

Over 100 Years of Feminist Fiction

BY JESSICA TEISCH

Betty Friedan's *The Feminist Mystique*, reported the *New York Times* a half century after its publication, "ignited the contemporary women's movement in 1963 and as a result permanently transformed the social fabric of the United States and countries around the world." Friedan's landmark book continues to influence generations of women. "If there's a feminine mystique now," Ariel Levy, the journalist and author of *Female Chauvinist Pigs* (2005), told the *New Yorker* in 2013, "it's that we think we can do everything. This is an opportunity that feminism has enabled."

Over the following decades, feminists from Gloria Steinem to bell hooks, Andrea Dworkin, Kate Millett, Naomi Wolf, Susan Faludi, Audre Lorde, and, more recently, Jessica Valenti, Caitlin Moran, Roxane Gay, Inga Muscio, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Rebecca Solnit, among others, have expanded, refined, and redefined notions of feminism.

Below we present some "feminist" fiction, which, in some respects, responded to the nonfiction writings of the women mentioned above. Though the genre is somewhat open to definition, our selections include novels written by women that feature strong women protagonists who, even if they lack the ability to choose their own destinies, own themselves and challenge prescribed gender norms. To call forth a quotation by Cheri Kramarae, "Feminism is the radical notion that women are human."

We've divided our selections by decade to show the evolution and diversity of feminist fiction and, in some instances, its intersection with race. It's also interesting to highlight the dystopian and utopian nature of some of these novels—where, in the future, matriarchies and powerful women reign.

1900–1919

Herland

By Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1915)

In this short, utopian novel, though antiquated in its white supremacy rhetoric, three swaggering men explore a region rumored to house a society consisting exclusively of women (men have become irrelevant to procreation). What they discover is a strong, self-sufficient, cohesive, and intelligent female society—one that does not conform to their expectations of women. The novel explores gender roles, the construction of gender, and how it becomes "fixed"—and above all reflects Gilman's belief in the importance of women's independence, female community, and education. The sequel, *With Her in Ourland* (1916), similarly utopian, contrasts Gilman's vision of a feminist society with the realities of a male-dominated world. "Though it reads like a plucky sci-fi adventure serial, at *Herland's* heart is an unapologetically feminist treatise," wrote Lindy West in the *Guardian*. "Gilman goes for it in a way that even some 21st-century progressives shy away from in the name of diplomacy."



Further Reading

THE HOUSE OF MIRTH | EDITH WHARTON (1905)



1920s

Orlando

A Biography

By Virginia Woolf (1928)

An early feminist masterpiece, *Orlando* is a savage satire on sexism and a “biography” of a male poet—an English nobleman born during the reign of Elizabeth I—who falls into a deep sleep and awakens as a woman. She switches between gender roles, dresses as both man and woman, engages with key figures of English literary history over 400 years, and emerges as a celebrated female poet in the 1920s. Inspired by Woolf’s lover, the aristocratic writer Vita Sackville-West, *Orlando* is transgressive and gender-bending. The book is great; see also the movie starring Tilda Swanton. “Those who open *Orlando* expecting another novel in the vein of *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* will discover, to their joy or sorrow, that once more Mrs. Woolf has broken with tradition and convention and has set out to explore still another fourth dimension of writing,” reported the *New York Times* in 1928.



Further Reading

THE AGE OF INNOCENCE | EDITH WHARTON (1920)

A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN | VIRGINIA WOOLF (1929)

MRS. DALLOWAY | VIRGINIA WOOLF (1925)

1930s

Their Eyes Were Watching God

By Zora Neale Hurston (1937)

A meditation on race and gender, Hurston’s lyrical, magical realist novel features the mulatto Janie Crawford in Florida, who endures two oppressive marriages before finding her true love. Throughout it all and despite her initially impoverished circumstances, Janie continues to believe that she deserves to be happy, rich, and sexually satisfied. Her belief in equality and individual power guides her as she searches for her own identity and becomes a deep, strong woman. “A forceful, erotic, well-wrought story about a black woman by a black woman,” concluded the *New York Times* upon its publication. “There is life—a swarming, passionate life, and in spite of the Tea Cake’s tragic end and the crumbling of Janie’s happiness, there is a sense of triumph and glory when the tale is done” (*New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review*, 1937).



Further Reading

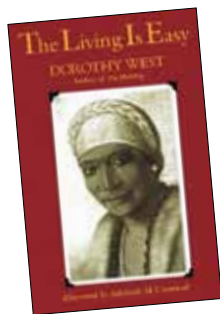
REBECCA | DAPHNE DU MAURIER (1938)

1940s

The Living Is Easy

By Dorothy West (1948)

West, one of the few black female writers to be published in the 1940s, founded the magazine *Challenge* and its successor during the Harlem Renaissance. This semiautobiographical novel, which depicts issues of race and notions of social advancement, also defies gender stereotypes. The daughter of Southern sharecroppers and now the wife of former slave “Black Banana King” Bart Judson, Cleo Judson hopes to re-create her original family by manipulating her three Southern sisters and their children—sans husbands—to live with her while raising her daughter as a member of Boston’s black elite. “The important thing about the book is its abundance and special woman’s energy and beat,” wrote the *New York Times*. “The beat is a deep one, and it often makes a man’s seem puny.” See also *The Wedding* (1995), about the hopes and dreams of African Americans living on Martha’s Vineyard in the 1950s, which was made into a miniseries by Oprah Winfrey.



Further Reading

LAURA | VERA CASPARY (1942)

1950s

Further Reading

SHADOW ON THE HEARTH | JUDITH MERRIL (1950)

1960s

The Golden Notebook

By Doris Lessing (1962)

The Golden Notebook made Lessing a worldwide feminist icon—despite her denial that this novel was feminist. The book’s innovative structure involves four notebooks kept by divorced English novelist Anna Wulf, who uses each for a different purpose. As she leaves the Communist Party and addresses domestic crises, she pens her thoughts about her African upbringing, politics, and even a diary and a novel titled *Free Women*. Presented to readers in alternating order until the finale, when Anna realizes her “wholeness,” these notebooks offer insight not only into postwar London but also into the “hazards and chances of



being a ‘free woman’” in a changing society. Anna similarly reflects Lessing’s—and women’s—multiple, often conflicting identities and responsibilities. “*The Golden Notebook* is Doris Lessing’s most important work and has left its mark upon the ideas and feelings of a whole generation of women,” concluded the *New York Times Book Review*.

Further Reading

THE BELL JAR | SYLVIA PLATH (1963)

DIARY OF A MAD HOUSEWIFE | SUE KAUFMAN (1967)

THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS | URSULA K. LE GUIN (1969)

WIDE SARGASSO SEA | JEAN RHYS (1966)

THE EDIBLE WOMAN | MARGARET ATWOOD (1969)

A HANDFUL OF TIME | ROSEL GEORGE BROWN (1963)

1970s

The Bloody Chamber

And Other Stories

By Angela Carter (1979)

◆ CHELTENHAM FESTIVAL LITERARY PRIZE

Carter, the late British writer known for her feminist, magical realist fiction, provides a modern, inventive twist to 10 classic fairy tales from the Western canon, from “Beauty and the Beast” to “Puss-in-Boots” and “The Snow Child.” Challenging the traditional portrayal of women as weak and helpless, she instead depicts them as strong and sexually liberated. The outcomes of these stories also differ—there’s romance and revenge, as well as the reversal of conventional notions of marriage, sexuality, and gender. Carter “sinks deep into their imagery and language—and in delving into the symbolic underpinnings of the myths that constitute so many people’s first encounters with literature, she can’t help but speak volumes about the social expectations and psychological pressures that govern women, men, and the interactions between the genders,” wrote *Flavorwire*. “... *The Bloody Chamber* retains its power because there will never be enough writing this perceptive—or just plain beautiful.”



The Women’s Room

By Marilyn French (1977)

A turning point in feminist fiction, this semiautobiographical best seller traces the evolution of a conventional young woman navigating 1950s suburban New Jersey. Mira Ward marries, becomes a housewife, has children, and divorces; other women have affairs, attempt suicide, and enter mental institutions. By the 1960s, the stifled Mira enrolls at Harvard, where she liberates herself from society’s expectations. Despite



criticism that she depicts her male characters as villains, French explores women's private inner lives and choices with emotional clarity and accurately captures the period. "What victimizes Mira is not men, but the chasm that she perceives between men and women—the mistrust, incomprehension and exploitation," wrote the *New York Times*. "... French has written a collective biography of a large group of American citizens. Expectant in the 40's, submissive in the 50's, enraged in the 60's, they have arrived in the 70's independent but somehow unstrung, not yet fully composed after all they've been through."

Further Reading

- SURFACING** | MARGARET ATWOOD (1972)
- FEAR OF FLYING** | ERICA JONG (1973)
- KINFLOCKS** | LISA ALTHER (1976)
- MEMOIRS OF AN EX-PROM QUEEN** | ALIX KATES SHULMAN (1972)
- LOVER** | BERTHA HARRIS (1976)
- KINDRED** | OCTAVIA E. BUTLER (1979)
- THE WAR OF DREAMS** | ANGELA CARTER (1972)
- RUBYFRUIT JUNGLE** | RITA MAE BROWN (1973)
- WOMAN ON THE EDGE OF TIME** | MARGE PIERCY (1976)

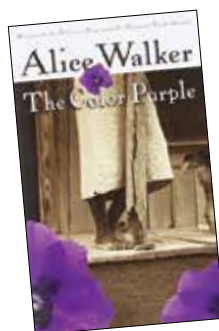
1980s

The Color Purple

By Alice Walker (1982)

♦ PULITZER PRIZE, NATIONAL BOOK AWARD

This genre-defining epistolary novel, which takes place between the early 1900s and the 1940s and starts in rural Georgia, features the poor, barely literate Celie, her abusive husband, her missionary sister in Africa, and a host of powerful women over four decades. Against poverty, sexual abuse, domestic violence, and institutionalized racism—but also female ambition and independence—Walker questions problematic notions of masculinity and the power of female sexuality. "In *The Color Purple* the role of male domination in the frustration of black women's struggle for independence is clearly the focus," reported the *New York Times*. "... What makes Miss Walker's exploration so indelibly affecting is the choice of a narrative style that, without the intrusion of the author, forces intimate identification with the heroine."



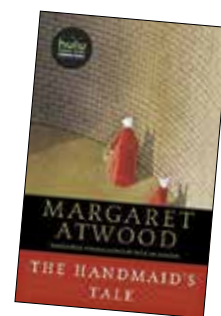
The Handmaid's Tale

By Margaret Atwood (1985)

♦ GOVERNOR GENERAL'S AWARD, ARTHUR C. CLARKE AWARD

In a future Christian fundamentalist state, the Republic of Gilead (once the United States), women are stripped of their autonomy, reproduction is controlled by the state, and fertile women become commodities of wealthy men. Atwood creates a caste system of Wives, Mothers, and Marthas, and through Offred, a woman serving the Command-

er and his bitter wife, she explores how women exercise agency under adversity. "In essence a Gothic tale of a young woman's cruel imprisonment, her shifting relationship with her captors, and her eventual escape, *The Handmaid's Tale* differs from its classic dystopian predecessors in the intimacy of the protagonist's voice and in the convincing domestic background Atwood has established for her," remarked Joyce Carol Oates in the *New York Review of Books*. "... Yet women beware women!—for the patriarchy has shrewdly conscripted categories of women to control and exploit other women." See also Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue*, which preceded *The Handmaid's Tale* by a year and also imagines a future where women, save for some serving as interplanetary translators, have lost their rights.



Further Reading

- THE TEMPLE OF MY FAMILIAR** | ALICE WALKER (1989)
- FRIED GREEN TOMATOES AT THE WHISTLE STOP CAFE** | FANNIE FLAGG (1987)
- THE GATE TO WOMEN'S COUNTRY** | SHERI S. TEPPER (1988)
- THE HOUSE OF THE SPIRITS** | ISABEL ALLENDE (1982)
- THE MISTS OF AVALON** | MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY (1983)
- BELOVED** | TONI MORRISON (1987)

1990s

Her Smoke Rose Up Forever

By James Tiptree, Jr. (1990)

In the 18 stories (originally published between 1969 and 1981) in this posthumous best-of, Tiptree (the pseudonym for American science fiction author Alice Sheldon) breaks down the categories of gender, biology, and sexual relationships. "The Screwfly Solution"—an answer to the population problem—imagines a world in which all men, even the kind ones, murder women. In the Hugo Award- and Nebula Award-winning "Houston, Houston, Do You Read?" astronauts flying by the sun time travel forward 500 years and encounter a culture that has no use for men. "[Tiptree] was hardly the only science fiction writer of her day to craft beautiful sentences, but she was (as her peers recognized) one of the best," wrote an NPR critic, "and she was the only one to show at once such a power of invention, an awareness of gender and justice, and a tragic sense of life."



Further Reading

DIRTY WEEKEND | HELEN ZAHAVI (1991)
POSSESSING THE SECRET OF JOY | ALICE WALKER (1992)
SAMAN | AYU UTAMI (1998)
THE RED TENT | ANITA DIAMANT (1997)
PARABLE OF THE SOWER (EARTHSEED) | OCTAVIA E. BUTLER (1993)
BASTARD OUT OF CAROLINA | DOROTHY ALLISON (1992; ♦ LAMBDA AWARD)
THE HOURS | MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM (1998; ♦ PULITZER PRIZE, PEN/FAULKNER AWARD FOR FICTION)
THE VIRGIN SUICIDES | JEFFREY EUGENIDES (1993)
I LOVE DICK | CHRIS KRAUS (1997)
PARADISE | TONI MORRISON (1998)

2000–2009

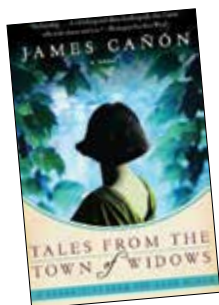
Tales from the Town of Widows

And Chronicles from the Land of Men

By James Cañón (2007)

♦ PRIX DU PREMIER MEILLEUR ROMAN ÉTRANGER

In the last decade of the 20th century, a Colombian mountain village finds all but three of its men—a hapless priest, a transvestite, and a gay man—conscripted by Communist guerrillas. Left to fend for themselves, the “widows,” formerly wives and daughters, found a remarkable, all-female, radically socialist utopia with nudity, lesbianism, and common property far superior to the revolution’s imagined society. In this debut novel Cañón, a Colombian writer living in New York (and yes, our only contribution here by a man), draws on magical realism à la Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar, and Mario Vargas Llosa. “Male violence rather than magic realism, in fact, is the unsettling subtext of *Tales From the Town of Widows*, and the occasional moments of atrocity go off like land mines among the more frequent moments of sexual adventure and sexual ambiguity that decorate this otherwise comic account of the rise and fall of a gynocratic utopia” (*Washington Post*). The film adaptation of the novel, *Without Men*, was released in 2011.



Further Reading

STOLEN SUNSHINE: A WOMAN'S QUEST FOR HERSELF | SMITA JHAVAR (2002)
FINGERSMITH | SARAH WATERS (2002)

2010–2016

Neapolitan Quartet

By Elena Ferrante (2012–2015)

The Italian writer is best known for her Neapolitan Quartet: *My Brilliant Friend* (2012), *The Story of a New Name* (2013), *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay* (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2014), and *The Story of the Lost Child* (★★★★ SELECTION Nov/Dec 2015). At heart, the series asks what happens to two intelligent women in a society that stifles female independence and when autonomy clashes with opposition.

Elena Greco and Lila Cerullo, incited and inspired by their friendship, grow up in a poor neighborhood in post–World War II Naples. Over six decades, as their paths diverge and reunite, they fight for education, class, and respect; become wives, mothers, and lovers; and adhere to and break conventions. “Her four-novel Neapolitan story is an epic masterpiece, a *Künstlerroman* of sustained passion and fury,” a *Time* critic wrote. “Ferrante is a subtle subversive; the domestic, in her brilliant books, is a time bomb that ticks too loudly to ignore.”



Margaret the First

By Danielle Dutton (2016)

Dutton, founder of the American feminist small press Dorothy, pens a warm, witty, and vividly imagined portrait of a woman strikingly ahead of, yet engaged with, her time: Margaret Cavendish, the eccentric Duchess of Newcastle. One of the first women to be published under her own name, Cavendish wrote plays, poetry, memoirs, philosophical and scientific treatises, and an early work of utopian science fiction. Upon returning from Paris to England after being exiled, she was the first woman ever to be invited to the Royal Society of London—and the last for another 200 years. “Some may find it troubling that Dutton hasn’t created a protofeminist. She is quite right,” wrote the *New York Times*. “Cavendish was a maverick, not a role model, and her marriage, far from being an impediment, sustained . . . Thus Dutton surprisingly and delightfully offers not just a remarkable duchess struggling in her duke’s world but also an intriguing dissection of an unusually bountiful partnership of (almost) equals.”



Further Reading

AMERICAN HOUSEWIFE: STORIES | HELEN ELLIS (★★★★ Mar/Apr 2016)
AMERICANAH | CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE (♦ NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD, ★★★★★ July/Aug 2013)
HOW TO BUILD A GIRL | CAITLIN MORAN (★★★★ Jan/Feb 2015)
THE PENELOPIAD | MARGARET ATWOOD (2005)
LAVINIA | URSULA LE GUIN (★★★★ SELECTION July/Aug 2008) ■