her own name and wrote furtively in her room. In "Northanger Abbey", she reacts to disparaging remarks about the novel by describing it as - 'in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humor are conveyed in the best chosen language.' She had no great literary pretensions and in her characteristic tongue-in-cheek manner described herself 'with all possible vanity, the most unlearned and uninformed female who ever dared to be an authoress.'

It was the spirit of Jane Austen who whispered to me that it was perfectly all right to a novel in a light hearted way, with interesting characters and a happy ending. I finally wrote my book, "Keep The Change", the way I wanted. I enjoyed the process. I didn't worry about whether it would turn out to be a Great Indian Novel or not. The book has not changed the world. But it has sold about 50,000 copies so far and brought some laughter into the lives of the readers. Jane Austen might have approved.

Nirupama Subramanian is a freelance performance consultant, facilitator, coach and writer.

her slim and sole novel, "Heartburn". Her humour never lets up, though it's razor-sharp in this unsentimental diagnosis of the end of a marriage. Her speedy narrative and clean prose (she despised adjectives) holds excellent instruction on how to write a vigorous story with memorable characters.

She kept her leukaemia private and died too soon in 2012. While I await posthumous publications of her other works, I revisit "Heartburn" again and again for the sheer pleasure of her writing.

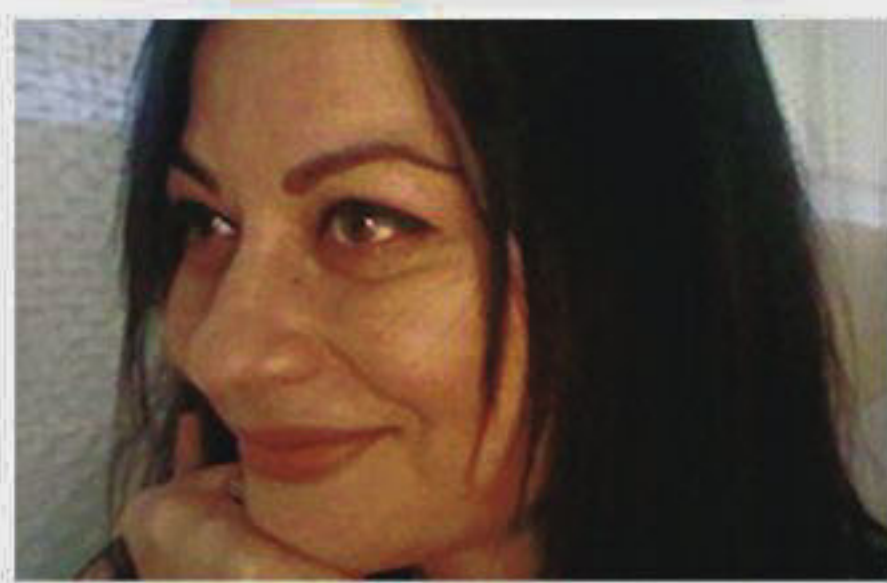
Nupu Press is a writer and film producer. Her blog is at www.nupupress.com

"And then the dreams break into a million tiny pieces. The dream dies. Which leaves you with a choice: you can settle for reality, or you can go off, like a fool, and dream another dream." (Heartburn)

NUPU PRESS:

I first heard of Nora Ephron when she wrote the clever and funny screenplay for "When Harry Met Sally". I loved that after writing several award-winning scripts, including "Silkwood", she went on to direct them too. Her romantic comedies, "Sleepless in Seattle" and "You've Got Mail" were enormously successful and are rightly counted as modern classics. My favourite Ephron film was her last one, "Julie & Julia", which split screen time between Julia Child's life in 1950s Paris with a contemporary blogger. Ephron was always current with her finger on the cultural pulse, and always incisive (though never mean) in her humour.

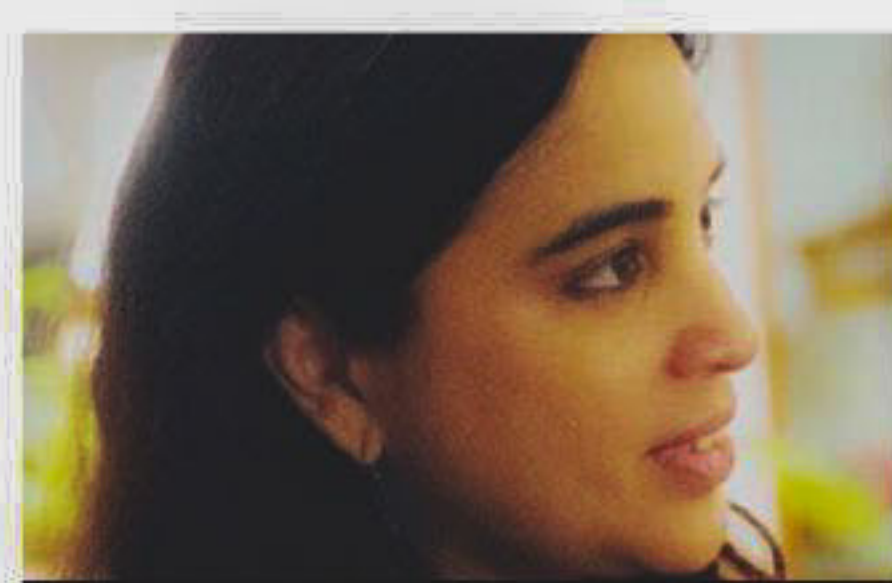
Trained as a journalist, she wrote for numerous publications over many decades, and I've devoured every essay collection in print. But my favourite Ephron creation is



PRAJWAL PARAJULY

Let me start with Enid Blyton. She was the first female author I read and one I revisit every time I go to my parents' house. "The Family At Red Roofs", her book, was the first family "saga" I read. What's interesting is I read it again and again when I wrote "Land Where I Flee". I am a South Asian cliché that way - a writer who grew up on an overdose of Enid Blyton and has still not outgrown her.

Prajwal Parajuly is author of "The Gurkha's Daughter" and "Land Where I Flee".



SAAD Z. HOSSAIN

Colleen McCullough is the undoubted boss of historical fiction. Her "Masters of Rome" series are some of the best books ever written, so meticulously researched, so beautifully fleshed out that they could easily double as text books. The entire ancient world is brought to life with a skill and depth which is unparalleled in any form of literature, far, far above the plethora of dumbed down, bare bones Roman fare on the shelves today.

Saad Z. Hossain's novel, "Baghdad Immortals", was published by Bengal Publications (2013) and is forthcoming from Unnamed Press, USA under the new title, "Escape From Baghdad".

SADAF S. SIDDIQI



Women poets who have influenced me include Emily Dickinson, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Maya Angelou and Mary Oliver. From bringing out the beauty of the world, in intricate precise descriptions, these poets have also been able to convey the reality of many women - by expressing, in very honest, often raw, un-self-censored words, their own intimate feelings of emotional

extremes, as well as touching on a range of subjects which have affected them as women - including topics regarded as taboo. The freedom to express themselves on their own terms, in their own voices, has always been inspiring.

Sadaf S. Siddiqi's debut poetry collection, "Sari Reams", was published in 2013 by UPL.

Purdah

SYLVIA PLATH

Jade --
Stone of the side,
The agonized

Side of green Adam, I
Smile, cross-legged,
Enigmatical,

Shifting my clarities.
So valuable!
How the sun polishes this shoulder!

And should
The moon, my
Indefatigable cousin

Rise, with her cancerous pallors,
Dragging trees --
Little bushy polyps,

Little nets,
My visibilities hide.
I gleam like a mirror.

At this facet the bridegroom arrives
Lord of the mirrors!
It is himself he guides

In among these silk
Screens, these rustling appurtenances.
I breathe, and the mouth

Veil stirs its curtain
My eye
Veil is

A concatenation of rainbows.
I am his.
Even in his

Absence, I
Revolve in my
Sheath of impossibles,

Priceless and quiet
Among these parakeets, macaws!
O chatterers

Attendants of the eyelash!
I shall unloose
One feather, like the peacock.

Attendants of the lip!
I shall unloose
One note

Shattering
The chandelier
Of air that all day plies

Its crystals
A million ignorants:
Attendants!

Attendants!
And at his next step
I shall unloose

I shall unloose --
From the small jeweled
Doll he guards like a heart --

The lioness,
The shriek in the bath,
The cloak of holes.



SAMIT BASU

I grew up in a Bengali household and was raised by women, so it was only as a grownup that I realised that the woman author was a separate species. Influences in work are Ursula Leguin, Mary Gentle, J.K. Rowling in fantasy/sci-fi genre. In comics, Gail Simone and Marjane Satrapi. In children's writing, Sue Townsend. But I don't think I read any of them because they were women.

Samit Basu is a writer of books, films and comics.

TAHMIMA ANAM

A woman writer who has inspired me is Mahasweta Devi. I started reading her short stories in my twenties, and I found them to be unparalleled in their clear-eyed gaze at everything from class to gender oppression and state power. She writes with spare, sometimes even brutal, prose, and she has that uncanny ability to write about deeply political issues while maintaining her artistic integrity. For me, her standout story is



SALIL TRIPATHI

I admire many women writers - Virginia Woolf, Martha Gellhorn, Anita Desai, Sylvia Plath, Nayantara Sahgal, Romila Thapar, Mahasweta Devi, Nadine Gordimer, and Alice Munro, and not necessarily in that order, to name only a few - so rather than take forever in deciding one of them to have influenced me, my vote goes to Sylvia Beach. She wrote only one memoir, but she was an early champion of freedom of speech. She set up the remarkable bookstore in 1919 called Shakespeare and Co., which gained renown when it moved to 12, rue de la Odeon in Paris, in 1922. It was the hub where young writers met during the "Paris Spring" - F Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and many others - during a period known as the age of the lost generation. Beach provided a home to these writers and nurtured them; and her brave decision in 1922 to publish James Joyce's Ulysses which was banned in the English-speaking world, marked a milestone in the global struggle for free expression. She had to close her shop in 1940, when the Nazis took over Paris, but even there, during the early days of Occupation when she kept the shop open, she refused to sell books to German soldiers. When the Allied Forces entered Paris, Hemingway, then a war reporter, was among the first to turn up at rue de la Odeon and liberated the store. Beach's memoir captures a vital part of 20th century history; her commitment to freedom of expression is of critical importance in our time, and in that she inspires me.

Salil Tripathi, author of "The Colonel Who Would Not Repent", has been a correspondent in India, Singapore and Hong Kong.



SOMNATH BATABYAL

In contemporary literature it has to be Chimamanda Adichie. Her work is relentlessly radical and interesting. She imbibes both the classic narrative style of her predecessors in Nigeria including the great Chinua Achebe while being truly contemporary. There is a poignancy which breaks your heart and yet her novels are ultimately about human redemption. Reading her is both painful and yet uplifting.

Somnath Batabyal, author of "The Price You Pay", worked for a decade in journalism before entering the quieter world of Western academia.

"If you don't understand, ask questions. If you're uncomfortable about asking questions, say you are uncomfortable about asking questions and then ask anyway. It's easy to tell when a question is coming from a good place. Then listen some more. Sometimes people just want to feel heard. Here's to possibilities of friendship and connection and understanding." (Americanah)



"Draupadi", about a Naxal woman who is captured by the army. Mahasweta turns the myth of Draupadi—the story of the woman who could never be shamed—into a parable about the female revolutionary's body. She is a feminist, rabble-rouser, activist, and master storyteller. Read her and be amazed.

Tahmima Anam, named one of Granta magazine's Best of Young British Novelists in 2013, is author of "A Golden Age" and "The Good Muslim".



SRABONTI NARMEEN ALI

Although J.K. Rowling's "Harry Potter" series came out while I was in college, and I hadn't actually picked up a book and read one until I had graduated, I have to say that she probably influenced me the most as a writer. The "Harry Potter" series, for me, was a symbol of hope. It forces you to take a hard look at the society that we live in, although it is done so cleverly that you actually do not even realize that you are doing it. You are taught, in the midst of all the chaos surrounding the adventures of Harry and his friends, how difficult and unforgiving the world is to people who are different; how stifling societies can be; how someone can have many flaws and many issues, but can still be a good person at heart. You are shown that it is not impossible to put others before yourself. J.K. Rowling, being a single mother of three children, wrote a series of seven books which made people start wanting to read again. Every book was filled with so many beautiful and intricate details. What made it all the more amazing was that by the time I finished the book, every question I had was answered in tenfold. Every 'I' was dotted and every 'T' crossed. In addition there is nothing pretentious about J.K. Rowling's writing style. She writes simply, with a naughty pinch of satire that makes something in the back of your throat tickle with laughter. I tell myself that if I can be even half the writer that she is, I'll have made it. She is the quintessential symbol of never giving up and always believing that anything is possible.

Srabonti Narmeen Ali, author of "Hope in Technicolor", is a writer and singer based in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

"If you want to know what a man's like, take a good look at how he treats his inferiors, not his equals." (Harry Potter and The Goblet of Fire)



TIFFANY MURRAY

I'm sitting in the New York University library overlooking Washington Square Park. It's 1994. I'm reading Jean Rhys. I discovered her thin blue-spined Penguin editions here in the labyrinth of stacks. I've worked my way through the Paris novels (though my favourite is and always will be the more "London After Leaving Mr Mackenzie"). Because it's not all 'Wide Saragasso Sea' with Jean. It's not all about her declaiming Charlotte Bronte's 'paper tiger lunatic' (Bertha Rochester). It's even more than the myth (or truth?) of Jean. How success came a tad too late. How, pretty penniless, she moved from place to place, forgot manuscripts, buried herself in away in Devon, buried herself in the bottle.

It's more than all of this. Jean Rhys taught me about writing. The process. The agony. The joy of getting it right. Perhaps she taught me about the grand Art vs Life dichotomy. What does she say in "Smile Please: An Unfinished Autobiography"? Ah, yes.

"I like shape very much. A novel has to have shape, and life doesn't have any."

As a young girl in exile, watching New York City from a library's windows, I felt this and I felt Jean's infamous 'outsider/inside' status. I thumbed "Good Morning Midnight" again. Again. There is something delicious about Sasha Jensen's words:

"We can't all be happy, we can't all be rich, we can't all be lucky - and it would be so much less fun if we were...There must be the dark background to show up the bright colours."

Tiffany Murray's novels "Happy Accidents" and "Diamond Star Halo" were both short-listed for the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Award.