

# "Scribbling Women"

True Tales from Astonishing Lives

*A celebration of women writers  
and their priceless legacy*

In 1855, Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote to his publisher, complaining about the irritating fad of "scribbling women". Whether they were written by professionals, by women who simply wanted to connect with others, or by those who wanted to leave a record of their lives, those "scribbles" are fascinating, informative, and instructive.

Margaret Catchpole was a transported prisoner whose eleven letters provide the earliest record of white settlement in Australia. Writing hundreds of years later, Aboriginal writer Doris Pilkington-Garimara wrote a novel about another kind of exile in Australia. World traveler and journalist Nelly Bly used her writing to expose terrible injustices. Sei Shonagan has left us poetry and journal entries that provide a vivid look at the pampered life and intrigues in Japan's imperial court. Ada Blackjack, sole survivor of a disastrous scientific expedition in the Arctic, fought isolation and fear with her precious Eversharp pencil. Dr. Dang Thuy Tram's diary, written in a field hospital in the steaming North Vietnamese jungle while American bombs fell, is a heart-breaking record of fear and hope.

Many of the women in *"Scribbling Women"* had eventful lives. They became friends with cannibals, delivered babies, stole horses, and sailed on whaling ships. Others lived quietly, close to home. But each of them has illuminated the world through her words.

*"Scribbling  
Women"*

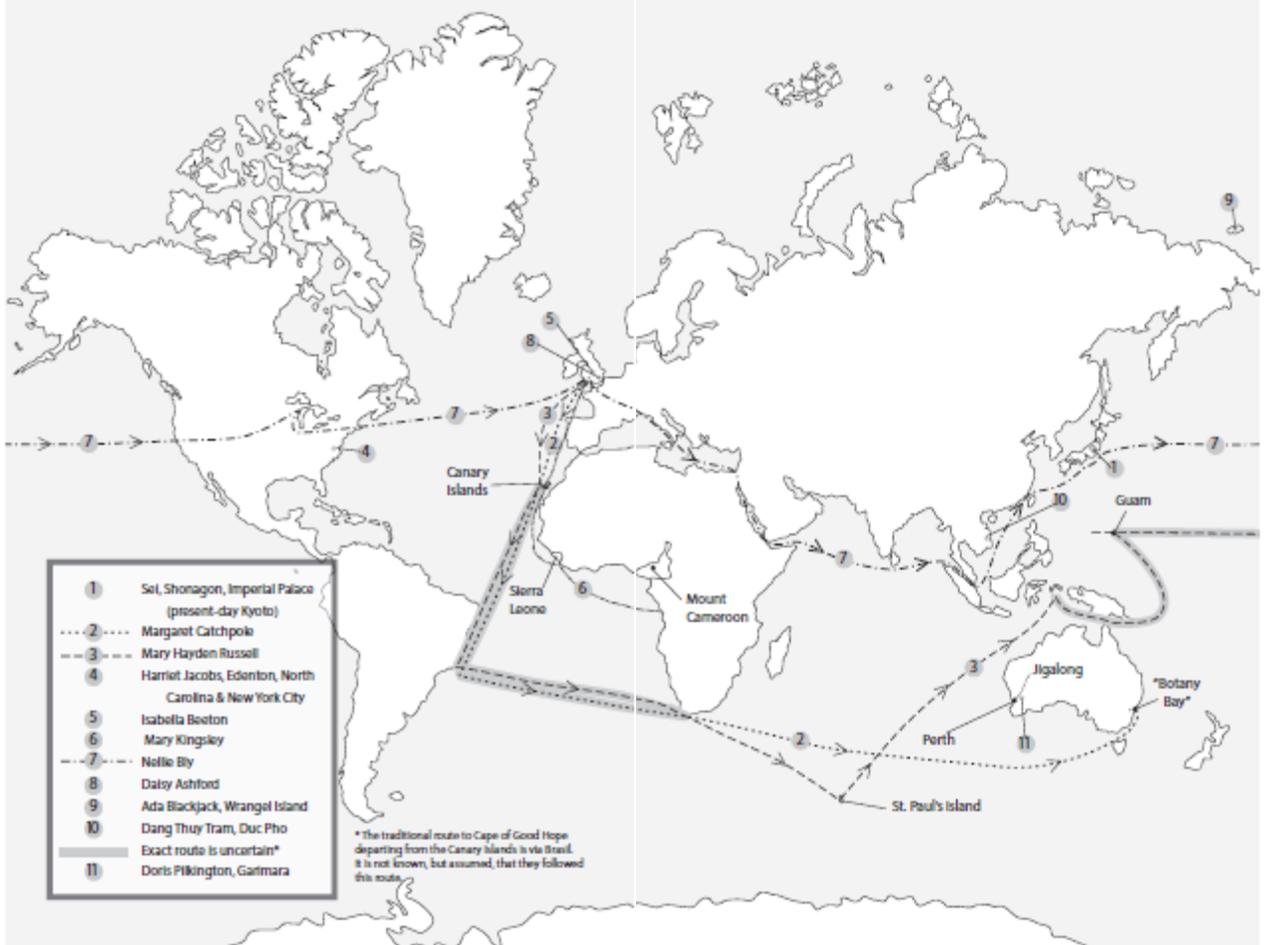
TRUE TALES FROM  
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## TEACHING IDEAS

### Interdisciplinary Curriculum Connections

#### Geography

The women in the book lived in places all around the world and their writing often reflects the terrain or weather that they have encountered. Some of them travelled great distances – in one case, circumnavigating the globe. Use a map of the world to locate their homes and the routes that they travelled.

#### History and Social Studies

Study connections are far-reaching, including topics such as: the Vietnamese war, the whaling industry, convict transportation to and from the settlement of Australia, slavery in the United States, the discovery of the Arctic, aboriginal rights in Australia and North America, the Imperial court of Japan during the Heian period, African exploration and colonization by Europeans, women's suffrage, and the roots of undercover journalism.

#### Language Arts

The writing by the eleven “scribbling women” takes on many forms: memoir, journalism, letters, diary, recipes, instructional, novel, poetry, and lists. Quotes are extensive in an effort to deliver each voice as clearly as possible.

#### Drama

Several of the women's vivid narratives lend themselves to lively “in role” writing or dramatic structure exercises, from creating monologues and scenes, to soundscapes, storytelling, and mime.

## DISCUSSION AND WRITING

1. The introduction of "*Scribbling Women*" suggests that writings by women were not always taken seriously. How would our view of our world be different if women had been writing the official history all along?
2. A biography, even when attempting to be unbiased, cannot possibly tell everything about a person's life. What we know about the women in the book is through their own writing and how they chose to present themselves. Is this a fair way to judge a person? How does reading someone's words differ from meeting that person face-to-face?
3. Although the subjects under study here are all women, many of their pursuits are more often associated with the historical exploits of men: polar bear hunting, horse stealing, whale fishing, mountain climbing, war doctoring, record breaking, and encounters with cannibals. How does the gender of the protagonist alter the way the reader feels about the story?
4. How is a memoir different from a diary? Discuss how the writing by the diarists and letter writers in the book compares to those stories written a long time after the events had happened. Is one form more or less meaningful? Trustworthy? Historically accurate?
5. The primary content of these women's "scribbles" can be roughly divided into three categories: observation, exploration, and survival. Discuss who belongs under each heading and why.
6. Setting and environment play a big part of the writings in this book. Discuss how weather and terrain influence a local culture, no matter where and during what era it may exist.

## SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

1. Have each student compose (at least) one list heading, following Sei Shonagon's example, choosing one of hers or creating an original. Post the lists around the classroom and encourage students to add items to as many lists as possible. Photocopy when the lists are complete to create a collected "Pillow Books."
2. Tape an outline on the floor the same size as the crawlspace where Harriet Jacobs spent seven years in hiding, 7' x 9'. If possible, use foam core to construct a roof, no more than a metre high at its peak. Have the students take turns confined to the space to get a sense of Harriet's sacrifice for freedom.
3. Some of these women would make terrific guests on a talk show. Interview child novelist Daisy Ashford, Arctic survivor Ada Blackjack, war doctor Dang Thuy Tram, or Doris Pilkington-Garimara, representative of the Stolen Generations. Students can take turns as the host and various subjects, preparing questions and answers that best reveal their stories.
4. On a more detailed map than the one in the book, chart Nellie Bly's voyage around the world and compare to those of Margaret Catchpole, Mary Hayden Russell, and Mary Kingsley. Create an imaginary FaceBook page (on paper) for each of these women, where she posts photographs and updates about her travels.
5. Pretend that Isabella Beeton is on the Food Network demonstrating one of her recipes or household tips. Have students appear as Isabella or one of her fellow chefs, explaining the steps in creating a meal.

## OTHER TITLES OF INTEREST

Not all of the original writing by the scribbling women are publicly available, and some are not necessarily (in its entirety) of interest to young readers. However, in some cases, their work is highly recommended.

For middle (or upper) grades:

- *The Young Visitors* by Daisy Ashford
- *The Rabbit-Proof Fence* by Doris Pilkington-Garimara (also made into a movie)
- *Ten Days in a Madhouse* by Nellie Bly
- *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs

For high school:

- *The Pillow Book* by Sei Shonagon
- Portions of *Travels in West Africa* by Mary Kingsley



Photo credit: Tom Slaughter

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Toronto-born **MARTHE JOCELYN** is the award-winning author and illustrator of over twenty books. Her picture book *Hannah's Collections* was short-listed for the Governor General's Literary Award for Illustration. Her novel *Mable Riley* won the inaugural TD Canadian Children's Literature Award. Marthe Jocelyn is the 2009 recipient of the prestigious Vicky Metcalfe Award for her body of work. For more information, visit Marthe Jocelyn's website: [www.marthejocelyn.com](http://www.marthejocelyn.com).