

## Feminism as Literature, Memoir as Poetry

BY JOANNE LEHMAN

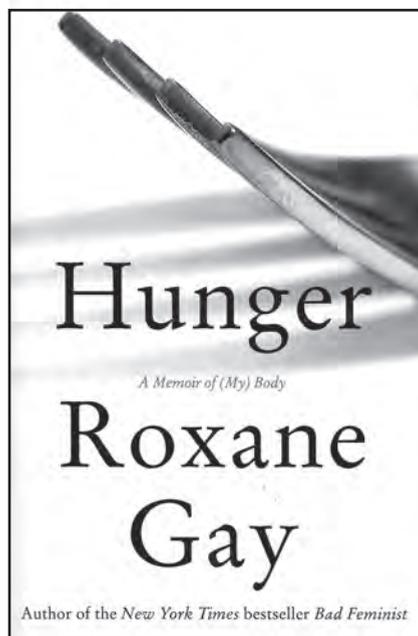
Roxane Gay, *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body*. HarperCollins, 2017. 320 pp. \$25.00, ISBN 978-0062362599; pap., \$16.99, ISBN 978-0062420718.

Feminist essayist and cultural critic Roxane Gay reached bestselling status with her collection *Bad Feminist* a few years ago after publishing fiction to high acclaim.<sup>1</sup> In 2017 she upped her output again, not only with a short story collection<sup>2</sup> but also with the deeply vulnerable, exquisitely crafted, and powerfully affecting *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body*.

When she began to write this memoir, Gay was “certain the words would come easily, the way they usually do.” But that’s not how it went: “I’ve cut myself wide open. I am exposed. That is not comfortable. That is not easy” (pp. 4–5).

Not comfortable, not easy; but Gay’s painfully extracted words are deployed with beauty and grace in this poetic work of prose literature. There’s her deft use of biblical allusion (“My body was broken,” p. 21). There’s her rhythmic repetition (“I don’t want to be defined.... I don’t want...to be consumed.... [Yet] I don’t want to be silent,” p. 38). There are her powerful arrangements of plain and simple words: “In my history of violence, there was a boy. I loved him” (p. 41). The book’s structure is intriguing: 6 larger, untitled divisions that group 88 numbered segments ranging from short, reverberating prose poems to full essays critiquing weight-loss culture and its associated reality TV shows. Any number of sections would be powerful to read aloud.

That boy Gay loved: he and his friends raped her when she was 12. That “history of violence” will always be background to her life and key to her relationship with her body. “Before this terrible thing happened, I had already started to lose my body,” she writes. But after it happened, she turned her body into a fortress so no one else could control it:



I do not know why I turned to food. Or I do. I was lonely and scared and food offered an immediate satisfaction. Food offered comfort when I needed to be comforted and did not know how to ask for what I needed from those

who loved me. Food tasted good and made me feel better. Food was the one thing within my reach. (p. 53)

I didn’t care about getting fat. I wanted to be fat, to be big, to be ignored by men, to be safe. (p. 84)

Food, hunger, weight gain and loss, a body under and out of control, a culture screwed up about all of the above, and a woman trying to find and heal herself “[i]n the after” (p. 79) of rape — these are the themes threading through Gay’s memoir of (her) body. She may use plain and simple words, but her meanings are layered and complex. And complicated. She does not, for instance, claim to be wholly of one mind about the highly fraught and feminist issues around weight loss and size acceptance. “I have been accused of being full of self-loathing and of being fat-phobic,” she says. “There is truth to the former accusation and I reject the latter” (p. 153).

To be clear, the fat acceptance movement is important, affirming, and profoundly necessary, but I also believe that part of fat acceptance is accepting that some of us struggle with body image and haven’t reached a place of peace and unconditional self-acceptance. (p. 153)

This book's complicated take on these issues could be the basis for rich discussions in gender and women's studies courses, especially those focused on women and their bodies.

The entire work is a compelling and lyrical read that could deeply enrich a course in literature or a creative nonfiction writing workshop. And if someone hasn't already thought

of using *Hunger* in a writing class cross-listed with gender and women's studies, someone definitely should.

## NOTES

1. *Bad Feminist: Essays* was published by Harper Perennial in 2014. Her fiction included the novel *An Untamed State* (2001) and the short story collection *Ayiti* (2011, reissued by Grove Press in 2018).
2. The 2017 short story collection is *Difficult Women*, published by Grove Press. She then edited an anthology of essays, *Not That Bad: Dispatches from Rape Culture*, which came out in May 2018. Gay is also a contributing opinion writer for the *New York Times*.

[JoAnne Lehman edits *Resources for Gender and Women's Studies: A Feminist Review*.]



Miriam Greenwald

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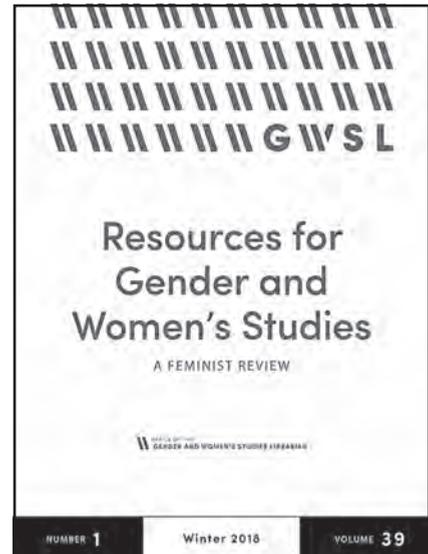
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