# Muse, Martyr, Mother, Monarch: Writing Women in History

Writing female characters that transcend tropes and come alive on the page is a challenging—and crucial—task for any writer. When those women lived decades, centuries, or even millennia ago, the work of the writer becomes even more complex. This panel will explore the process and practices of four women novelists who’ve featured powerful female characters, from a 19th century astronomer to an 18th century Russian empress, jazz age Chicago artists, and American slaves in antebellum Ohio.

## Statement

The lives of women, and what we face at every level of our professional and personal development, have never been more amplified than they are today. Reimagining and reframing those lives in the pages of our stories is crucial for our culture is to evolve and thrive. This panel will engage with the most important practical and creative issues facing both novice and accomplished writers of fiction working in historical settings.

## Panelists:

* **Amy Brill’s** articles, essays, and short stories have appeared in *One Story*, *The Common*, *Electric Literature, Medium*, and *Real* *Simple*, among others, and in anthologies including *Before and After: Stories from New York,* and *Labor Day.* A Pushcart Prize nominee, she has been awarded a New York Foundation for the Arts fellowship, as well as residencies at the Edward Albee Foundation, Jentel, the Millay Colony, Fundación Valparaiso, the Constance Saltonstall Foundation, and the American Antiquarian Society. Her first novel, [*The Movement of Stars*](https://bookshop.org/books/the-movement-of-stars/9781594632372), is about a female astronomer on Nantucket in the 1840s. She lives in Brooklyn with her family.
* **Rebecca Makkai** is the Chicago-based author of the novels[*The Great Believers*](https://bookshop.org/books/the-great-believers/9780735223530)*,*[*The Hundred-Year House*](https://bookshop.org/books/the-hundred-year-house/9780143127444), and [*The Borrower*](https://bookshop.org/books/the-borrower/9780143120957), as well as the short story collection [*Music for Wartime*](https://bookshop.org/books/music-for-wartime-stories/9780143109235). *The Great Believers*was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, and received the ALA Carnegie Medal and the LA Times Book Prize, among other honors. Makkai is on the MFA faculties of Sierra Nevada College and Northwestern University, and she is Artistic Director of [StoryStudio Chicago](https://www.storystudiochicago.com/).
* **Dolen Perkins-Valdez** is the author of the *New York Times* bestseller [*Wench*](https://bookshop.org/books/wench/9780061706561), and a second novel, *Balm*. Her fiction has appeared in *The Kenyon Review*, *StoryQuarterly*, *StorySouth*, and elsewhere. In 2011, she was a finalist for two NAACP Image Awards and the Hurston-Wright Legacy Award for fiction. She was also awarded the First Novelist Award by the Black Caucus of the American Library Association. A graduate of Harvard and a former University of California President’s Postdoctoral Fellow at UCLA, An associate professor of creative writing at American University, Dolen lives in Washington, DC with her family.
* **Irina Reyn** is the author of three novels: [*What Happened to Anna K.*](https://bookshop.org/books/what-happened-to-anna-k/9781416558941) (winner of the Goldberg Prize for Jewish Fiction from the Foundation for Jewish Culture); The Imperial Wife; and[*Mother Country*](https://bookshop.org/books/mother-country/9781250076045). She is also the editor of the anthology [*Living on the Edge of the World: New Jersey Writers Take on the Garden State*](http://irinareyn.com/books/living-on-the-edge-of-the-world/)*.* Irina’s writing has appeared in publications such as *Ploughshares*, *One Story, Post Road, Tin House, The Los Angeles Times, Town & Country Travel,* and *Poets & Writers*, and has been widely anthologized. She teaches fiction writing at the University of Pittsburgh.

## Introductions and brief readings (3-4 minutes each)

## Questions, answers, conversations

* We have each written novels that interpret women of different time periods through the lens of contemporary concerns... what are the risks and rewards of this process? Where are the hazards and pitfalls of this process?
* Why are we drawn to writing women in other time periods? What are we hoping to discover as writers?
* When does “history” begin? Twenty years ago? Thirty years ago? Before the author was born? Is our claim to writing women of the past more authentic if we lived through that era? Or are linked in some way to those who did?
* How do we address technical challenges from dialogue, to research to voice?
* Let’s talk about agency, which good fiction often relies on to succeed. Characters who shape their own narratives, take action, make narrative waves—these are the memorable ones. Think Girl With a Pearl Earring, Year of Wonders, huge popular works in which the protagonists were very much running the story. But do these stories tend to invest women in other eras with a level of control over their lives that they may not have had? Does it matter? Can realism and a great story coexist? How do we balance these potentially competing ideas?
* To take that further… speaking on power: let’s talk about writing the realms in which women did have and wield power, and what role those stories might play in our contemporary world.
* Given the scarcity of materials about women's lives in other eras, how do we go about filling out the historical record? What resources do we call on to flesh out women's stories? How much imagination can or should infuse our renditions of their lives?
* On the role of imagination… this is especially important to keep talking about, as we debate appropriation versus imagination; whether stories can “belong” to anyone, and if so, who decides, and what are the criteria? I’m thinking of a book like *Wash,* a story about a male slave, written by a white women, and celebrated widely, versus a book written by a white woman about a Mexican woman, widely vilified. What makes one book about a woman, by a woman, appropriative, where a book about a person of another gender and race isn’t? And if we are writing about history—isn’t it all appropriative in some way? Since none of us lived in the past?
* What about the issue of "likability"? Readers often demand to "like" characters in fiction and seem to judge "unlikable" women characters in particular. Do we smooth the rough edges or accentuate them?

## Questions from the audience