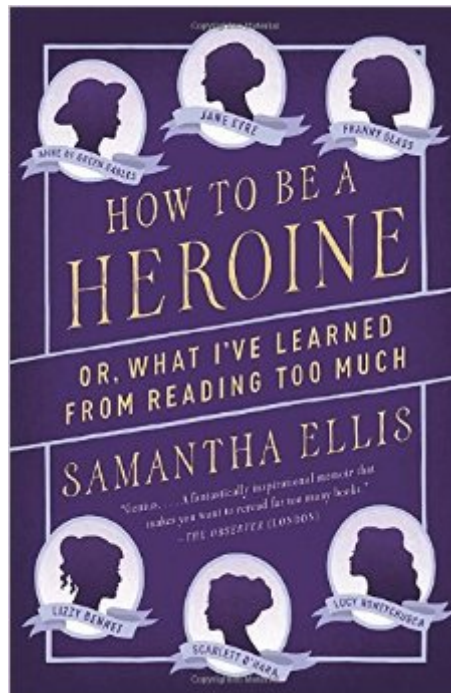


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# How To Be A Heroine: Or, What I've Learned From Reading Too Much



## Synopsis

While debating literature's greatest heroines with her best friend, thirtysomething playwright Samantha Ellis has a revelation: her whole life, she's been trying to be Cathy Earnshaw of *Wuthering Heights* when she should have been trying to be Jane Eyre. With this discovery, she embarks on a retrospective look at the literary ladies—the characters and the writers—whom she has loved since childhood. From early obsessions with the March sisters to her later idolization of Sylvia Plath, Ellis evaluates how her heroines stack up today. And, just as she excavates the stories of her favorite characters, Ellis also shares a frank, often humorous account of her own life growing up in a tight-knit Iraqi Jewish community in London. Here a life-long reader explores how heroines shape all our lives.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is an interesting hybrid. Is it a personal memoir filtered through the lens of a raft of feminist literary criticism? Or feminist literary criticism filtered through the lens of one reader's life? Either way you take it, it's good. As memoirs go, it's a bit on the light side, as Ellis's insights into her life and state of mind are interspersed throughout with recounting of plots of the books she's read and examinations of how she (and often others) interpret the women who people them. To be frank, Ellis's own life story seems interesting enough; from a family of Iraqi-Jewish refugees, challenged by an inexplicable seizure disorder, she is a journalist and playwright who could easily be the center of a literary classic such as those she discusses here. I would have enjoyed getting to know her

more. As literary criticism goes, this book was a total winner for me. By owning her biases - discussing how her reading of the characters and stories she's analyzing are influenced by her own evolving state of mind - Ellis adds considerable warmth and personality to her criticism and also grounds the books themselves. I have never been personally impressed by *Wuthering Heights*, but seeing how Ellis saw Cathy Earnshaw and why made Earnshaw feel more sympathetic and real. Her quirks and flaws became more plausible to me if not necessarily attractive. And while the open subjectivity of the criticism is in itself charming, it isn't all Ellis has to offer. She brings enough information about the authors of the books she discusses to make her arguments persuasive. I learned something about the authors of these tales, and what I learned made her interpretations of the characters feel more informed. From either angle, the book was an interesting one, informative and entertaining even where Ellis is discussing books I haven't read. As literary criticism goes, it's practically painless - thought provoking without becoming tedious or pedantic. As memoirs go, it's a bit of a tease. Ellis is far more interesting to me than Earnshaw, and I would have enjoyed learning a little bit more about her. Still, I was pleased with what she gave me. A really good read.

Eat, sleep, breathe...books. This is for everyone who has felt kinship with the literary characters they grew up with, and how they have shaped, whether or not we realize it, who we are and how we think. Ellis grew up reading the classics and loving their authors and characters, from *LITTLE WOMEN* to Sylvia Plath, from *WHAT KATY DID* and Anne Shirley to Cathy Earnshaw and the ladies of *VALLEY OF THE DOLLS*, books that were sometimes far removed from her upbringing as an Iraqi Jew in London. She not only tells us of the books she loved growing up, but also how she looked at them re-reading them as an adult, and how her favorite characters in the books changed from childhood to adulthood. Ellis has a nice breezy style that makes this an easy and enjoyable read, and it's always fun to see what devoted readers log as their favorite books, even though I occasionally thought her book choices odd (but that's just different tastes). If one thing bothered me, it was Ellis' opinions of her old favorites. While I view my old childhood favorites differently than I did as a child, I don't see them as lacking as Ellis did (for example, *Katy Carr*). They're the products of their time and it's not their fault they don't conform to modern ideas. But that's a minor quibble in an otherwise good book.

Inspired by their trek to the house that inspired *Wuthering Heights*, Samantha Ellis and her friend debate the merits of classic literary heroines. What begins as a Cathy Earnshaw-vs.-Jane Eyre discussion soon becomes something more as Ellis decides to delve into her favorite books to

examine other heroines. Part memoir, part literary analysis, *How to Be a Heroine: Or, What I've Learned From Reading Too Much* is a charming romp through the classics and how Ellis has related to them during different stages of her life. I was acquainted with most of the heroines featured in the book, and I've also added a few others to my never-ending to-read list thanks to Ellis's work. Revisiting the March sisters, plucky orphan Anne Shirley, tempestuous Scarlett O'Hara, floundering Franny Glass, storyteller Scheherazade, moody Esther Greenwood, and headstrong Lizzy Bennet was like reuniting with old friends. Ellis marks her life by the books she has read, and she provides her readers with a glimpse into her own life as a Jewish Iraqi Londoner playwright as she also examines what makes her favorite leading ladies tick. As she grows up, she searches for role models between the pages and finds plenty to admire and to question on her journey. In the end, as a thirty-something who still hasn't quite figured it all out yet, she begins to let go of her idealized female characters in favor of finding her own way. As a librarian and avid reader, I love books about books and am pretty much the target audience for *How to Be a Heroine*. Of course, I was much more drawn to chapters that featured books that I had read before and was less into the ones that I couldn't relate to as well. Even through those sections, though, I wanted to stick with Ellis. She is fresh and funny and just as much a bibliophile as I am. I would love to sit down and talk books with her, and she's already got me feeling inspired to reread some of my old favorites and some of my old enemies too. *Wuthering Heights*, I may just appreciate you yet. Maybe.

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