

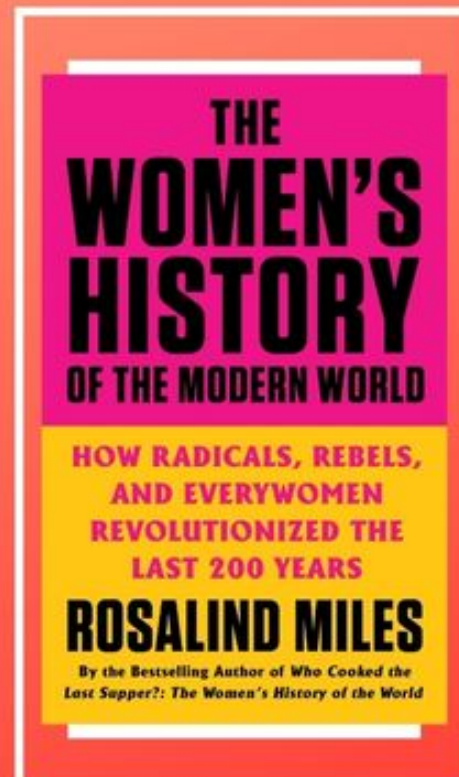


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Rosalind Miles Mines History to Bring Us the Women Who Dared

The author, historian, and activist talks to Shondaland about her new book, "The Women's History of the Modern World."

By K.L. Romo FEB 1, 2021



ROSALIND MILES/SHONDALAND

“As a child, I cannot remember when I realized that to most people, girls were less important than boys,” says Rosalind Miles in her newest book, *The Women's History of the Modern World — How Radicals, Rebels, and Everywomen Revolutionized the Last 200 Years*.

Noting a statement by Pulitzer Prize-winning American historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich — “well-behaved women seldom make history” — Miles shines a spotlight on these rebels who've fought to gain equality in a man's world.

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I am in love with all the brave female movers and shakers who dragged us into the modern age, often in the teeth of violence and hatred.

Evidenced by Kamala Harris, elected as the first female Vice President of the United States, women have rocked the race toward equality. Other well-known women paved the path — Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman elected to Congress; Oprah Winfrey, the first woman to produce her own talk show; Jennifer Welter, the first woman coach in the NFL; and sixteen-year-old Malala Yousafzai, the youngest person to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014.

In the *The Women's History of the Modern World*, Miles also highlights lesser-known trailblazers absent from history books, such as Sarah and Angelina Grimké, who led the American Anti-Slavery Society; Margaret Sanger, the mother of birth control; and heroine of the Belgian resistance during WWII, Andrée de Jongh.

But we still have a long way to go.

Researching the writings of over 266 authors, Miles encapsulates the stories of hundreds of women's rights heroes. Her ability to absorb and assimilate so many facts is a testament to her extreme command of history. She chats with Shondaland about her hopes for women, overcoming gender inequality, and mentoring mothers returning to the workforce.

K.L. ROMO: Do you consider *The Women's History of the Modern World* a rallying cry for women?

ROSALIND MILES: Yes, very much so. If it prompts other women to look back at our recent history and take its lessons forward into the present, we would all have a very different and better future. The women of the past were held back by two factors — being at the mercy of their biology, which condemned them to inescapable childbearing and being denied basic human rights like legal identity.

The fight against these wrongs was first led by women like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who organized the world's first Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls in 1848, and Margaret Sanger, who pioneered birth control from 1912 onwards. Working with other women, and also good men over the last 200 years, these women made the modern world. We need to live up to their example.

KLR: How is this book different from your previous one, *Who Cooked the Last Supper*?

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RM: *Who Cooked the Last Supper?* aka *The Women's History of the World*, begins when the first cell, which was female, crawled out of the first slime and originated life on earth, then covers thousands of years. Yet everything that has freed women from the chains of the past has happened in the last two hundred years and was crying out for attention. *The Women's History of the Modern World* picks up where *Who Cooked the Last Supper* left off and carries women's stories into the 21st century.

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KLR: From your vast research and experience, what inequalities still face women today, and how can we overcome them?

RM: Throughout history, there has been the fixed belief that men are superior to women, and men should run the world. Women's inferiority is attributed to God (every religion insists on the subordination of women), to nature (they are smaller and weaker), and even to evolution (Darwin decreed that every woman is "inferior in mind" to men, because "her skull is intermediate between that of a child and a man").

To reinforce male domination, every era has reinvented the notion of women's inferiority — reinforced by religion, tradition, the law, and education.

Women have made inspirational gains in challenging and overcoming this concept, but even now, we are nowhere equal to men. We must move on from reclaiming our past to taking our share of the power to re-shape the future.

KLR: Tell us more about your *Women's Manifesto for Equality — A Blueprint for Revolution*, which outlines six action items (all non-violent, I should add).

RM: Every revolution, every social movement for democracy, every claim for equality, has stopped short of equality for women. Once they stop killing girl babies, the world's women will outnumber men. If women had equality, we would be in the majority in every legislature, executive body, armed force, financial structure, church, mosque, and every big or little league in the world.

In 1972, both the Democratic and Republican parties approved the Equal Rights Amendment in America, which was then passed by both Houses of Congress and backed by two successive Presidents, Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter. The next year it sailed through the ratification process required by the Constitution, and won 30 of the 38 states needed to make it the law, before an alliance of vested interests strangled it. I want to see the US revisit the ERA and get it done.

KLR: You've consulted and cited books and writings of over 266 authors for *The Women's History of the Modern World*. How do you keep up with and incorporate the thousands of facts included in the book?

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RM: After college, I spent four years at a research institute where I learned how to identify what you need instead of reading every word. That meant following the old military objective, "Selection and Maintenance of Aim" — keep your eye on the ball and don't get distracted by other stuff, no matter how interesting.

I am also blessed (or cursed) with a retentive memory. My mind is like an old attic packed with stuff you don't know if you'll ever need, but you can't bear to throw away.

A portrait of Harriet Tubman
HISTORICAL / GETTY IMAGES

KLR: Do you have any favorite rebel women in history?

RM: I am in love with all the brave female movers and shakers who dragged us into the modern age, often in the teeth of violence and hatred. Why did British suffragettes wear such big hats at their demonstrations? — to protect themselves from being hit on the head with half-bricks.

My favorite heroine is Harriet Tubman because she fought against double discrimination, as a woman and as a Black person. Her courage in repeatedly returning to rescue others from their plantations is beyond compare. I also relish the touch of steel that made her refuse to allow any of the "passengers" on her Underground Railroad to turn back if they lost their nerve. Drawing her gun, she would just quietly stick it in their ear and say, "You'll go free or you'll die a slave."

KLR: You've also written novels centered on the struggles of famous historical women, such as Elizabeth I, Guenevere, and Isolde. How do fictional accounts bring their history to life, and how do your fictional portrayals compare to their struggles to escape expectations and stereotypes?

RM: History records actions, rarely motives. Even when individuals recount what they did, they don't always understand it themselves. Why did Henry VIII come to hate Anne Boleyn so madly that he celebrated her death by dancing in yellow satin, when he had loved her so deeply that he split Christianity in two? Fiction allows the writer to use the tools of modern psychology to fill in the gaps, to explore, and to invent.

Others' expectations governed the lives of most people in the past; they had little freedom to avoid their fate. The lack of that freedom is still true for most women, especially those living outside the western world, under the tyranny of grotesque practices like female genital mutilation, still glorified as "tradition." Women everywhere are still far more subject to the demands and expectations of others, now long hardened into the harmful stereotypes we have only just begun to identify and call out.

KLR: You've helped women succeed in the workforce through your work with the Coventry Centre at Coventry University. How can the business community help women reach their career goals?

RM: The great question posed by Betty Friedan that started the Women's Movement — "Is this all?" — triggered a worldwide wave of self-examination for women. The Coventry Centre was established to help women find their own answers to this question, to widen their horizons beyond the domestic and build their confidence, and to offer training and encouragement to return to work.

Work is such a vital component of freedom and fulfilment, offering opportunities for change and growth, self-determination, and financial independence, that it forms an essential highway to equality. Part of our struggle is to get the world of work to conform to women's lives as workers and mothers, rather than forcing women into man-shaped holes dug according to man-made rules.

KLR: Tell us something about yourself your fans might not already know.

RM: I have met Princess Diana, Nelson Mandela and Her Majesty the Queen.

K.L. Romo is a freelance writer, novelist, and book reviewer living near Dallas, Texas. Her writing has appeared in The Writer, Narratively, Library Journal, Washington Independent Review of Books, and Your Teen Magazine, among others. Please visit her on Twitter at [@KLRomo](#).

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