

ART AS A STRUGGLE

Writing as a feminist act

Bel Olid



Nadia Sanmartin

If I say that, if you are a woman, writing is a feminist act, you might mention shades of grey or romantic novels, or those guides to being a *perfect whatever* that are often signed by (but not always written by) women. And that's why I shall refine my comment: if you are a woman, writing when it is not to defend the system is an act of feminism. Writing just because, because you need to, because you have something to say. Whatever the result, if you're writing to explore your thoughts, even if your thoughts are not feminist.

It takes time, writing. Time that you're not using to take care of anyone, or make money, or make yourself look nice to please others. In fact, depending on the ideas you express, you might not be pleasing at all. Writing means spending a lot of time alone, thinking your own thoughts. As well as a lot of time reading and listening to other people, and discussing what you read out loud or in your head, in person or across the centuries, and collecting the fruits of these conversations, the ideas that bring you alive, in writing.

The author Alicia Kopf, who won the Documenta Prize for *Brother in Ice*, with international renowned and excellent reviews, could serve as an example of the price you must pay for escaping from your lot, from believing in yourself and doing what you have to do. In interviews she has explained that during the many years she worked away in her study, invisibly and without social recognition, her family questioned the time she spent there. It didn't contribute anything to the family, who needed her, and neither was she earning money. When a man does that, people accept it, end of story. He's a misunderstood artist, or he's so creative... If you're a woman, it's not allowed. After the Documenta Prize, which earned her some money, but above all the prestige of being acknowledged as a *good* writer and a *great* artist, the family's attitudes changed. Now she was actually earning something

for all the time she invested.

But what is the point of art if not the fact that it's free to create? Why is it that we women have to prove that we do it well, that our work will provide something to somebody other than ourselves (money for the family, prestige within the social group, some kind of good for humanity) in order to be allowed the time to create? How do you get to be a good writer other than spending hours and hours writing texts that are not so good? Don't you have the right to write if you're not aiming for anything other than to satisfy a personal desire?

The sexist idea that women feel fulfilled through taking care of other people's needs but men find fulfilment when they please themselves is deeply rooted. So much so that breaking away from this idea and finding the time to explore ourselves is profoundly feminist.

Now let's add in some other factors. What if, as well as being a woman, you're poor? What if you suffer from racism? If you've been looked down on your whole life because you're not the *right kind of woman*? How much strength, how much belief in yourself would you need to sit down and listen to yourself? How much luck, how many contacts and how much work would be needed to give your work the chance to be read one day? How hard would it be for the literary world that has rejected you to stop ignoring you? How much talent would you need before people stop looking down their noses at you and are forced to acknowledge that what you write is literature, without spitting out the word "women's" before, as if it were an awful thing to be a woman and want to express the fact?

Writing takes you out of your place in the world, which is to serve and submit to men's ideas, and gives you a spot amongst those voices who have something to say. Indeed, when you write, you believe you have something to say, and when you want to publish, it's because you believe that what you have to say is worthy of being listened to. That's not at all bad when your whole life you've been told that it's men who are the writers, men who have valid ideas, men who deserve attention.

When I was asked to select a list of works of feminist fiction, rather than non-fiction, the first books that came to mind were those that deal with the usual feminist themes. But then I widened my focus to think about books that had taken me out of my comfort zone because they opened my ears to voices that I hadn't expected to find. They were all books by women authors that had removed themselves from their assigned lots in life and, under the most improbable conditions, had taken the time they needed to create what they felt like. To write the books they wrote is feminist, without a doubt. And so too may it be to publish them, translate them and read them.

When I was a child, I read *The Diary of Anne Frank* and realised that it had been written by a woman. A girl, to be more precise. Certainly without any hope that it would ever be published. But there I was with the book in my hands, and there were parts that moved me. No one gave her permission to think; she simply took it upon herself. It was the first book by a woman that I was aware of reading, and it had been written by someone with the same name as my aunt and cousin. I had been writing since I'd learnt the rudiments, for pleasure, almost in secret. Now, suddenly, I imagined that one day it might be my name on the cover

of a book. It took me a long time—I was almost thirty before my first work was published. But the time came. And it did so because I listened to myself, because I gave myself time, because I believed, contrary to what the world said, that my voice was worth listening to.

Hopefully, this list of books I have put together, with uncertainty and some randomness, will encourage other women to write. I hope that they will find one in which they see themselves reflected and which gives them a push. That dialogues are generated and ideas revealed. Because it is the responsibility of those of us who have more rights, more spaces and more freedoms to try to reach everyone. So that no potential female author stays buried under the weight of the voice (often from without, but even more malicious when it comes from within) that says no, you don't deserve the time you want to dedicate to writing.

Eleven out of ten

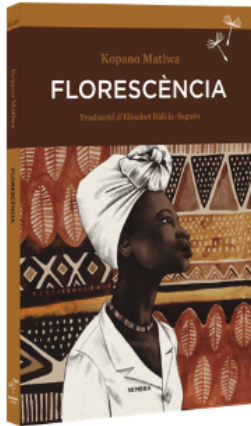
So now it's time to choose. Ten works of fiction that, in my opinion, have contributed to feminism and are worth highlighting. I can't help thinking ten books are too few for such a broad field. But we'd have the same problem if it were 100: how to choose 100 out of so many possible candidates? And how can I be trusted to choose wisely?

I've always been a chaotic reader. One book leads to another, and my reading map has unforgivable holes along with strange densities in areas where I'd be happy to stay forever. I've studied Russian, Catalan, French, English, North American, Latin American, classical and Spanish literature. How can I cover all other literatures, with my skewed baggage of likes and dislikes? What's more, most of the books I studied were far, far removed from feminism. I've dipped into non-canonical books, because they were brought to me by real or imaginary friends, made from cuttings of interests found in the texts I devour or on the internet. Everything I've read by chance, or in looking for reasons for certain deficiencies, makes one thing clear: I simply cannot approach this list as a selection of best books, or even most appropriate ones. I just haven't read widely or variedly enough.

However, what I can do is to think about what has moved me forward by reading it. What has made me feel accompanied. What has inspired me to write or seek out more books. And this is what I've examined. I'm looking for the scars of what I've read in recent years; what has changed me and remained with me. And these beautiful scars, which adorn me and help make me what I am, are books I want everyone to read. Not because they are the best or most relevant or anything like that. They don't need comparisons: they shine with their own light. However, I have tried to provide a degree of variety so that there are diamonds to suit almost any taste. Some have been best sellers, others are hard to find. Poetry and prose, from different corners of the world. A few of them written in Catalan, while others are translations. Some with humour and solemnity, some illustrated and some read out loud.

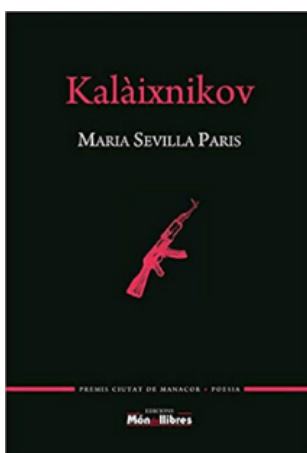
In the end, I've chosen eleven, not ten, just to show the inadequacy of the selection. I'd like this list to inspire you to write to me with your own lists, lists that multiply by thousands, creating unprecedented back-logs on my bedside table. For every ten books I recommend,

you can recommend me eleven more. So together we produce a list that is unusable due to its quantity and variety and extravagance. Fancy joining in? We have our networks, our generosity, our knowledge.



Evening Primrose, Kopano Matlwa

The painful, wondrous presence of the body in feminist practices. Not just a discourse, but a vulnerable and powerful body, in a story about violence against bodies that wants (but fails) to strangle ideas. Matlwa's protagonist confronts the contradiction of being yet not being feminist, of being yet not being xenophobic, of being yet not being privileged. With a red thread of blood trickling through it, leaving its indelible mark.



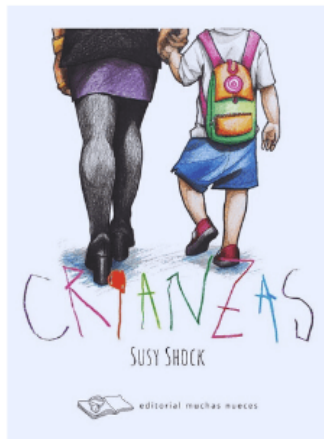
Kalaixnikov, Maria Sevilla

Poems that exude crude beauty and beautiful crudity, Sevilla's poetic subject is viewed without pity or drama. It is poetry best read out loud, like a wound so deep within you that it still festers years after your first contact. And you turn back to examine it, in the certainty that something better will bloom from what was there before you read it.



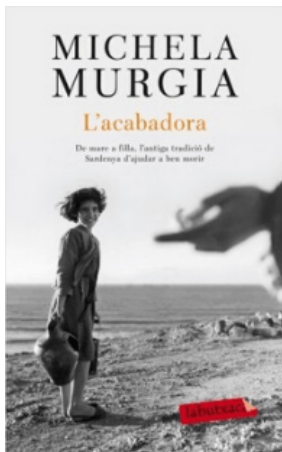
The passion, Jeanette Winterson

Reading Winterson makes you feel more free; to live and to write. She plays with time and space, with genres and much more. And while reading her, you follow the characters on a journey that brings you to yourself, to the centre of what you are, under the cloak of propriety, to what you are not always willing to acknowledge. I don't recommend this over her other works as a matter of preference for the novel itself, but for Dolors Udina's translation into Catalan titled *La passió*, which she has revisited 30 years after her first version, with all the baggage of an exceptional translator at her back and in her heart.



Crianzas, Susy Shock

An aunty trans, as Susy Shock describes herself, writes letter to neighbours, the families of her nephew's classmates, the whole world. The letters are worth keeping close at hand: there are always transphobes, homophobes, sexists ready to express their contempt and aggression. These profoundly political texts were first presented as podcasts on lavaca.org. The collection in this volume is brimming with poetry, strength, humour, light and truth. In short, love of life.



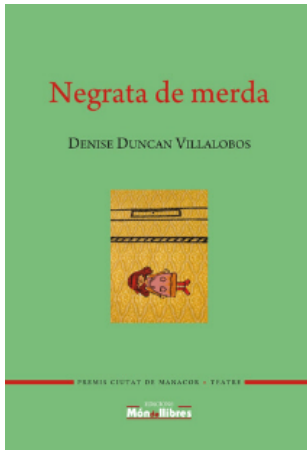
Accabadora, Michela Murgia (translated into English by Sylvester Mazzarell)

Women's networks, women's lives, women's power even in situations where they seem powerless. In a Sardinia both so near and yet so far, the daughter of the *accabadora* recalls the past and shows its impact on the present.



Hadeel, Rafeef Zidah

Though this spoken-word record has not been translated into Catalan, we had the chance to hear it at Barcelona Poesia 2019 and there are numerous subtitled videos of her performances on the internet. Her voice is a flowing stream of consciousness that seeps into your veins, traps you with its truth and rhythm, whose power lies in daring to exist and raise itself in a world that would rather have it silenced.



Negrata de merda, Denise Duncan

What happens when your black daughter tells you, a white mother, that the inevitable has just happened, that she's been called 'a fucking nigger'? What decisions do you make, and why? Denise Duncan has written a play that is perfect in its narrative tension, creating unease in its audience, through dialogues in which racism, condescension, relationships and class prejudice weave a tragedy that is less than epic, but all the more human for it.



Una nena muy blanca, Mariana Komiseroff

Komiseroff's thriller is a tale, a tragedy which is a punch in the face to anyone who has never experienced poverty and has never dared examine it beyond stereotypes and simple superficial headlines. She writes about a complex neighbourhood, full of complex lives. Not just because they're difficult, which they are, but also because they're full of subtleties. Yet, when the moment comes, how delicately the light shines out of the slums of Buenos Aires portrayed in the book.



La senyoreta Keaton i altres bèsties, Teresa Colom

Unreal atmospheres, fantasies and plots to carry you far away. A collection of bizarre delicacies in which the poet Teresa Colom uses the narrative form to highlight the poetry in the stories and images she provides.



Permagel, Eva Baltasar

To be or not to be is not the question. The question is *how* to be, how to exist when you feel both expelled and trapped by life. If you have ever felt suicidal at some point in your life, this book will take your breath away, relativise existential angst, show that if you cannot find a way to exist, life will take you and do to you what it will. And this is not always that a bad thing.



The Diving Pool, Yoko Ogawa (translated into English by Stephen Snyder)

A study of cruelty, a catalogue of unmentionable pleasures. Ogawa destroys the infantilisation, objectification and banalisation of teenage girls we are used to seeing in most canonical literature and presents an edgy protagonist, throbbing with eagerness to experience everything she is suspicious of and nothing more.

**Bel Olid**

Bel Olid is a writer, translator and feminist activist. She is a lecturer for the Department of Catalan Studies at the Autonomous University of Barcelona and a regular columnist for *Nació Digital* and the *El Temps* magazine. She is the current president of the Association of Catalan Language Writers (Associació d'Escriptors en Llengua Catalana -AELC). Her published works include books for both children and young adults, short stories and theoretical reflections such as *The Heroines Fight Back* (*Les heroïnes contraataquen*, 2011), an analytical essay on gender roles in children's literature for which she was awarded the Premi Rovelló for Best Children and Youth Essay. She is the author of *Pocket Feminism: Survival Kit* (*Feminisme de butxaca: kit de supervivència*, 2017), *Interrupted Lives* (*Vides aturades*, 2017) and the recently published *Shall We Fuck? - What we (Don't) Say When we Talk About Sexuality* (*Follem? - De què (no) parlem quan parlem de sexualitats*, 2019)