Maliha Abidi

RISE

Extraordinary Women of Colour Who Changed the World

'Women and girls worldwide will find inspiration and strength in the pages of this beautiful book.'

MALALA YOUSAFZAI

CONTENTS

7 Preface

8 Aishopan Nurgaiv
10 Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez
12 Ama Ata Aidoo
14 Amal Clooney
16 Amanda Gorman
18 Amna Al Qubaisi
20 Angela Davis
22 Aretha Franklin
24 Asima Chatterjee
26 Autumn Peltier
28 Ava Duvernay
30 Benazir Bhutto
32 Berta Cáceres
34 Beyoncé Knowles-Carter
36 Calypso Rose
38 Claudia Jones
40 Clemantine Wamariya
42 Deepika Padukone
44 Elif Safak
46 Esra'a Al Shafei
48 Esther Afua Ocloo
50 Esther Mahlangu
52 Fairuz
54 Fatema Mernissi
56 Fatima al-Fihri
58 Faye Simanjuntak
60 Felicitas Mendez
62 Frida Kahlo
64 Funmilayo Ransome Kuti
66 Germaine Acogny
68 Guo Jianmei
70 Hanan Ashrawi
72 Hayat Sindi
74 Heidy Quah
76 Ibtihaj Muhammad
78 Isabel Allende
80 Jaha Dukureh
82 Jameela Jamil
84 Josephine Baker
86 Junko Tabei
88 Katherine Johnson
90 Lea T
92 Lee Tai Young
94 Leymah Gbowee
96 Linda Sarsour
98 Loujain Al Hathloul
100 Mae C Jemison
102 Malala Yousafzai
104 Margaret Busby
106 Maria Da Penha
108 Maria Walanda Maramis
110 Marjane Satrapi
112 Mary Golda Ross
114 Mary Jane Seacole
116 Mary Kom
118 Maya Angelou
120 Maya Lin
122 Mazlan Othman
124 Mercedes Sosa
126 Michaela Coel
128 Michelle Obama
130 Mindy Kaling
132 Miriam Makeba
134 Misty Copeland
136 Na Hye-sok
138 Nadia Murad
140 Naomi Osaka
142 Nawal El Saadawi
144 Negin Khpalwak
146 Noor Jehan
148 Oprah Winfrey
150 Oumou Sangare
152 Parveena Ahanger
154 Prudence Mabele
156 Razia Sultan
158 Rigoberta Menchú
160 Rosa Parks
162 Sanmao
164 Serena Williams
166 Shirin Ebadi
168 Shirin Neshat
170 Shirley Coleen
172 Simone Biles
174 Sonia Sotomayor
176 Sophia Duleep Singh
178 Sylvia Tamale
180 Tawakkol Karman
182 Taytu Betul
184 Tebello Nyokong
186 Tererai Trent
188 The Mirabal Sisters
190 Theresa Kachindamoto
192 Tu Youyou
194 Umm Kulthum
196 Wangari Maathai
198 Wangechi Mutu
200 Wilma Mankiller
202 Yayoi Kusama
204 Yusra Mardini
206 Zaha Hadid

207 About the Author
208 Acknowledgements
210 Copyright

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

13 October 1989
Congresswoman
United States of America

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was born and raised in New York City's Bronx borough. When she was five, her family moved to the suburb of Westchester, using all their funds plus borrowed money: her parents hoped to provide young Alexandria and her brother with better schooling and quality of life.

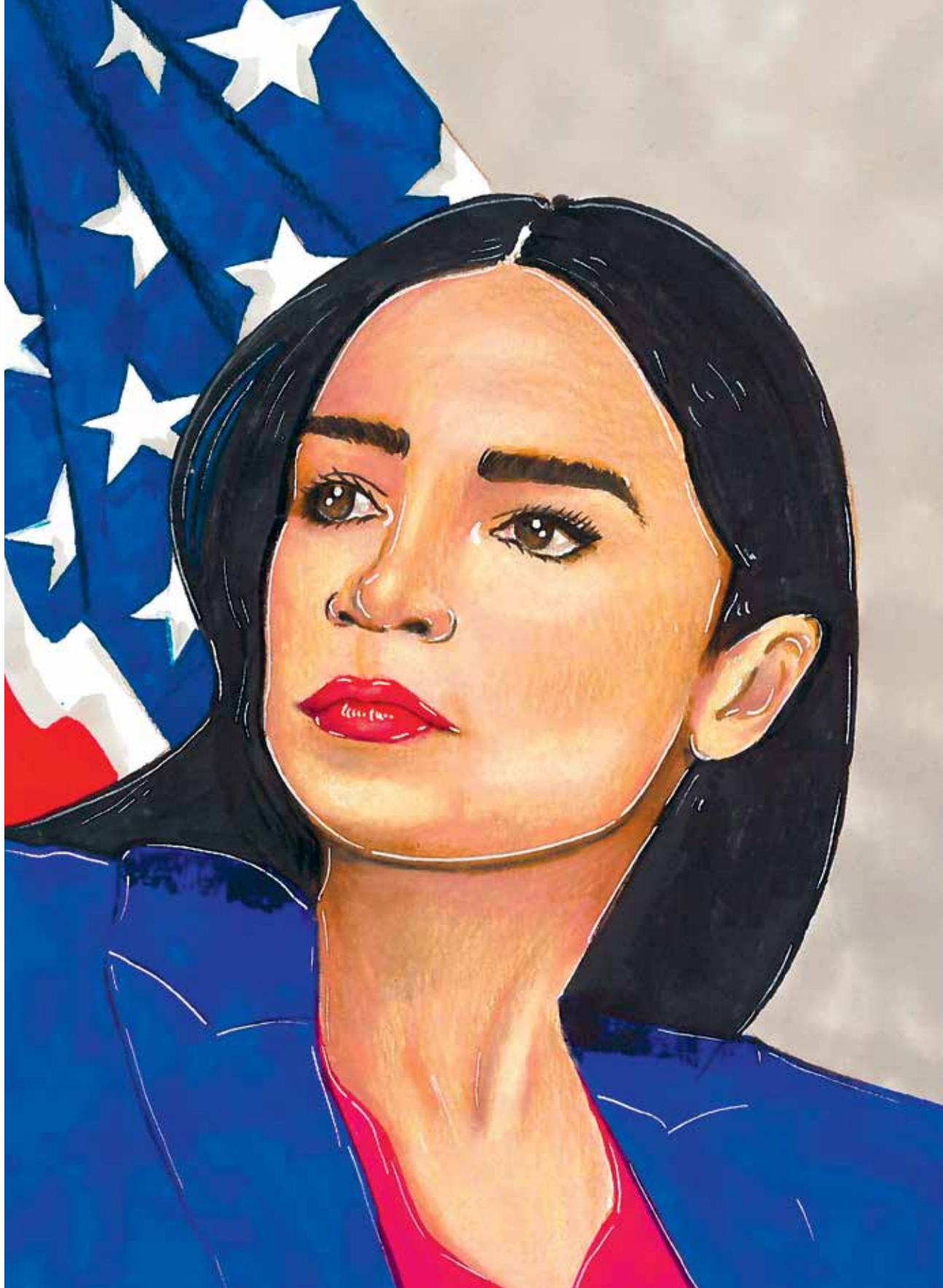
When Ocasio-Cortez was sixteen, her father was diagnosed with lung cancer. Times became difficult for the family, emotionally and financially, and they nearly lost their home. Ocasio-Cortez's mother cleaned houses, sometimes in exchange for university-preparation classes for her daughter.

Ocasio-Cortez gained admission to Boston University. Just before her sophomore year, during the financial crisis of 2008, her father died, and the family's situation worsened. They moved back to the Bronx, where Ocasio-Cortez joined them after graduating. She began working for an educational non-profit organisation, helping undocumented Latinx youths. She also worked as a bartender, taking extra shifts in order to support her family, recognising that their struggles were mirrored in the stories of many other local people.

In 2016, a political action committee called Brand New Congress approached Ocasio-Cortez to run for a seat in the US House of Representatives in 2018. (Her brother had nominated her; she was selected from ten thousand possible candidates.)

'Women like me aren't supposed to run for office,' she said in her campaign video. Ocasio-Cortez was widely underestimated: her opponent in the primary election had run unopposed for fourteen years. Her campaign was entirely grassroots-funded. She spoke about the adversity her community faced, including financial hardship, lack of healthcare and housing issues. Having confronted such problems while growing up, she was persuasive; voters realised that she would fight for them in government.

Ocasio-Cortez became the youngest congresswoman in US history and has earned a reputation for vigorously holding politicians and business interests to account.



Esther Mahlangu

11 November 1935
Artist
South Africa

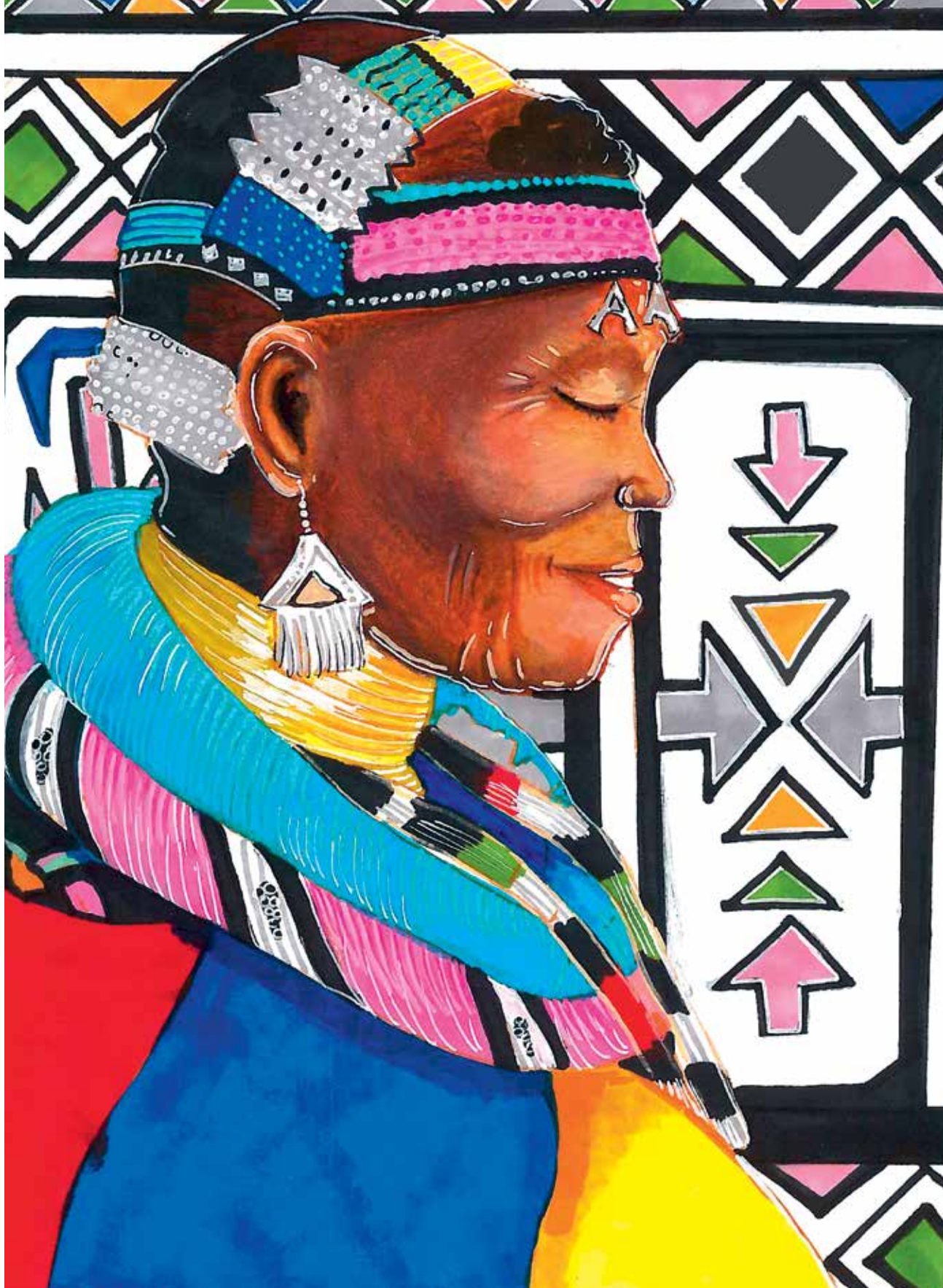
Esther Mahlangu was ten when she began imitating her mother and her grandmother, who filled the exteriors of their mud-walled house with traditional Ndebele mural designs. When they rested from painting in the hot sun, young Esther would pick up the chicken feathers they used as brushes and resume where they had left off. Upon their return, she would get into trouble: her lines weren't straight, and she lacked training in the style.

She loved the form, however, and being scolded didn't stop her from painting daily. The older women relented, allowing her to paint the back of the house. Her lines eventually became straighter, and her designs grew beautiful. Finally, she was given the front walls to paint.

As Mahlangu grew older, her devotion to Ndebele art deepened. She became an expert at painting murals. To obtain white, black, red, yellow and green, she used soil, clay, cow dung, limestone, ash and water – mixtures so strong that rainstorms can't wash the colours away.

When French art researchers came to Mahlangu's village and learned of her work, they invited her to participate in an art exhibition, 'Magicians of the World', in France. Thus Mahlangu's work became widely known. In 1991 she became the first woman to participate in the prestigious BMW Art Car Project, painting Ndebele designs.

Mahlangu's art now features in collections worldwide, and she loves to travel – always in traditional clothing – and share her culture and heritage. Voicing concerns that young Africans are becoming detached from their roots, she has said '... If the young children don't learn from the elders, then everything will vanish.' To that end Mahlangu started a school in her backyard, training girls to make Ndebele art, so that they, in turn, could teach subsequent generations. In her own actions, and words, Mahlangu is true to her belief that 'no culture must come to an end.'



Junko Tabei

22 September 1939 – 20 October 2016
Mountaineer
Japan

Junko Tabei, a fragile girl prone to pneumonia, ascended her first mountain when she was ten. In 2016, terminally ill with cancer, she climbed Mount Fuji. In between, this petite woman achieved an enviable reputation as a barrier-breaking mountaineer.

Tabei reached the summit of Mount Everest in 1975 – the first woman to do so. (In fact, she was the first woman to climb *all* Seven Summits – the tallest mountains on each continent.) Eschewing the traditional roles expected of Japanese women, and ignoring the male-dominated clubs that did not admit female members, Tabei connected with other women interested in mountaineering and helped form the Ladies' Climbing Club in 1969.

Cutting her career as a teacher short, Tabei edited a science journal, tutored English and taught piano in order to fund her climbing ambitions. Although she was told frequently that it was inappropriate for women to seek such challenges, she secured sponsorship for the Everest expedition. Her husband, a respected mountaineer himself, supported her, caring for their children when she was away on expeditions.

The Everest climb was precarious. With 2,800 metres left to the summit, an avalanche buried the fifteen-member party. Sherpas came to the rescue, and there were no casualties – but Tabei and others were injured. Nevertheless, Tabei pushed herself upward. Later, it transpired that the Sherpas could not carry up enough oxygen for more than one climber. Alongside Sherpa Ang Tsering, the party nominated Tabei to continue to the summit and make history.

In 2000, Tabei obtained her postgraduate degree, writing on the environmental degradation of Everest as the result of overactivity. She became the director of the Himalayan Adventure Trust of Japan, dedicating the last years of her life to preserving the ecology of the great mountains, which had given it so much meaning.

Lea T

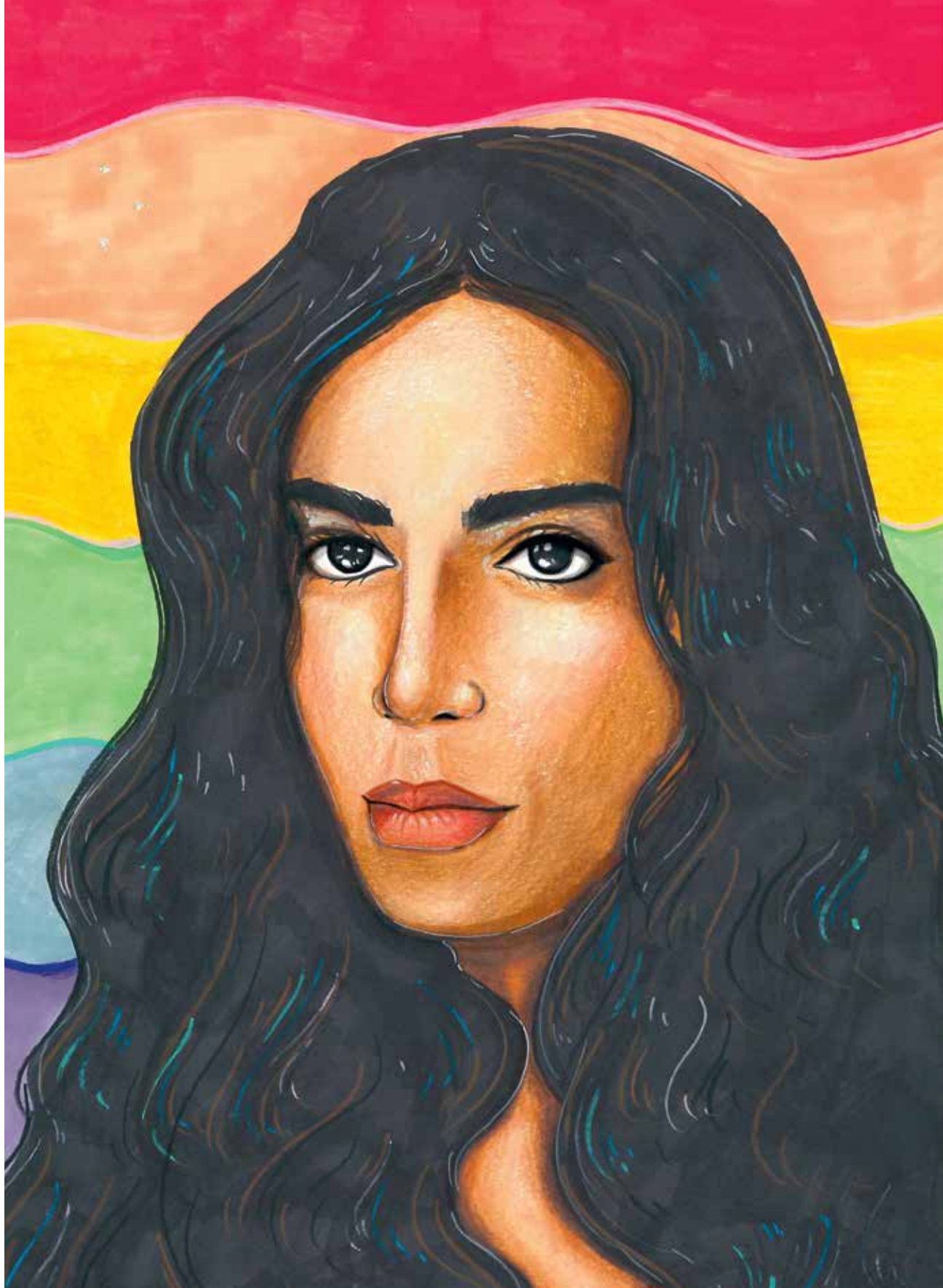
19 February 1982
Fashion Model
Brazil / Italy

Throughout her childhood, Lea T felt 'different'. Born Leandro Medeiros Cerezo in Brazil and assigned male at birth, she would eventually become the first transgender model to represent a global beauty campaign. However, becoming this successful was never going to be easy for Lea T.

Lea T endured years of alienation from her Catholic family, and experienced bewilderment about her own gender, which she could not define. She would embrace her true nature only as an adult. Her friend Riccardo Tisci, then an aspiring fashion designer and later the creative director of Givenchy, supported and encouraged her. No longer denying her reality, Lea T began the process of gender reassignment. She felt lonely and ostracised, enduring stares, mockery, groping and menacing behaviour as she went about her daily business.

Lea T worked as Tisci's personal assistant, becoming his muse as he rose through the ranks at Givenchy. She eventually became a top model – and proudly transgender. Lea T rocked the fashion industry, was appointed the face of Redken and appeared in magazines from *Vanity Fair* to *Love*. French *Vogue* featured a stunning, controversial nude portrait of her. In Rio de Janeiro in 2016, Lea T became the first publicly transgender person to participate in an Olympic ceremony, leading the Brazilian team into the stadium on a bicycle.

'Society separates [people into groups],' Lea T has said, 'treating the oppressed in one way and the rest normally and even with a certain superiority ... It doesn't make sense. But it is up to those who are in the [oppressed] group to raise the flag, if they want to. I make a point of saying that I am trans ... It is important to use that visibility with pride. If I had not ... we would not have opened the doors.'



Maria da Penha

1945
Women's Rights Activist
Brazil

In 1976, biopharmacist Maria da Penha married her Colombian fiancé, economist Marcos Antonio Viveros. They had three daughters. Then, suddenly, the violence began.

After Vivero was granted Brazilian citizenship, he began abusing his wife and children, striking them, tying them up and forcing the girls into cold showers as 'punishment'. Da Penha made no official complaint: at the time, domestic violence was not a special category in the eyes of the law. 'We weren't even aware of this expression,' da Penha has said. 'You just had a "bad husband".'

In 1983, as da Penha slept, Viveros shot her. She was rushed to the hospital by neighbours. The bullet lodged in her spine, and she became a paraplegic. Viveros claimed he had been fending off burglars, which the police accepted as truth. When da Penha was released from hospital, paralysed, Viveros isolated her from friends and family. She made covert preparations to escape – but one day, Viveros tried to electrocute her as she bathed.

Fortunately, da Penha survived, and left Viveros. For the next nineteen years, she fought to see him jailed; he was tried twice and found guilty, but went free each time on appeal. In 2002, Viveros was sentenced to eight years' imprisonment, but was released in 2003.

Meanwhile, da Penha had campaigned for changes in the law, even taking her case to the Organisation of American States. In 2006, the 'Maria da Penha Law' was passed: Brazil now recognises multiple forms of violence against women and sets stricter punishments for abusers – a change that has had a life-saving impact on countless women.

Da Penha has not ceased campaigning. In 2009, she founded the Instituto Maria da Penha, a non-profit organisation to raise women's awareness of their rights and strengthen the Maria da Penha Law through education and training.

Michaela Coel

1 October 1987
Writer, Producer and Actor
United Kingdom

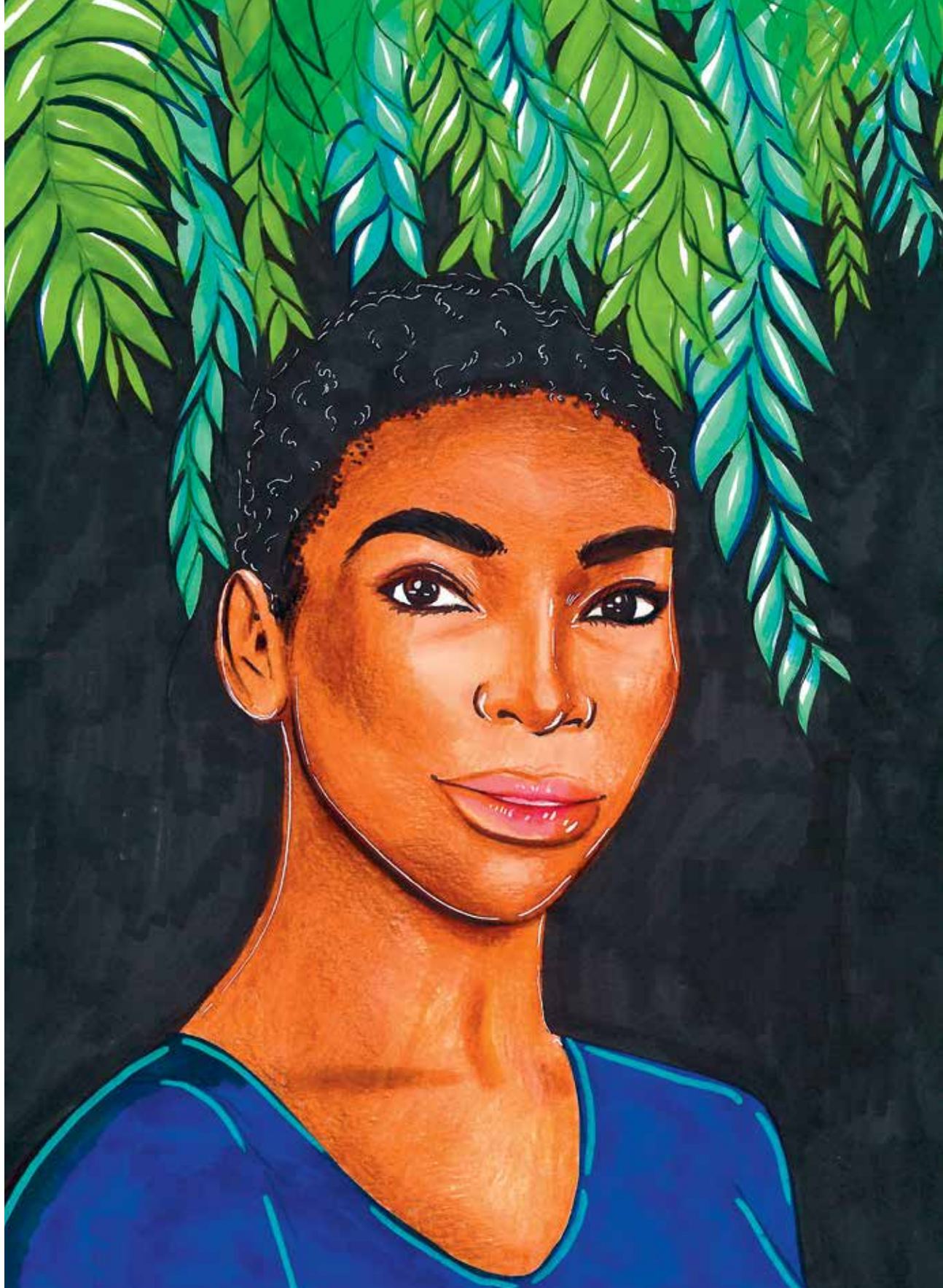
Even in an era of ground-breaking television, Michaela Coel stands out. She has written and performed professionally since 2006 but her big screen breaks came in 2015 and 2020 with sitcom *Chewing Gum* and dramatic series *I May Destroy You*, both widely acclaimed.

Born in London to Ghanaian immigrants, Coel and her sister were raised by their mother on a council estate where there very few black families, and regularly endured racial slurs and vandalism. Intense, curious and restless, Coel participated in youth theatre and, at twenty-two, enrolled in the Guildhall School of Music and Drama – the first black woman admitted there in years.

At Guildhall, Coel wrote a darkly humorous one-woman show. A production company approached her to transform it into the series *Chewing Gum*, centring on a young woman ready to lose her virginity. Coel had never written for television before and was frustrated by the industry's culture of excluding creatives at certain stages of production. Thankfully, she was involved in almost every creative aspect of the show, which subsequently became a huge hit. She won two British Academy of Film and Television Arts awards in 2016, for comedy performance and for writing.

Giving the distinguished MacTaggart Lecture at the Edinburgh International Television Festival in 2018, Coel shocked the audience by citing, thoughtfully and intelligently, her experience of racism in the television industry – and of being sexually assaulted. She used that painful incident as the basis of *I May Destroy You*. Again, Coel showed her integrity as an artist, turning down a $1 million offer from Netflix so that she could retain full rights and creative control of the show, which aired on BBC instead. The series, which is experimental and pushes many boundaries, earned much critical praise, and won two Bafta Television awards.

The self-aware 'misfit' Coel is now a show business insider, contributing to positive change in the industry whilst making some of the most original programming in years.



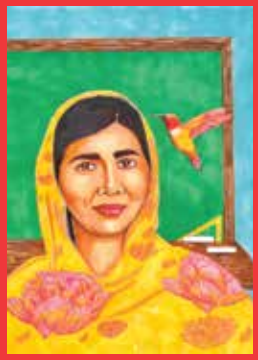
RISE: Extraordinary Women of Colour Who Changed the World
MALIHA ABIDI

Rise celebrates the inspiring stories of 100 remarkable women of colour. From the entrepreneur with a homemade marmalade business who went on to found Women's World Banking, to the educator who built the first university in the world; and from the athlete who fled civil war on a sinking boat and then swam in the Olympics, to the first Black female astronaut, these trailblazers have risen above challenges to reach dizzying heights.

These scientists, entertainers, sportswomen, leaders, artists and activists hail from more than forty countries. Past and present, famous and forgotten, they have worked both behind the scenes and under public scrutiny to make our world a better place.

Featuring stunning portrait illustrations by acclaimed artist Maliha Abidi, *Rise* reveals the creativity and courage of these pioneers, and is essential for all.

MALIHA ABIDI is a Pakistani-American artist and illustrator, based in the UK, whose work is dedicated to women's rights and mental health. Her self-published debut, *Pakistan for Women: Stories of Women Who Have Achieved Something Extraordinary* (2019), won Abidi international acclaim with appearances on BBC, *Good Morning America* and TRT World, and in *Metro* and *Glamour* magazine. She has since worked with renowned organisations such as the United Nations, Women's Aid, Malala Fund and Peace Corporation, to showcase underrepresented narratives and help create positive change through art. Abidi is the founder of The Story of Mental Health, an intersectional organisation that provides marginalised communities with well-being resources and encourages the use of art as a mode of therapy.



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