

Women Engineers: From Fact to Fantasy

Creative Writing Workshop by Hannah Stone

Hannahstone14@hotmail.com

This Creative Writing workshop outline was part of the University of Leeds project

Electrifying Women: Understanding the Long History of Women in Engineering

For more information on these women and other Electrifying Women visit <https://electrifyingwomen.org> where you can also read blogs about the project and find details of lectures and other events. The workshops conducted in the autumn of 2019 resulted in output which was published in a pamphlet: an online version of this is available from <https://electrifyingwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/56/2020/02/Electrifying-Women-Creative-Writing-Anthology-final-11-Feb-20203242.pdf>.

Contact Hannah on hannahstone14@hotmail.com or the generic mailbox electrifyingwomen@gmail.com if you have any questions.

Activity

To get into character, have a look at the thumbnail sketches of women engineers overleaf. Then imagine you are a woman engineer and quickly write one sentence in response to each of these prompts (plus anything else you think will help you get under their skin):

What was your first thought this morning?

How do you feel about wearing corsets?

Which women will you engage with today (cook, housemaid, laboratory worker, construction line operative, fellow committee member, daughter, shop assistant, etc)?

What do you like about driving or flying your own vehicle?

What obstacles do you think you might encounter with regard to today's plans and how might you overcome them?

Discuss briefly with your neighbour (if you wish).

Select one genre/topic – or choose/invent your own (ask Hannah for ideas) - and write for 20-30 mins on it.

For example:

A letter to *The Woman Engineer* asking for advice about a domestic or work issue

A poem using electricity as a metaphor

A script for an interview on the wireless about the prospectus for the Arrol-Johnston women's engineering college

A detailed description of a promotional item or piece of memorabilia relating to a woman engineer

A note left for your husband explaining why you will not be home for the next few days, asking him to carry on with a joint project

A blog entry from Robert Ballard about possible evidence to do with Amelia Earhart: what did he find and how did he interpret it?

A journal entry from Alice Gordon, describing her collaborations, on engineering projects, with her husband.

Feel free to invent technical language, to incorporate historical or futuristic perspectives.

During the workshop there will be the opportunity for one to one discussion about your draft or ideas and you are then invited to share them with the rest of the group. We will also discuss what you might do next with this piece of writing.

Some thumbnail sketches of women to inspire your writing in today's workshop

Alice Gordon Author of a chapter within the book *Decorative Electricity*, co-written by her husband James Gordon and published in 1891. She records 'some personal experiences' about the introduction of electric lighting, and suggests that 'Perhaps no one but an electric engineer's wife can truly judge of what that struggle has been.' Considerable domestic stress was caused when her cook informed her there could be no more pastry until her kitchen utensils (including rolling pin) had been returned from their deployment to the laboratory.

Dorothee Pullinger (1894-1986) Moved from her native France to UK at the age of 8. Worked as a draftsman at the Paisley works of the Scottish automobile firm of Arrol-Johnston and then in the Vickers munitions factory in Barrow-in-Furness. Her father created an engineering college and apprenticeship scheme for women. She was an enthusiastic racing car driver.

Caroline Harriet Haslett (1895-1957) Engineer and founding secretary and president of the Women's Engineering Society (WES), in response to an advertisement for 'a lady with some experience in engineering works as organising secretary for a women's engineering society.' The society was established by seven women including Lady Katherine Parsons and her daughter Rachel. Caroline co-founded the Electrical Association for Women designed to reduce the domestic drudgery endured by women in their homes. At the time of her retirement the EAW had 14,000 members. In 1949 she published a book entitled *Problems have no Sex*.

Laura Annie Willson (1877-1942) Born in Halifax and started work at age of ten in a local textile factory. Became involved in the Trade Union movement including the Women's Labour League. Engineer and suffragette twice imprisoned for her political activities. One of the founder members of the WES in 1919, and first woman member of the Federation of House Builders. The housing estates she helped design had the latest gas and electrical appliances.

Hilda Lyon (1896-1946) Born in Market Weighton, attended Newnham College, Cambridge obtaining a BA in Mathematics. She then studied aeroplane stress-analysis and became the engineer who designed the streamlined Lyon shape for airships and submarines. Her paper 'The Strength of Transverse Frames of Rigid Airships' was the first paper written by a woman to win the R38 Memorial prize awarded by the Royal Aeronautical Society. She became the Principal Scientific Officer at the Royal Aircraft Establishment in Farnborough.

Amy Johnson (1903, vanished January 1941)

Born in Kingston-upon-Hull, educated at the University of Sheffield where she obtained a BA in economics. She started flying as a hobby and in 1929 became the first British woman to obtain a ground engineer's 'C' license. She was the first woman pilot to fly solo from England to Australia; she and her husband Jim Mollison went on to set other records for aeronautical firsts. During WW2 she joined the Air Transport Auxiliary. Although there were witnesses to the malfunctioning of her final flight over the Thames estuary, her body was never found.

Amelia Earhart (1897 – 1937)

First woman to fly across the Atlantic solo. Disappeared 1937 during her attempt to fly around the globe. No trace of her has been found, but Oceanographer Robert Ballard, who found the Titanic, is heading up an expedition to Nikumaroro, a small atoll in the Pacific. After her death a wide range of promotional items were designed as memorabilia.