

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra. And today I'm joined by Julia Cooke, author of, among other books, *Starry and Restless: Three Women Who Changed Work, Writing, and the World* and today she's here to tell us about one of those women. So let's start with an introduction to Mickey Hahn.

JC: Mickey Hahn was an early 20th century writer, journalist. She wore a lot of different hats. She is best known for her writing for *The New Yorker*. She was *The New Yorker's* China coast correspondent from around 1937 onward through World War II. She wrote more than 50 books and over 200 articles – 181 of them were for *The New Yorker* alone – and short stories. She wrote consistently for *The New Yorker* and other American magazines for 60 years and published her last book in 1988 when she was in her 80s. She started off not in writing at all. She went to the University of Wisconsin at Madison, and she was the first woman to major in mining engineering, which happened not entirely by accident, but rather by personality disposition. She had taken a course about geology, and the professor said that the female brain was “incapable of higher mechanics.” And she said, oh, really? And so she signed up to major in mining engineering, and she became the first woman to receive a degree in mining engineering from Madison. She then got a job in St. Louis working at one of these firms, which she absolutely hated. She really could not stand still for very long. She wrote letters home in that era, which I loved reading, which are basically complaints about what it felt like to be in an office for someone who's not meant to be in an office. My favorite quote might be, “at three o'clock every day, I have an unquenchable urge to scream.” And I think many of us have felt that way.

So she took off. She traveled across the country. She went and she became a Harvey girl working in the southwest of the US. And then she moved to New York to become a journalist. She taught at Hunter College for a little bit. She moonlit freelancing for other reporters, a bunch of men that she knew in her group of friends would say to her, “oh, hey, I can't do this assignment. Can you do this for me?” She wrote a piece about opium. And then she interviewed a couple of notable men and just kept going. And eventually she became a research assistant for a guy who was working on a biography of Robert Browning. And so she went to Europe with him. And she had always kind of had the travel bug. She had always really wanted to just go places. She had itchy feet. She drove across the US in 1924 in a Model T Ford when she was still in college, dressed up as a boy for safety, obviously. Then there was her whole Harvey girl episode. And when she went to Europe, she would write these letters home to her mom that were just fantastic to read. They would slam these incredibly poignant descriptions of a place in with descriptions of the people who were traveling with her. And right around that time, she began to write for *The New Yorker*. Her brother-in-law had initially sent the editors of *The New Yorker*, which was a very new publication at that point, some of her letters from the Southwest. But the editor wrote back to her brother-in-law and said, these are very good, but their subjects lie “too far west of the Hudson for us.” And so they said, stay in touch.

So when she was living in New York, she was living with roommates. She was writing about this huge wave of young women who were moving from all across the country to New York to become professional women. And they were looking for rooming houses and signing up to live with roommates in apartments that they leased for themselves. And so this milieu became what she was writing home about. At that point, her brother-in-law sent another letter to the editors of *The New Yorker* and they said, that's a girl that we want to, let's include her. They began to publish her writing and they weren't really sending her out on assignments yet, but she had an open door there. So amid all of this, one of the big challenges with Mickey's life was number one, figuring out what was and wasn't important on a narrative structural level for a reader, because her whole life is just so rich. At every turn, she was doing something wild and interesting. I haven't even gotten to age 30 yet here. She goes to Europe. Then she comes back to New York. She decides to write a book about dating because another brother-in-law – she had a lot of sisters – another brother-in-law said to her, “oh, you're going on all these dates with men. Why don't you start writing about them?” So she did. And she structured it like the science experiments because of her background in mining engineering, of course. So it was very Carrie Bradshaw-esque, this book that she wrote was her first book.

And then she decided to go to the Congo, the Belgian Congo. She took off, as one does, in 1930 at age 25.

She went by herself, which was remarkable. She was going to meet a guy that she had met who was a Red Cross volunteer. She got there, stayed for 18 months, wound up writing a travel book about her experience in the Belgian Congo, came back to the U.S. The guy turned out to be quite a jerk. She left in a fit of white hot rage, as she wrote, after she saw that he had beaten one of the women that he considered his wives. And he was looking at her as his next conquest. And she really thought that they had had this brotherly arrangement. And so she was very vexed about leaving, but left. And I say vexed only because she had come to really care for the women that she was living with. And she didn't like the idea of leaving them. Nothing vexed about leaving the dude. And she came back to the U.S. to promote that book, really got into writing.

At that point, she had an agent. Agent kept asking her for novels. She published a couple of novels. And this is a theme with both Mickey Hahn and the other women that *Starry and Restless* is about, that they were polymaths. On a writing level, they were doing all different kinds of writing. Where they really shone was in journalism, in literary journalism. They were just remarkable reporters and stylistic writers. And they were able to marry that sense of reporting with literary style in a way that was really unique and innovative. But their agents just kept asking them for novels. And they really wanted to make writing their living. And so they would write these novels that were, in many instances, really drawn from life. You could call them early autofiction. And sometimes they sold. Sometimes they didn't. Mickey, in particular, did not seem to attach a whole lot of meaning to whether or not any of her novels sold. They were very clearly just what she was doing to be financially independent, which mattered a lot to her.

So in the late 1930s, she decided to go to Shanghai. It was her sister that asked her to go. Her sister had never left the country before and just said, "my global world traveling sister, can you come with me? Let's go to Shanghai." Shanghai was at that point known as the Paris of the East. Very glamorous and louche. And they went, it was almost as cinematic as like, you take one foot off the boat and you're like, "I'm not leaving here. You're gonna have to drag me out." That's kind of what happened. She really flourished in Shanghai. Her writing really found its pace and its voice. *The New Yorker*, who she had been writing for for quite some time at that point, but she'd asked them for staff jobs and they kept saying no. Now that she was in China and she had something really important to report on. Remember, this was the end of the '30s. So the Japanese are encroaching on Chinese territory and the Pacific front of World War II is really heating up. And so she began to write in this totally different vein. And it was really important. She also carried on an affair. She scandalized the expat community by getting involved with Shao Xunmei, who was a well-known playboy publisher and poet in Shanghai at that point. Among the expats, it was all fine and well to invite the local Chinese to your dinner parties and cultivate this kind of mixed atmosphere of openness and intellectual meeting, but to really carry on a sexual affair with someone who was Chinese was very frowned upon. And Mickey did not care at all, obviously. She lived with him for quite some time. They were together. She wrote a number of books, went to Hong Kong for one of her books. She and Xunmei kind of fell off once she kicked the opium habit that she had developed with him.

She decided to kick opium because she wanted to do the work on the book that she knew would be kind of the book of her literary career. It's called *The Soong Sisters*. And it was about the three sisters who had married the three most powerful men in China at that time. And because they were the wives of the government, we're talking Chiang Kai-shek, Sun Yat-sen, and K'ung, who was the head of the bank at that point. She knew that she could not be an opium addict and be going to these government things to be interviewing these women. So she kicked the habit. She led this cinematic, incredible life. She wrote for a long, long time. Her writing only ever seemed to get better, in my opinion, especially her reporting. She wound up having two children further down the line. Marrying this introspection on domesticity, some of her best writing, I think, really pulls together a domestic thread and domestic awareness. She hated housework, loathed it. But she was aware of it in the way that many women are aware of domesticity in ways that men are not. She really was able to attune herself to the more socio-political, cultural aspects of domesticity in ways that were really remarkable for the time.

AT: I do have to shout out, if anyone wants to read a biography of the Soong sisters, *Big Sister, Little Sister*,

*Red Sister* by Jung Chang is fantastic. So just put that out there. But when we're talking about the range of biographies that she was writing about all these different people, including Aphra Behn, which of course I love because she was a spy and a playwright. And I've actually seen one of her plays and it's freaking hilarious. But she's writing about Da Vinci and Chiang Kai-shek.

JC: Totally. She basically followed her curiosity, truly wherever. She was really kind of unable to say no. And because she had what we would now call a platform, and she was able to publish these books, she would just write and publish this incredible variety of books. She published cookbooks, she published novels for young readers, which usually centered on some kind of spunky young woman, which in the 1950s was pretty cool.

AT: I mean, I think spunky young women are still pretty cool. (JC: Yeah.) And something that you didn't mention, because there's just so much to talk about with her is she was in Hong Kong when the Japanese invaded and she was at the time romantically involved with the local head of British Army Intelligence.

JC: Absolutely. Yeah. Charles Boxer wound up becoming her husband. It's hard to say what the juiciest part of their relationship is, but I'm going to say something that is not actually on any level juicy, but it speaks to me, which is that he came to her via her writing and her mind. He thought that she had the most interesting mind. When they first met, he had read something of hers and asked to be introduced to her. And she was at that point involved with Xunmei and was not interested in Boxer. And he walked away being a little disappointed. And he was also involved with someone else in the interval in which they did not, while she was working on the Soong sisters book, and totally agree regarding (Jung Chang's) book. It was a great source for me. And it's an excellent book. While she was working on *The Soong Sisters*, Charles got married. And then she went to Hong Kong. And at that point, the wives and sisters of most of the British diplomats, because Japan was about to invade Hong Kong, they'd already been sent to Australia. So she and Charles started hanging out. And one thing led to another. And yeah, she got pregnant. She gave birth to their baby, which was, again, deeply scandalous, enormously scandalous for her to be pregnant by the British head of intelligence for the Far East. It was wild. And it was so wild that when Ernest Hemingway and Martha Gellhorn came to town, and they met Charles and Mickey, Hemingway actually offered to claim paternity of Mickey's baby, said, "Charles is going to get in trouble. If you want, you can tell him it's mine." She was like, "No, that's okay. Thanks. I'm good. He'll be fine. We're okay." And then like, as an afterthought, she was like, "also, how about your wife? This is not cool."

AT: Can we just take a minute to appreciate that's Ernest Hemingway's idea of (JC: helping out) being nice to women?

JC: Yes, completely. No, totally. It's very Hemingway. Let's just say that. So she gave birth to her baby only six weeks before Pearl Harbor. So at that point, the Japanese invaded Hong Kong, and Charles fought in the Battle of Hong Kong, was wounded and then captured, became a prisoner of war. In the colony, there was a negotiation and the Japanese were agreeing to trade Americans and send them back to the US. But they would have to stay in a prison camp, basically a camp for hostages, until the boat came and Mickey had this tiny, tiny baby that she knew would not fare well. And she also knew that she had Charles and she could bring him packages. As a POW, he could receive packages, but only if someone was there to give them to him. So she decided to stay in the occupied city, which is a fascinating chapter of her life. But again, this is my big challenge with Mickey is that there're all these fascinating chapters of her life. It was really hard to shape a compelling narrative around her life, because it's all just so interesting. Everything is compelling. There's very few lulls. She stayed in Hong Kong, and eventually she left. She and Charles agreed that once Carola was of a certain age, that she owed it to her baby to leave. And that was a really poignant moment for them. But luckily, Charles was okay. And then they were reunited eventually. And the back and forth of their reunification is just a soap opera. And it wound up being covered in all of the US papers, publicized as the best publicized romance

of the war. Boxer himself is a fascinating character. And he has an incredible biography, which is not really a narrative biography. It's this giant tome. The man who wrote it, the level of detail that he went into is truly, truly incredible. His sources were such a resource for me. He found letters and he traced out these back and forths that were really incredible to see. Boxer is well worth anyone's interest. He notably turned down the OBE recognition twice because they were trying to recognize him for his service in the war. He said that until the government was willing to give the same recognition to an Indian officer that he knew, he was unwilling to receive it.

AT: Now, the fact that she had this fascinating wild life makes it all the more interesting that, as *The New Yorker* has called her, she became a forgotten American literary treasure, which I will say seems a little on the nose since they were the ones who published so much of her work. But does this match what you know of her stories? Because she's been the subject of books before. It's not like she's completely unknown.

JC: Yeah, it's interesting. So I have to add one addendum, which is that, yes, it's definitely a little on the nose from *The New Yorker*. But it's also accurate because her memoir that she wrote of her time in China sold upwards of a half a million copies. It was wildly well known. She was incredibly famous and well respected in a certain era. And she did kind of slip out of the public imagination. And while there has been some written about her, it's tough because I don't think that she has gotten the recognition that she deserves. And part of that is because first of all, she doesn't fit into any niche as a writer, because she was so prolific, and she wrote so much, she put out so incredibly much writing. She was very compulsive, and her writing habits were incredibly compulsive, like she was constantly writing. She went on a vacation in the early '60s, late '50s, I'm not entirely sure. And she told her nephew that it was the first time in two decades or something that she was not writing every day. The discipline of it and the practice of it was enormous. And she was very unprecious about what she was willing to publish, which I think does get in the way of recognizing her because some of what she published was not that great, honestly. Some of it is wonderful. But some of it is not that fantastic. And that's I think that's okay to say, you have to be able to acknowledge when stuff is not that good. She was so prolific. She was also all over the place. She had no real niche in terms of what she was known for. I think personally that she was best at long-form literary journalism, which is what my book is mainly about. She was relentless about her observation and her curiosity about people, and how they worked and how they interacted and the way that they presented themselves reflected these larger currents. And she was also really good at positing herself within those. Her perspective within her narrative voice was wonderful, really skillfully done. But again, she found no real niche.

And she was also physically all over the place. We know that Americans don't love reading about foreign countries. And that's a huge thread of *Starry and Restless* that unites the legacies of all the women at the center of it. And it's not just wanderlust, their commitment to telling the stories, wanderlust is the kind of flippant way to put it. But the reality is that these women were driven by this real compulsion to go out and witness and tell the stories of these places that they were going to, in a way that would really be comprehensible to Americans. Remember, this is an era of rising global fascism. And they felt strongly that the US people in the US needed to understand the ways that other people were functioning in other countries in order to, a couple of them really had very strong feelings about getting the US into World War Two. And they really wanted to rally the US into the war in a very real way. So it wasn't just about them or about wanderlust, it was about performing that role. But that has gotten in the way of getting these women and especially Mickey, because on top of the geographical, like all over the placeness of her writing, there's the topical all over the placeness of her writing. But that geographical all over the placeness really gets in the way of recognizing their contribution to American journalism and placing them on the canon. I went to grad school for creative nonfiction and did not read any of these women, especially I did not read any Mickey on any of my syllabi. But I read a ton of writing written by male *New Yorker* writers from the same era. And it's not just because they were men. I think that's a lot of it. But some of it was that they were writing about like the Lower East Side, or Indiana, or places that

were legible to American readers, whereas Mickey was writing about living rooms in Shanghai in the late '30s. And it stuck in the public imagination. At the time. But as far as getting into anthologies, it really didn't go far. And of course, some of it was just plain old sexism.

And some of it also, is the fact that she was really glamorous, she gave no shits about convention, none. She was unapologetically feminine, she was really allergic to cliché and group affiliation, which meant that she did not love the feminist movement. And a lot of the women that I was writing about did not love the feminist movement, they felt that the American feminist movement of the 70s, really was short-sighted and did not acknowledge the feminist movements of history that had gotten them to the place that they were at, which is a really valid complaint. But as a result, there was really no one to champion her and say look at her.

AT: Speaking of her international writing, because so much of her legacy is writing about her travels in Asia and Africa, my immediate gut reaction, like even today, when I see a contemporary white Western woman writing about visiting predominantly non-white countries, and that's the basis of their book, it makes me cringe because it has been done badly so much. So without having read Hahn's writing, I would like to assume that she avoided a lot of those common issues, but you tell me.

JC: My gut reaction to a lot of that writing is similarly cringey. I share your instinct. Mickey did avoid a lot of it. Sometimes she could lean into some of the caricaturing lightly. Some of her writing about the Congo in particular, you read it today, and it can be a little cringey. Phrases are, I kept reading it and thinking, "you can't say that no, no, don't!" But I will say the overarching theme, though, when it comes to Mickey Han is that what I mentioned before, her genuine curiosity about people overrides absolutely everything else. She is genuinely interested in different kinds of people and genuinely sensitive to human nuance and unwilling to consider cultural differences all that much of a barrier. When she was in China, for example, she was really interested in understanding the cultural context. She spent almost all of her time with Xunmei and his group of friends. So she was very aware of the ways that history inflected their language, and different cultural currents that many Westerners were totally unaware of in China in that era. And so her writing has a sensitivity when it comes to human interaction that I think is really remarkable and really overrides stuff. And to that point, even when it comes to her Congo writing, which strikes me in certain moments as very cringey, in that era, a critic from the NAACP wrote, and I quote, that "she went to Africa and saw Africans as neither funny nor different people." She was cited as someone who considered Black people as humans and not as caricatures. So that sense of examining humanity really did come through, even in that era, which I think is pretty remarkable.

AT: Well, speaking of her nonfiction memoirs, I'm always curious when I'm talking to a biographer, you are much more fortunate than many of my guests who are trying to write biographies and have basically no documentation. And then I talk to people like you, where you have maybe a little bit too much documentation. (JC: Too much. Yes.) But I'm always curious, for someone who was able to so thoroughly document her life, but was writing for an audience, how that shapes how accurate or reliable a narrator she is of her own life. But from what you've been saying, it kind of sounds like she didn't really care. It sounds like she wouldn't necessarily have censored or edited herself in the way that a lot of women would have when they're presenting their story to the public.

JC: You're absolutely right. She was definitely prone to sometimes amping things up, but not terribly so. And my second book was about stewardesses of the jet age. And I use the term accurately, I was corrected when I started writing the book and started calling these women flight attendants. They said, "No, no, no, darling, we're not flight attendants. We were stewardesses." And they use the term to delineate the job that they performed in the '60s and '70s. Women who kept doing the job from the '70s onward, were flight attendants, they became flight attendants. And then there were women who worked in the '60s, '70s and '80s, and they consider themselves flight attendants. But for the women who stopped in the '60s and early '70s, they use the

term as a way to say, “look, we’re that fly encased in amber, we’re a bygone thing.” So I honed this style of research that involves a lot of layers and involved, for that book, it was a lot of interviews. I was interviewing women about things that had happened a long time ago. So there’s the layer of self mythologizing, but then there’s also the layer of just memory. Memories are not always reliable. So I would do interviews and then go and check the primary and secondary sources and then go back and do more interviews and then go back and check the primary and secondary sources. And that’s kind of what I did with Mickey’s memoirs.

I would read her memoir and then check what *The New York Times* was saying about the same era and really go back and forth and also check her letters to her mother and her sister. She wrote tons of letters, which was a huge boon for me. So I was really able to compare. That’s how I got a sense for how reliable she was as a narrator. And she was generally pretty reliable. There are moments when she was not, but in general, pretty good hit rate. My issue was one of self-censorship in terms of just a couple of things. She did not talk about having postpartum depression. She mentioned that she’d had it after her second baby and did not go into depth anywhere in the interviews that she gave to, you mentioned her first biographer, Ken Cuthbertson. He was generous enough to let me quote from the transcripts of his interviews with her. And I think he mentioned it to her and she just kind of cut him off and was like, “yes, that happened. No, I’m not interested in discussing.” From what I could glean of that episode, I asked her daughter about it, not the daughter who was an infant, her first daughter who was of an age where she might have remembered something. I had a hard time deciphering what was hormonal postpartum depression and what was just a big funk about her career. In that moment, she was in a huge slump. She had lost a sense of direction that she had had. And she was someone who later, she has this beautiful quote about how not having an assignment or a project, she found profoundly unmooring in general. She really needed something to keep working on to kind of keep her moving forward through the days. And I deeply identified with that, to be honest. And so I really wish that I could have known more about that period of her life. But she was unwilling to dwell on that in general. There were a couple of episodes of depression that she dealt with that it was like she had no shame about noting it, that it had happened. She did not try to hide it the way that many women of her generation, I think, might have. But she was also unwilling to go into detail.

AT: From what you’ve told me, it seems like the only part of her story that she might have viewed as, I don’t want to say weakness necessarily, but she very much seems like someone who *lived*, (JC: Yes) who wanted to get as much out of life as she could. And I feel like part of that mentality is not wanting to dwell on the negatives, because if you’re living in the past, you can’t be present.

JC: Totally. Yeah. And I think she was also unwilling to serve as an object lesson for anyone. Her daughter has now read my book and thoroughly enjoyed it and gave her seal of approval, which always feels good. But I think that Mickey would feel like I was cringy, to be honest. I think she would kind of be like, “don’t make an example of me. Why do you need that?” She would not want to be anyone’s role model. I’ve made these bracelets, “What would Mickey Hahn do?” bracelets. For readers who are buying my book or taking it out of the library, if you DM me on Instagram or send me an email, I’m happy to pop one into the mail. Because I really think that her influence, the confidence and the give no shitsness of her life is just, you don’t have to be like Mickey in order to let her energy infect your ability to stand up for yourself in a way. And look for the fun and various little instructive. She would find that profoundly undignified in a way, I think, and just kind of like needy, I think. (AT: “Oh, my God, why are you obsessed with me?”) Exactly. No, she’d be like, “why? Me? Like, no, you shouldn’t. No, no.” And I’m okay with that.

AT: Regular listeners may recall that I have other episodes about Dickey Chappelle, who was a brilliant war correspondent and photojournalist, and Sigrid Schulz, who was the *Chicago Tribune*’s Berlin bureau chief during the rise of Nazi Germany. And I’m always curious with so many incredible women.

[Listen to Lorissa Rhinehart on Dickey Chappelle \(transcript\)](#) and [Pamela Toler on Sigrid Schulz \(transcript\)](#).

Like, that's just to name a couple. You've got three in your book. But just women journalists from this period, there are so many that you could have chosen from. And particularly because you created this narrative interweaving three different stories. What was it about Mickey that grabbed your attention, held it, and made you want to intertwine her stories with those of Martha Gellhorn and Rebecca West, who hopefully you'll come back and talk about them. But why these three, I guess? And specifically, why Mickey?

JC: The things that I find incredibly compelling about her, the force of her contrarianism and her ambition without being too hard-edged about it. It's a really interesting line to walk. I liked her and how she always really seemed to find a way. She had that ambition and determination without being too sugary or cutthroat at all about it. She was a generous person and a friend to a lot of people. That balance I found really compelling. I admired the fact that she was always really allergic to cliché. And so that I found incredibly compelling. And why the three of them, the three had relationships with one another. Mickey was very close friends with Rebecca West. As I mentioned, she was with Hemingway and Martha Gellhorn in China for a while. She actually reviewed Martha Gellhorn's *Travels with Myself and Another* in *The New York Times* years later. In *Travels with Myself and Another*, Martha mentions Mickey Han because she quotes Hemingway writing a letter to her mother, Edna, saying that Martha was in China treating the women like dogs. And Martha said, "I only remember specifically two women from China that I interacted with a lot. And they were Madame Sun Yat-sen and Mickey Hahn." And she said, "I was never foolish enough to be dismissive of her." Gellhorn and West also had their relationships.

But part of what I was trying to do with this book was really animate these different varieties of female collegiality and friendship. I think too often women are stereotyped into being either sisterhood besties or catty bitches and competing for the single place. And especially in that era, it is true that most newspapers only hired one woman on staff. And so women were actually competing for a singular role. Women are often balkanized and told that we have to be competing. In reality, the women foreign correspondents of that era, a lot of them really did form this really remarkable, I could say sisterhood and fall directly into cliché. But it really was more of a webbing of collegiality and respect. And sometimes that respect turned into friendship, as in the case of Mickey and Rebecca, who became genuine friends.

On a research level, the caliber of their letters was really what enabled me to write the kind of immersive book that I wanted to write. I wanted to write something that would really put people in scene with these women, and give them access to their closest relationships, especially with other women. And those letters were a gold mine. But I also wanted to talk about all of these different varieties of relationships that women form that are not necessarily friendship. Martha and Mickey's relationship was one of mutual respect and collegiality and a wariness that I found compelling. Martha and Rebecca had their own sort of relationship. There are so many different kinds of relationships that people can form that have no small impact on a life that can be incredibly impactful. I feel like those relationships are not as often explored among women.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast. And remember, well behaved women rarely make history.