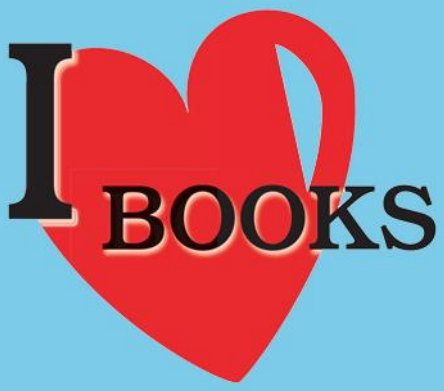

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Opening extract from

Reaching the Stars: Poems About Extraordinary Women and Girls

Written by

Liz Brownlee, Jan Dean & Michaela Morgan

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For the extraordinary Emma

Jan Dean

For Emmelie and Helena, and in memory of Deb Larcombe

Liz Brownlee

To the stars as yet unseen. Shine on

Michaela Morgan

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A Girl Is Born

Here she is. She's small. What shall we call her?
Teeny? Tina?
Look at her toes, tiny strong and curled.
Ready to unfurl.
What shall she be?
A dancer?

Wow! What a noise – a bellow like an animal, loud and lusty.
Strong.
And her eyes blue as an ocean, and as deep.
What shall she be this newborn girl?
Her small hand waves.

Michaela Morgan

Girls of the Week

Monday's girl stands up proud.
Tuesday's girl speaks clear and loud.
Wednesday's girl likes to dream and ponder.
Thursday's girl loves to wander.
Friday's child can be slow – or speedy.
Saturday's child will help the needy.
But the child that is born on the Sabbath day
is as good as the rest in every way.

Michaela Morgan

Girl Power

All the women named in this poem are world-class athletes.

They said, 'You run like a girl.'
And I thought, 'Right. I'll be the speed of light,
sprint fast as Dina Asher-Smith,
or go a Paula Radcliffe distance,
do marathons without assistance.'

They said, 'You throw like a girl.'
And I thought, 'Right. I'll fast-bowl out
of sight,
be Sana Mir or Katherine Brunt,
keen-eyed and steady-headed
as a panther on the hunt.'

'Can't catch,' they said, 'that's like a girl.'
'Yeah, right. Like Sarah Taylor keeping wicket?
Cricket balls fly faster than a roar of speeding cars.'
'Well, girls can't kick,' they said. I laughed.
'Tell that to Abby Wambach,
she could kick a ball from here to Mars.'

They said, 'You think–'
'Stop there,' I said. 'I've no more time to
waste on you.
If you don't get it now, you never will.
If women's strength and cleverness
put your head in a whirl. Just pull yourself
together,
like a girl.'

Jan Dean

Feminism Rules

A feminist feels that women and men should be treated equally. For instance in the workplace, a woman should be paid the same as a man if she is doing the same job. It does not mean that you should be the same as a man. Many men nowadays could be called feminists.

There isn't a ruler
for measuring a feminist
you can stand up for your rights
and still want to be kissed
you can be a fashionista
and have a maths degree
be a model or mechanic
or love embroidery
a woman might be strong
but no one's perfect, not by far
working through your foibles
helps you find out who you are
feminism is a process
a conversation – fight,
things are complicated
often – there is no 'right'
ask questions of your own
of yourself and how you feel
no one has all the answers
if they do – they are unreal.

Believe in yourself, if someone
criticizes, disagree
being a feminist is just being
who *you* are or want to be!

Liz Brownlee

Sugar and Spice?

Sugar and spice and all things nice
That's what little girls are made of.

Burgers and fries, fails and tries
That's what girls are made of.

Strawberry ice creams, hopes and dreams
Plans and schemes, sliced green beans
Puds and pies, hopes that fly
Steel and silk, blood and milk
That's what girls are made of.

Michaela Morgan

Boudicca

When the Romans conquered Britain, Boudicca led a rebellion against them. Her armies destroyed the Roman cities of Colchester, St Albans and London.

Tall in my chariot,
bright as a sword,
my heart beats
like pounding hooves.

I will rise up,
with an ocean of spears, of arrows,
and fall on my enemies
like the iron sea.

I will fill the world
like bitter cold which bites the flesh.
And my enemies will hear my name
and fear me.

I will become the thunderbolt,
I will be the shaking of the earth,
the flood and tidal wave
that sweeps these Romans to their grave.

Jan Dean

Khutulun, Mongolian Warrior Princess

Khutulun was born around 1260, on the Mongolian steppes. Women had the same duties as men: fighting, horse riding and using bows and arrows. She helped her father repel the advances of armies led by the notorious Kublai Khan. She said she would not marry anyone she could beat at wrestling – but the trouble was she was just too good at it. In the end she chose someone she liked and didn't ask him to wrestle her.

Mongolian wrestler
Khutulun,
fought and won
against Kublai Khan.

A princess of
amazing forces,
she'd seize soldiers
off their horses.

Many suitors
came to meet her,
wrestling for love –
but none could beat her.

Liz Brownlee

Fierce Woman

Anne Bonny was a pirate in the Caribbean during the eighteenth century. The story told in this poem is true – she only escaped hanging because she was pregnant, and then she disappeared and no one knows where she went.

Anne Bonny was a pirate
Anne Bonny sailed the sea
Anne Bonny was a hell-cat
And here's her history.

Anne Bonny came from Ireland
From the fair town of Kinsale
She sailed in the crew of Calico Jack
And would fight with tooth and nail.

Anne Bonny crewed on black flag ships
And plundered where she could,
But Jack got caught and so did she
They all came to no good.

And back in old Jamaica
She's sentenced to the rope,
But Anne says she's a child inside
And where there's life there's hope.

So Captain Jack does dangle-dance
His toes tap on thin air,
But Anne escapes and disappears
And no one knows to where.

Jan Dean

QEI

Queen Elizabeth I was the daughter of Henry VIII and his second wife Anne Boleyn. The royal court wanted her to marry so that they would have a strong ruler, but she surprised them by being amazingly good at the job. She ruled well and wisely for forty-four years.

Here's the thing –
The blokes at the top really wanted a king.

Get what I mean?
They weren't keen on a queen.

So when it came to Good Queen Bess,
They thought that was an awful mess.

They thought a ruler must be male,
A girl in charge was sure to fail.

Elizabeth was no one's fool,
Under pressure kept her cool,

And proved a woman really could
Rule well and wisely. She was good.

She reigned alone, in power supreme.
A great and famous English queen.

Jan Dean

Song of the Match Girl

One of the nineteenth century's best-loved stereotypes is that shivering waif the match girl. As well as selling matches, girls (as young as nine) and women made the matches in conditions that led to them losing their hair, their health and their lives. The phosphorus on the white tips of the matches was responsible for a deadly condition known as phossy jaw. In London in 1888, girls and women employed in Bryant and May match factory went on a historic strike to protest against their horrific working conditions. This poem tells their story.

Life is no fairy tale
For a little match girl such as I.
Working all day from dawn to dusk,
Under a leaden sky.

'Course, I'm a big girl now. I'm ten.
So I work a fourteen hour day.
And *if* I don't get fined,
Five shillings a week is my pay.

But I *do* get fined. And so do my friends.
One by one we lose our pay.
For any little reason,
They take our cash away.

For dropping a match. Or a little laugh.
For any pause in a long long day.
For any tiny break,
They take our money away.

So strike, girls, strike!
Fewer hours! More pay!
And no more fines!
And safer work!
Listen to what we say!

We are a band of strong girls.
We keep our spirits high!
But the work we do is killing us,
And I'm too young to die.

My friends have yellowed skin.
Some have thinning hair.
And the unlucky have the phossy jaw,
Which makes the people stare.

That phosphorus is killing us.
It eats at us bit by bit.
What eats away at our skin and bone
Is that tiny white matchstick tip.

The tip is as white as a grinning skull.
As white as a winding sheet.
As white as the pus on an open sore,
White as the demon's claw.

It's as white as the ice in the bosses' hearts.
As white as the frost on their souls.
As white as the spirits that howl in the night,
Who wail to the world their woes.

So strike, girls, strike!
Shine a light to the rest of the world.
Fight the fight, strike a light,
Show them what we are worth.

Strike, girls, strike!
Fewer hours! More pay!
And no more fines!
And safer work!
Listen to what we say!

Michaela Morgan

Petticoats

They sound light
So pretty, so petty
But the hard facts are
They are heavy.

For respectability I can wear up to six at a time.
They give me greater grace. Make me look weightless.
I am fragility, floating. I am delicacy dancing.

I tote this weight of delicacy everywhere I go.
So hot in the heat. So wild in the wind. Walking is weightlifting.
My clouds of petticoats soak up the rain, drag me down.
Keep me in when I want to go out.
Snow is a no go. So, no, no. I just look at it from afar.
So white, so fragile. Light as feathers.

Whatever the weather my petticoats will sully and sulk.
So I stay still and sew. Stitching new decorations for my petticoats.
The sofa is the place to be. So far and no farther.
The place for me.

Michaela Morgan

Stays

They call them corsets
Or ‘stays’.
And stay is what you must do when
    wearing them.
Stay.

Stay upright.
Stay quiet.
Stay still.
No room to breathe.
No air to run or shout or laugh out loud.

Contained, obedient.
Good girl!
Stay!

Michaela Morgan

Ask Eleanor

About 150 years ago, Eleanor Ormerod was a world expert on insects. She was self-taught and invented ways of getting rid of insect pests. In 1889 the American government asked for her help when national stocks of flour were infested with caterpillars. Their own scientists couldn't solve the problem, but Eleanor Ormerod did.

If it creeps or it crawls
in cracks in the walls,
if it's wormy and wriggles,
hairy-tickly as giggles,
if it's beetles or flies,
with wings soft as sighs,
or has composite eyes
and a sting-tail surprise,
but you don't know its name
– which is rather a shame –
ask Eleanor.

Are bugs eating the best
of your veg? That's a pest.
Are there holes in your vest
where the moths come to rest?

Are you feeling distressed
by a small biting guest?
Are you itching to blame it,
but can't really name it?
Ask Eleanor.

What is eating your rafters,
with floorboards for afters?
What's munching your chairs
and the treads of your stairs?
The roof will come tumbling,
the walls will fall crumbling,
but you can't recall
what started it all?
Ask Eleanor.

For Eleanor knows
what's destroying your rose,
knows wasps and knows weevils
and all of their evils.
Maggots and grubs
that feast on your shrubs
are all known in full.
No, bugs are not dull . . .
Ask Eleanor.

Jan Dean