

Book Collection Essay
‘A Thousand Other Hearts’: Women Who Guide Me
By Hannah Fenster

Let me be honest: this collection began as its own mastermind, cultivating itself behind my back for several years before I caught on at the start of my college career. My growth into a conscious collector mirrors my increased ownership over my future. Many of the collection’s foundational texts were gifts from the women of my family whose lives preceded and influenced mine, and as a whole the collection embodies Edwidge Danticat’s observation in *Krik? Krak!* : ‘You have never been able to escape the pounding of a thousand other hearts that have outlived yours by thousands of years.’ While I can only guess at the identities of my thousand-year-old ancestors, I know from roughly one hundred years of oral history that I come from a line of strong women. Women who left abusive marriages and raised children of character in Great Depression Pittsburgh; women who supported cancer-stricken brothers and husbands; women who forged successful careers in male-dominated professions. Entrepreneurial women, scholarly women, loyal women. And yet, diverse as their experiences were and continue to be, they share a profound reverence for stories and the courage required to tell the difficult (but necessary) ones. Indeed, this seemingly genetic story appreciation is the reason I am able to know their accomplishments so comprehensively, and so intimately. With the immaterial gift of strength passed through their personal histories, as well as with the physical gifts of books from my mother and grandmother, this collection began to shape *me* before I realized, during the past four years, that I had the power to do the reverse.

The books in this collection, which include poetry and prose, short story and novel, fall into three broad categories, which chronicle the phases of my acquisitions. The first, initiated by the aforementioned women who hoped to raise me with their character, consists of children’s

books by women about young women who are forced, in some capacity, into independence. These young women, though often required to step prematurely into the traditional role of woman as family caretaker, also pursue their own intentions doggedly. Those that are gifts initiated my interest in literature by and about women; those I selected, often without any conscious awareness of this budding interest, demonstrate the way the behavior of the young characters resonated with me from the beginning.

The second category, developed more intentionally, still consists of books by and about women, yet I make the distinction due to a shift in intended audience from child to adult readers. Many of these volumes present different versions of the female bildungsroman, to which I have been attracted since the start of my college career four years ago. The evolution of this category signals a shift in my interest from the young girl's self-sufficiency in dire situations to the broader scope of female development. As in the previous category, these books continue to provide a bridge of inspiration between the conglomerate of authors, characters, and women in my life—and me. In this stage of collecting I deliberately began to prioritize the books' contents over their objective values. One book, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, contains my mother's annotations, and another, *Krik?Krak!*, supplied a point of common conversation from which sprouted an important female friendship of mine. During this phase I awakened to the thread connecting my books; namely, that each harbors two stories: the one contained within its pages, and the para-story of its role in my life. Applying this observation to the books in the first category, I realize that each led to one of my happiest memories: reading ten books so I could choose a free one (*Homecoming*) at the library; purchasing *A Wrinkle in Time* at the only English bookstore in Vienna and gobbling it between German classes at school; meeting *The Star of Kazan* via audiobook and pausing the CD to belly-laugh at Herr Egghart's flamboyance.

It is only fitting, then, that my current collecting strategy aims to use the personal influence of literature to build my confidence in deliberate ways. In my academic life, I appreciate literary analysis, compose short stories and poems, and struggle to muster the confidence necessary to construct those bold ideas and daring sentences. With all these qualities in mind, I have decided in the past two years to extend my collection to include books by women I know, to remind myself of my rightful place in the line of writer women. I obtain autographs when possible, tangible contracts of each relationship between role model and admirer. Each book in my collection is an artifact with a complex history in and around its pages, and my most recent additions demonstrate a newfound confidence in forging my own way.

Overall, the collection develops and solidifies its intentions in conversation with the events in my life. In a class on Women in Latin American Literature in the fall of 2014, I learned of the #readwomen2014 campaign, the establishment of a hashtag phrase to publicize the “trendiness” of reading female authors. In a sense, this collection has been my own version of this campaign since my early years. My own assortment of books, like the #readwomen2014 movement, makes a point to include authors and characters from all over the globe and throughout history. My collection lacks representation from a few key regions, however. In particular, as my career interests center on a more involved study of West African literature, I feel it is imperative to add to my collection the works by and about the influential women of that region. As I continue to develop “‘A Thousand Other Hearts’: Women Who Guide Me” I will gain an increasingly comprehensive panel of advisors to turn to about any topic.

Annotated Bibliography of 28 Works
‘A Thousand Other Hearts’: Women Who Guide Me
Collected by Hannah Fenster

1. For the Young

Brisley, Joyce Lankester. *The Milly-Molly-Mandy Storybook*. New York: Larousse Kingfisher Chambers, 1998.

What strikes me most about this story collection, every time, is Milly-Molly-Mandy’s independence, the way she goes wherever she wants, when she wants. As she lives in her own private cupboard over the stairs, it was this book that defined how I appreciate space. I know now, as then, that I love a cozy one as a home base, but with the safety of that space secure, I am addicted to the wide road and the open sky, traversed alone.

Hamilton, Virginia. *Bluish*. New York: Blue Sky Press, 2002.

A lesson in both independence and deep, unadulterated kindness. The story of Bluish, a fifth-grader with cancer, and Dreenie, who navigates the tricky process of supporting someone who struggles to accept her need of assistance. To this day, when I read this book, I hear my mother’s instructions on friendship in my head: “Above all, be kind. That is the most important thing.”

Haywood, Carolyn. *Betsy and the Boys*. Boston: HMH Books for Young Readers, 1945.

Each book in Haywood’s timeless series encouraged my own feminism before I even know the term. This copy, however, holds a special place in my heart. Bent and torn, it was my mother’s selection at her elementary school bookfair, and I hope it will stay in my family forever as physical proof of the values passed down through the maternal line.

Ibbotson, Eva. *The Star of Kazan*. New York: Dutton Children’s Books, 2004.

A beautiful, partially metallic hardcover – one of my most treasured books, for its exterior but especially for what it contains. In 2005, when I was twelve years old, my mother’s sabbatical took us to Vienna, Austria for six months – my first experience expanding my definition of home, and of missing a place viscerally once we left. Accordingly, *The Star of Kazan*, set in vividly-described 1908 Vienna, never fails to summon a cozy feeling for me. It is one thing to imagine a setting, but it’s another to get to know fictional characters in a setting you already *know*.

L’Engle, Madeleine. *A Wrinkle in Time*. New York: Yearling Books, 1999.

The book that converted me into a lifelong L’Engle fan, *A Wrinkle in Time* also played an integral role in my development while living in Austria. Selected and purchased myself in the only English bookstore in Vienna, the novel provided me with endless imaginative escape for the moments when my situation felt most foreign. Its presence as a healthy coping mechanism helped me emerge at the end of six months in love with the city and travel bug-bitten.

Lovelace, Maud Hart. *Betsy-Tacy*. New York: Harper Trophy, 1979.

Betsy-Tacy provided one of my first points of reference for strong female friendship. Read many times over, often on days when my child life seemed difficult for one reason or another, propped up against my pillows with my mother.

Lowry, Lois. *Number the Stars*. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, 1992.

One of the only books I can claim to have read and re-read, many times over. Annemarie stands up to a force greater than herself, helping to protect her Jewish friend who stays with her family during World War II. What's important about this story, though, is the way it fragments that apparently grandiose act of generosity into all its day-to-day components. The image of Annemarie's hand, indented with the Star of David after hiding her friend's necklace from Nazi soldiers, remains imprinted in my mind.

Rundell, Katherine. *Rooftoppers*. London: Faber and Faber, 2013.

This is the only book in this section I acquired during the past year. It also fits into the third category, as it is one I collected during my year in Oxford after meeting the author, a fellow at All Soul's College who gave a lecture on children's literature in my college, St. Anne's. According to Rundell, children's authors should "aim high to lead a child to ask a question." In retrospect, all the authors in this child-focused section of my collection did just that. I just needed *Rooftoppers* and its author to help me understand my attraction to these particular books.

Ryan, Pam Muñoz. *Esperanza Rising*. New York: Scholastic Press, 2002.

Just as my mother selected *Betsy and the Boys* at her bookfair, I selected *Esperanza Rising* at mine, feeling extremely grown up. At the time, I would've admitted that the cover image of a dancing girl heavily influenced my decision, but now I treasure Pam Muñoz Ryan's novel as an essential component of my collection for its Mexican perspective on the America I thought I knew so well.

Rylant, Cynthia. *In Aunt Lucy's Kitchen, The Cobble Street Cousins 1*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998.

Lily, Rosie, Tess, Aunt Lucy, Michael... the characters in the Cobble Street Cousins' series are as vivid to me as my next door neighbors. Their creative ideas – a cookie company, a newspaper, a play in the living room – encouraged me to move from imagination to reality. Alongside the protagonists, I created my own cookie company and published three years' worth of newsletters for family and friends. These books blurred the lines for me between imagining and doing.

Skolsky, Mindy Warshaw. *Love from Your Friend, Hannah*. New York: Harper Collins, 1999.

The first book in the *Hannah* series, an epistolary novel, re-enforced the letter writing culture handed to me through my grandmother and my mother. As I watched Hannah (the character) write to everyone from farm boys to presidents, I began to understand the power of letter as artifact, as tangible proof that someone cares about you. It is a philosophy to which I still ascribe wholeheartedly, and have passed on to others in turn.

Voigt, Cynthia. *Homecoming*. New York: Atheneum, 1983.

Homecoming features not only a female the head of the family, but a female *child* in that role. Aside from the exemplary female lead, the story of acquisition determines this book's significance to my collection. I chose this book from the library as a reward for reading 10 books. I remember the damp smell of the hallway through the "staff only" door, the feeling of privilege and pride of *earning* a book. *Homecoming*, in a way, sealed my homecoming to the world of books, to which I still feel deeply privileged to belong. The dedication page bears a pencil inscription: "Gift of Mrs. Crowell Freeman." Little did Mrs. Freeman know her gift to the library was also a transformational gift to a young girl.

2. For the Adult

Alcott, Louisa May. *Little Women*. New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004.

No collection relating to female empowerment would be complete without the classic coming-of-age-story featuring Jo, Meg, Beth, and Amy. I purchased this at Barnes and Noble, where I go when I decide I need to acquire a book right this minute. It is a clean, smooth copy, and I hope to return to it someday soon with my current marginalia habits.

Allende, Isabel. *Paula*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2008.

An autobiographical journey through grief, and through the inexhaustible bond between mother and daughter. Allende's description of her spiritual coping mechanisms gave me the courage to explore new directions with my own spirituality. Purchased at a large corporate bookstore, inspired by *Zorro*, which I read for school.

Danticat, Edwidge. *Krik?KraK!* New York: Vintage Books, 1995.

A collection of short stories about a network of Haitian women, extending across generations, during the centuries-old conflict with the Dominican Republic. Weaves together threads of politics, writing, motherhood, and wife expectations like a braid. Its messages make *me*, a Virginian, feel connected to generations of women beyond even my own family, while also encouraging my love of the written word. "When you write, it's like braiding your hair...Some of the braids are long, others are short. Some are thick, others are thin...Like the diverse women in your family" (220).

Frank, Ann. *The Diary of a Young Girl*. New York: Anchor, 1996.

Another classic in a collection about female strength. Frank's introspection encourages my own daily journaling practice.

Hughes, Siân. *The Missing*. Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2010.

Another example, like *Paula*, of a woman mourning a child. An honest, deeply vulnerable poetry collection, *The Missing* exposes the most intimate moments of tears and teeth gnashing, as well as the filling of the void with other, simpler appreciations. My favorite poem in the collection, "Easy," celebrates the consistency of the presence of air, and the way breath unites the living.

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Boston: Perennial, 1998.

Ordered impulsively online years after my first encounter with the novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* always seems to know when I need its advice. I've heard several colloquial terms for this sort of book, "Bible book" among them, but the bottom line is that Hurston's elegant phrases have provided countless mantras for my day-to-day life. "Pheoby's hungry listening help Janie to tell her story." "There are years that ask questions and years that answer." "She called in her soul to come and see."

Schreiner, Olive. *The Story of An African Farm*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Schreiner's daring description of female physical labor and sexuality in Dutch-colonized South Africa was written first under a pen name when she was just 23 years old. I purchased and studied this book during my year in Oxford, where I was stunned at the avant-garde middle section, which inspired me to experiment with form in my own writing.

Smith, Betty. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2005.

What distinguishes this novel in this collection, in addition to its story of a young girl growing up in New York City, is its annotations – first my mother's, and then mine. I am not sure who purchased the book, but it is mine now, as I have claimed it through my markings. My mother and I conversed in the margins of this book, and it is one of the greatest gifts she has given me – the gift of her most immediate thoughts.

Woolf, Virginia. *Orlando*. London: Grafton Books, 1977.

Acquired expediently from a charity shop in Oxford, as soon as a tutor insisted I read it. One of the most radical challenges in this collection to what it means to be feminine, as Orlando's mid-novel gender switch is treated like no more than a change of clothes.

3. Autographs and Inspirations

Baughner, Janée J. *The Body's Physics*. Huntington Beach, CA: Tebot Bach, 2013.

Janée Baughner, my creative writing teacher at Interlochen Arts Camp in 2008, singlehandedly confirmed my love affair with poetry. She took us to the art gallery, where we spent hours in contemplation of a single piece, learning ekphrasis, her own most-used technique. As a dancer I am enamored with the way this collection explores the body from several angles. I honor Janée by purchasing her books, and she honored me, in this case, by scrawling a thank-you note "for being a terrific student" across the title page.

--. *The Coördinates of Yes*. Toronto: Ahadada Books, 2010.

Written during a several month-long solo sojourn across the European continent, *The Coördinates of Yes* is an icon of female independence and discovery. It is also a testament to perseverance, Janée Baughner's first book after decades of writing.

del Campo, Florencia. *Novela Roja*. Buenos Aires: Tren en Movimiento, 2013.

I include this book purely for the story surrounding it. I encountered Florencia del Campo on Couchsurfing.com while searching for opportunities to practice my Spanish in Madrid

during my year abroad. When I learned she had recently published a novel, I took a page out of Janée's book (figuratively), and took a solo sojourn to a tiny bookshop down a charming Madrid backstreet. I later met Florencia for a walk in the park, during which time we conversed in Spanglish about the "writer's life." Her surprise and excitement that I had acquired her book made it clear to me how important it is to maintain a supportive community of writers.

Dermont, Amber. *Damage Control*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2013.

I purchased *Damage Control* while on a writing fellowship to the Iowa Writing Festival in the summer of 2013. I heard Amber Dermont lecture and read, and I couldn't get enough of her tact and natural storytelling ability. When I handed her this beautiful hardback to sign, she wrote, "For Hannah, Glorious and Brilliant. You light up the room with your words. Tell stories!" I peek at her words when I need a confidence boost. She was already aware of the necessity of encouragement I was to discover with Florencia del Campo.

Naslund, Sena Jeter. *Ahab's Wife*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2000.

Autographed, recommended by my grandmother. Acquired in anticipation of a seminar on *Moby Dick* I took in the fall of 2014, after which it has become increasingly significant to me.

Poliakoff-Chen, Phaye. *The Art of Work*. Seattle: Booktrope Editions, 2013.

The author is a professor, now friend, of mine, and the inscription reminds me of our relationship of mutual positivity.

Weiner, Jennifer. *In Her Shoes*. New York: Atria Books, 2002.

This autographed copy represents an exercise in losing preconceptions. When Jennifer Weiner visited Goucher College in the fall of 2014, I felt skeptical about meeting her because I felt her subject matter trivialized the female experience. Yet in hearing her speak, I came to understand that she has her own definition of female empowerment for which she fights, and thought it may include different priorities from my own, I must respect her dedication.

Ten-Book Wishlist

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Adichie, Chimamanda. *Americanah*. New York: Knopf, 2013.

Adichie gave one of my favorite TED talks, “The Danger of a Single Story,” and I am eager to read her specific take on the Nigerian expat experience.

Aidoo, Ama Ata. *Our Sister Killjoy*. London: Longman, 1994.

I plan to study West African literature in graduate school. Ama Ata Aidoo is perhaps the most well-known female Ghanaian writer, and *Our Sister Killjoy* her seminal text.

Danticat, Edwidge. *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.

This collection of the Toni Morrison Lecture Series includes two essays in which I take a particular interest: “I am Not a Journalist” and “Daughters of Memory.” My research suggests that these two lectures will address my fears of moving forward with research about a culture not my own, as well as the female role in preserving tradition.

Munro, Alice. *Too Much Happiness*. New York: Knopf, 2009.

Munro’s *Who Do You Think You Are?* complicated my notions of the “strong woman” by including radical explorations of sexuality. It is important, then, that I read more by Munro to continue to create that sense of productive discomfort. In this collection, the title story features a female mathematician who must emigrate from Russia to Sweden, to the only university in Europe willing to hire a woman in mathematics. My mother is a mathematician and stories of female mathematicians are few and far between, so this seems an opportunity ripe for connection and comparison.

Nair, Anita. *Ladies Coupé*. New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2004.

Appears a lighter read that will also present answers to some important questions about love and dependence. Anita Nair is a well-known Indian writer, and it is important that I expand my collection to South Asia, as it includes no representation of that region currently.

Poniatowska, Elena. *Paseo de la Reforma*. Mexico City: Joaquin Mortiz, 2009.

A dear friend of mine is translating this novella for her senior thesis, and I have been invited to accompany her to meet the author in Mexico City. I must prepare for this opportunity accordingly. I look forward to adding Poniatowska to my list of role model acquaintances.

Robinson, Anna. *Songs from the Flats*. London: Hearing Eye Press, 2005.

An autobiographical collection from a woman of South London. I met Ms. Robinson in Oxford and I admire the way she stays true to her roots by grappling with accurate dialect and brutal honesty about inter-class relations. This particular edition is for sale on her website, in autographed form.

Valenzuela, Luisa. *Cuentos Completos y Uno Más*. Distrito Federal (Mexico): Alfaguara, 1999.

I grew attached to Valenzuela during a self-directed project for a course, especially due to the powerful political nature of her work, which embodies my theory that art should not merely *be*, but *do*. A professor at Goucher has attended a dinner party at her home, so perhaps it is not too much of a dream to meet her?

We Will Be Shelter: Poems for Survival. Ed. Andrea Gibson. Austin, Write Bloody Publishing, 2014.

I recently purchased a copy for a friend, and I would love to add this collection to mine for daily reference. Each poem features an introduction describing the poet, as well as a cause to which the poem speaks. Several sections grapple with feminism in all its incarnations, exploring the boundaries of womanhood and uplifting the woman. Like Valenzuela's work, these are poems that *do* something, largely initiated by women.

Women Writing Africa: West Africa and the Sahel. Ed. Esi Sutherland-Addy. New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2005.

Dr. Sutherland-Addy, the editor of this essay collection, is my dream PhD or Fulbright research advisor. The book as a whole will provide a window into her interests and help me understand a diverse range of female West African perspectives. I suspect it will become a foundational text for my own future research.