FEMINIST HISTORY FOR EVERY DAY OF THE YEAR

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KATE MOSSE

FEMINIST HISTORY FOR EVERY DAY OF THE YEAR



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As always, for my beloved Greg, Martha,
Felix, Ollie, Finn & Lily

and for my wonderful niece Ellen Huxley
(my Lionesses partner-in-crime)

'I have lived to see my lost causes found.'

Pauli Murray

'I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is: I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat . . .'

Rebecca West

'Women belong in all places where decisions are being made. It shouldn't be that women are the exception.'

Ruth Bader Ginsburg

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Introduction

When you take a look in the mirror, what do you see? I don't mean the colour of your hair or eyes or skin, nor how tall you are or your clothes size. Beyond those things, what do you see? An astronaut or a doctor? A biologist or architect? An environmental activist or a headliner at Glastonbury? Perhaps a tech wizard or a Paralympian, a teacher or a police officer?

There should be no barriers to what a girl or woman can achieve, no obstacles put in her way. There should be no barriers for trans or non-binary people either, nor for boys or men. For anybody. And even though there are no individual entries for men or boys in this book – since it was inspired by the idea of putting missing women and girls back into history – there is a chapter celebrating amazing male feminist allies and how feminism is as much about an attitude, a state of mind, as gender. For things to be fairer, better, we've all got to be in this together.

But the simple truth is that, for most of history, society has tried to put limits on what women and girls are allowed to do. And it's not just the distant past. Did you know that women in Switzerland couldn't vote or stand for election until 1971? Or that until 1975 women in the UK couldn't open a bank account in their own name? Or that girls in Afghanistan in 2025 are not allowed to go to school after the age of eleven?

When people try to take away our freedoms, we have to speak up.



Pretoria Women's March of 1956

This book is a celebration of some of the trailblazers who refused to accept the limitations put on them, who campaigned and marched, battled and challenged the status quo to change the world for the better. There are stories of resilience and hope, loss and triumph, sexism and liberation, joy and brilliance. You'll meet hundreds of inspirational women, girls and non-binary people who deserve to be household names, some from the distant or recent past, others who are making history today.

They could be you. They *are* you.

This book will take you through time and space, to every corner of the world and to the stars above. From Ancient Egypt to modern-day Britain and everything in between. At its heart is the idea that everyone – wherever they come from, whatever they look like, tall or short, whatever the colour of their skin, whatever their gender or sexuality, whatever their nationality, whenever they lived – should be free to be who they want to be.

That's what feminism means – fairness.

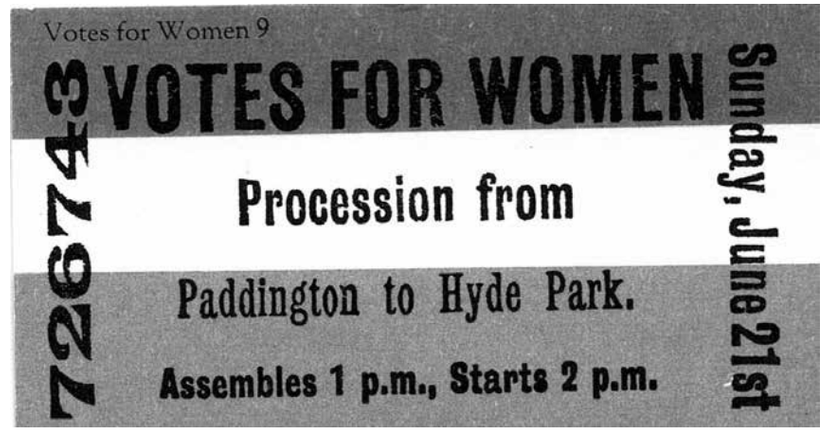
Because I'm a writer – and passionately believe in the importance of women and girls telling their own stories – there are lots of writers in this book. If you were making

your own list of trailblazers, you might choose some of the same women, or maybe come up with a completely different line-up. That doesn't matter. Since 190,000 BCE some 117 billion people have been born on Earth, and 8.2 billion are alive today. That's a lot of women jostling to be heard. *Feminist History for Every Day of the Year* is just the beginning of a conversation to put back into the history books all the women and girls whose achievements have gone unrecorded or overlooked. By saying their names loudly and proudly, we can tell the whole story of *all* the people who made history.

Together.

A couple of things to bear in mind before you start reading.

First, quite a lot of our feminist heroines are the first to do something. But these 'firsts' only count if they are the beginning of changing opportunities for other women and girls, too. After the first, there must be a second, a tenth, a hundredth, until it is no longer unusual to see a woman in a



Ticket to WSPU procession on Sunday 21 June 1908

position once only occupied by a man.

Second, you can read this book any way you want. You might begin at the beginning on 1 January, or sneak a peek at your birthday, or find another date that is special to you. You could look up women you already know in the index or start with those who you've never heard of. You might be drawn to particular periods of history or parts of the world, and there's a useful glossary of abbreviations and organizations listed at the back. Again, that doesn't matter. This is your book. Being interested in history is like being a detective: following clues. You never know what you might find or what might spark your interest. Each of the entries is just a brief snapshot of the lives of an amazing woman or girl, intended to start you on your own journey of discovery. Look them up, research, find out more.

Third, although this book is a celebration of women who've done extraordinary things, we mustn't fall into the trap of only paying attention to those we like. Pirate commanders and military leaders, women of faith and women of science, climate campaigners or politicians – you don't have to agree with every single thing someone says or does to acknowledge their achievements and admire them. Some of the women in this book were complicit in dreadful things, but it's still important that we don't scrub them from history. Knowing everything is how we learn and make things fairer.

Finally, without knowing our feminist past we don't know how far we've come and who we are today. Rights are never given. They are fought for and can be taken away

again. They need to be protected. History matters. Women listening to other women matters, women standing shoulder to shoulder matters.

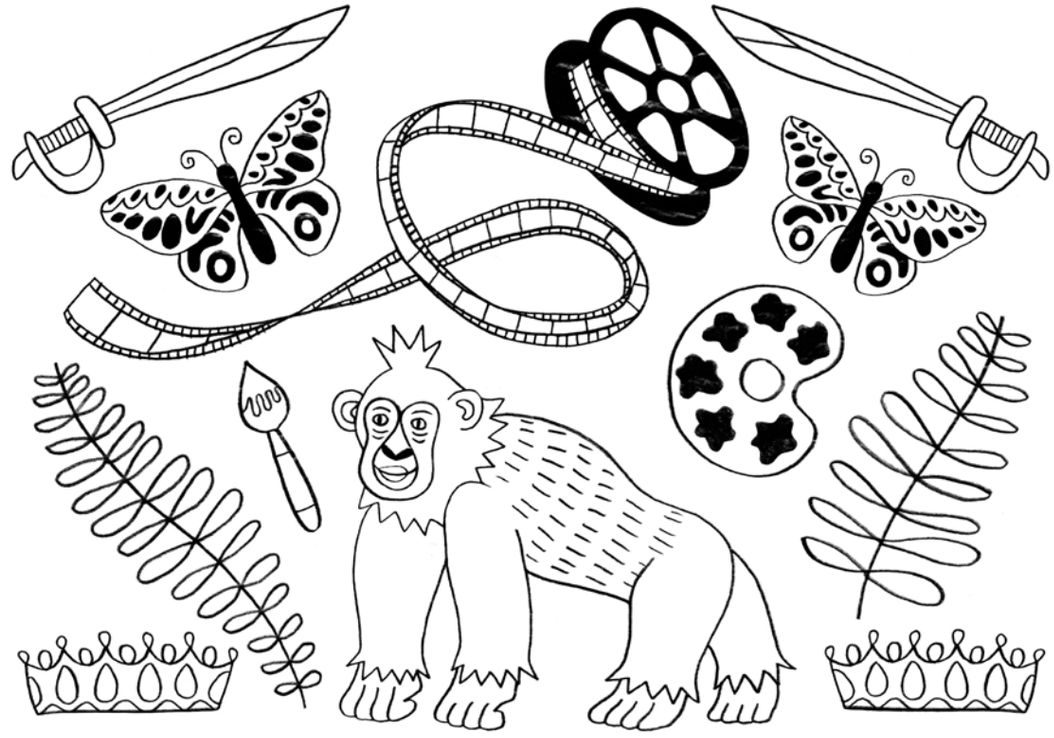
Sisterhood works.

Now go back to the mirror. Look at yourself again and tell yourself again that you have the right to be anyone you want, to use your talent and your passion, to lead a life unlimited.

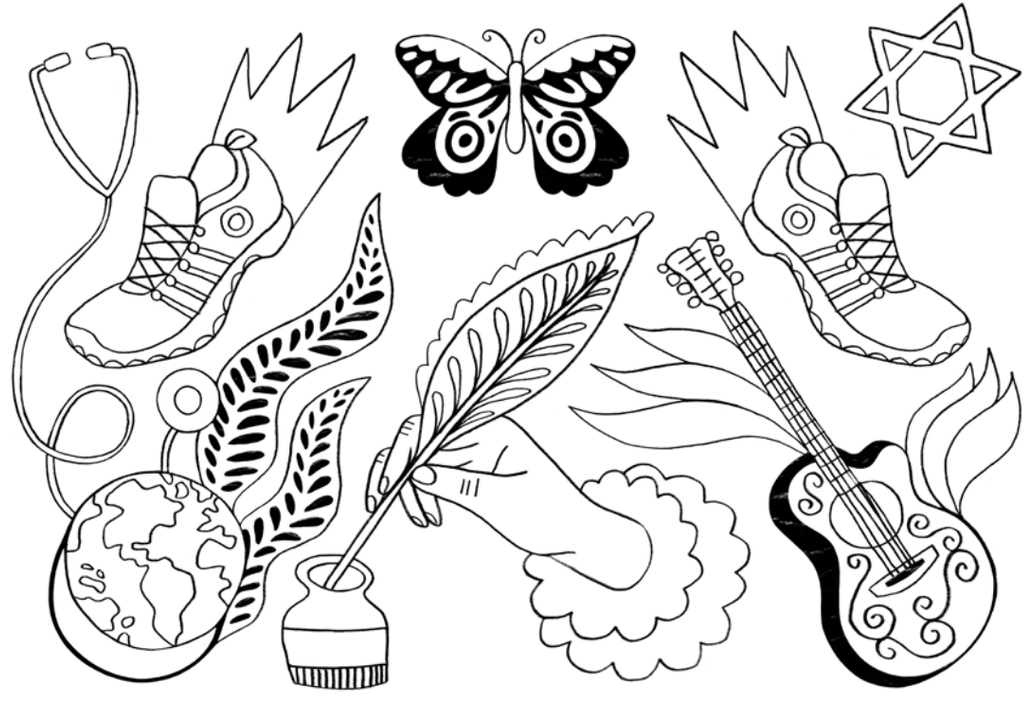
These are complicated and challenging times, but they are also beautiful and full of wonder. Spend time in the company of these extraordinary women and girls, be inspired by them, argue with them, laugh with them, remember them. Then, roll up your sleeves and take the world by storm.



Kate Mosse
June 2025



JANUARY



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1 January ➳ Mary Shelley

The Gothic masterpiece *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* was published anonymously – as most books written by women were at this time – on New Year's Day 1818.

Shelley had the idea for the novel two years earlier when she was only eighteen. She'd already suffered a great deal of trauma in her life – her mother had died shortly after giving birth to her, she had fallen in love, eloped and later married the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, her first child had died and they were frequently in debt and homeless.

In 1816, they were staying with their four-month-old baby and friends at Lake Geneva in Switzerland. It was a summer of black skies and endless rain. Trapped indoors, the friends challenged one another to come up with a ghost story to pass the dark evenings. One night, as thunder and lightning echoed off the lake, Shelley had a vision: 'I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life.'

The monster was born, the invention of scientist Dr Frankenstein.

Often described as the first science fiction novel (though this was actually Margaret Cavendish's 1666 novel *The Blazing World*), *Frankenstein* was a runaway bestseller. Though critics condemned it as too sensationalist and gruesome – one even questioned the author's sanity – readers loved it.

It was not until a second edition, printed in Paris in 1821, that Mary Shelley's name appeared on the title page.

2 January ➳ Florence Bridgwood

The child star Florence Bridgwood was born in Ontario on 2 January 1886. Her mother was a music hall performer who had emigrated from Ireland to Canada during the Great Famine. Bridgwood made her stage debut at the age of three – singing, dancing, reciting poems – and, by the time she was six, she was known as 'Baby Flo, the Child Wonder'.

When her mother's theatre troupe split up, Bridgwood went to America. During her long career, she appeared in almost 300 films and, at the height of her fame, she was known as the 'Biograph Girl', one of the leading ladies in silent movies produced by the film company – Biograph – she worked for. She is considered by many as the world's first movie star.

3 January ➳ Velu Nachiyar

Meet the first of our warrior queens: courageous women who took up arms to protect their land or those they loved.

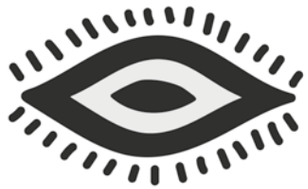
Born in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu on 3 January 1730, Velu Nachiyar was trained in martial arts, horse riding and archery, and spoke several languages, including Urdu, French and English. At the age of sixteen, she was married to the king of Sivaganga. When he was killed in battle, Nachiyar escaped with their daughter, raised an army of 5,000 soldiers and fought against the British East India Company in 1780, who were trying to seize her lands. Victorious, she established her own women's army and ruled until her death on Christmas Day 1796.



4 January ➳ Ellie Simmonds

When British Paralympian Ellie Simmonds was appointed MBE in the New Year Honours List 2009, at the age of just fourteen, the newspapers made much of the fact that she was the youngest MBE ever.

In her swimming career, Simmonds broke every record going and won a cabinet's worth of gold, silver and bronze medals at the Paralympic Games, the World and the European championships. She's now an ambassador for the Scout Association, a Girlguiding leader and a patron of the Dwarf Sports Association UK (DSAuk).



5 January ➳ K. V. Switzer

The American long-distance runner Kathrine Switzer was born on 5 January 1947.

On a cold morning in 1967, K. V. was standing on the start line of the 71st Boston Marathon. She and her coach had studied the rules and nowhere did it say that women were not allowed to compete, so she signed the form with her initials – as she always did – and posted it in. This made her the first woman to run the race wearing an official bib – number 261.

It was not until the race had started that the director realized there was a woman running alongside the men. He tried to drag Switzer off the road and pull the bib from her back. The attempt was caught on camera and broadcast around the world. Switzer remembers a man at the roadside



Runner Kathrine Switzer attacked by race official Jock Semple while running in the 1967 Boston Marathon

yelling: 'Go home to your husband and make him dinner,' but also a woman shouting: 'Come on, honey, do it for all of us.'

As a result, the American Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) banned women from competing in races against men, but female (and some male) athletes and coaches campaigned until the ban was finally lifted. In 1972, Boston established a women's race. Switzer won the 1974 New York City Marathon in three hours, seven minutes and twenty-nine seconds – she fell short of her goal to run the marathon in under three hours, but got her personal best in the Boston Marathon the year after with 2:51:37, where she came second.

In 2017, fifty years after her first run – and wearing the same bib number, 261 – she ran Boston again, this time with more than 13,000 other women racing alongside her.

It just goes to show how one woman with determination can change the world.

6 January ➳ Roza Robota

On this day in 1945, the Polish-Jewish resistance fighter Roza Robota was executed at Auschwitz.

Robota grew up in Ciechanów in Poland. When the Nazis took control, she was forced into a ghetto, an area of the city where Jewish families were forced to live against their will in terrible conditions and kept apart from the rest of the population. During the Second World War, more than a thousand ghettos were established by the Nazis to segregate and imprison European Jewish people.

In 1942, Robota was deported from Ciechanów to a concentration camp. The rest of her family were murdered in the gas chambers, but she was assigned to one of the Sonderkommando units in Auschwitz II – Birkenau, where prisoners were forced to work for the Nazi regime. Put to work in the munitions factory, Robota and three other women smuggled gunpowder to the underground resistance in the camp, who were planning a revolt.

By 7 October 1944, everything was ready. They succeeded in blowing up one of the gas chambers and putting the other out of action. Hundreds of SS officers were injured and some killed. Robota managed to escape, but was quickly caught. Although she was tortured, she did not reveal the names of the men who had organized the revolt.

On Saturday, 6 January 1945, in the cold and the mist, the four women were hanged. It was the last public execution at Auschwitz. Two weeks later, the camp was evacuated. Three

weeks after their deaths, the camp was liberated. Now 27 January each year is commemorated as Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD).



Roza Robota

7 January ➳ Caster Semenya

Caster Semenya, one of the most successful female South African middle-distance runners of all time, was born on 7 January 1991.

She has won two Olympic gold medals, three World Championship golds and two from the Commonwealth Games, but despite this, Semenya has had to fight just as hard off the track as on it for her achievements to be accepted and honoured.

Semenya was born female and was raised as a girl, but because she has elevated testosterone levels she has some physical characteristics that differ from those associated with a specific gender. Some call this 'intersex', but in her autobiography Semenya rejects that term and simply describes herself as a 'different sort of woman'.

Just before competing in the 2009 World Championships, Semenya was forced to undergo tests to prove she was a woman. She won the 800 metres all the same – and World Athletics allowed her to keep her title – but after that, she was forced to take medication to reduce her naturally high testosterone levels, medication that made her ill. These matters are complicated, but victimizing a woman born differently is not the way to make things fairer. When the permitted testosterone levels were lowered again in 2018, Semenya challenged the rules in the European Court of Human Rights. Five years later, in July 2023, the Court ruled in her favour.

8 January ➳ Elizabeth Hooton

Elizabeth Hooton was a 17th-century preacher from Nottingham. She was the first female Quaker minister. The Society of Friends – known as the Quakers – was founded in England in 1652, based on principles of simplicity, peace, integrity, community, equality and stewardship. Good principles, you'd have thought, except that the ruling Protestants of the time – known as Puritans – did not allow any other forms of worship, so they persecuted the Quakers. Hooton was one of a group of maybe sixty travelling preachers in the north of England known as the 'Valiant Sixty' for their courage in speaking out against the official Church of England.

Imprisoned and tortured for her beliefs, Hooton travelled to the West Indies, Boston and Massachusetts, where Quaker communities were also under attack. Despite hardship, Hooton never stopped proclaiming what she believed in. She died in Jamaica on 8 January 1672.

9 January ➳ Simone de Beauvoir

The French philosopher, novelist, travel writer, political thinker and feminist activist Simone de Beauvoir was born in Paris on 9 January 1908. One of the towering figures of 20th-century literature, she is best known for her groundbreaking 1949 book *The Second Sex*, one of the building blocks of Western feminism.

With her famous phrase



de Beauvoir was the first to try to explain what we now call sex–gender distinction: that's to say the difference between biological sex and the concept of gender, which is socially constructed. She opposed marriage – though she was in a relationship with French writer Jean-Paul Sartre for most of her life – and believed in sexual freedom for women as well as men. In 1954, she was the third woman to be awarded the Prix Goncourt, the most important literary award in France.

Parisian to her bones, she died there in 1986.

10 January ➳ Ella Baker

On 10 January 1957, the Black civil rights leader Martin Luther King invited sixty Black ministers and community leaders to Ebenezer Church in Atlanta, Georgia, to debate how to make American society fairer for Black Americans. Out of that meeting came the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), a group that became very important in the fight for racial equality.

Ella Baker was one of those advising him that day. A civil rights and human rights activist, she was the first staff member hired by the SCLC and is one of the unsung heroines of the civil rights movement.

Baker was a teacher and journalist who encouraged grassroots activism, believing that women and men should advocate for themselves and change their communities from within. She spoke out against sexism in the civil rights movement and worked for the NAACP (the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), as well as helping to found the SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee).

Baker died in 1986 and was inducted into the American Women's Hall of Fame in 1994. In 2009, she was remembered by the issue of an American postage stamp with her picture on it.