

Books

Not That Bad Is Excellent

BY KATRINA SPENCER

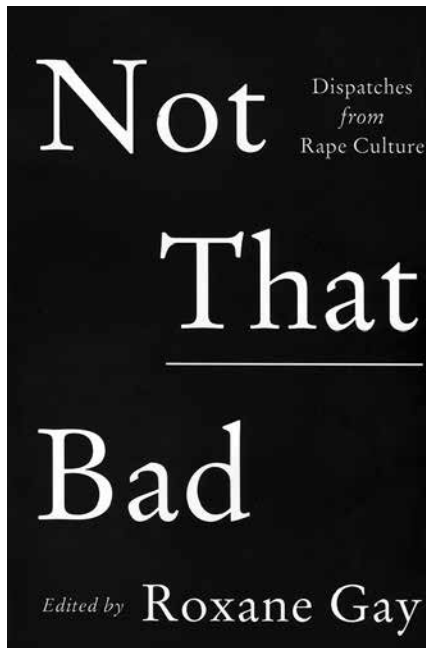
Roxane Gay, *Not That Bad: Dispatches from Rape Culture*. Harper Perennial, 2018. 368 pp. pap., \$16.99, ISBN 978-0062413512.

Note: This review discusses sexual assault/rape.

On September 10, 2019, the *New York Times* published a piece in which six formerly enlisted men told of being sexually victimized in our armed forces.¹ On September 17, 2019, Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley filed a resolution seeking an impeachment inquiry against Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, having noted more claims, in addition to Stanford professor Dr. Christine Blasey-Ford's, of sexual misconduct against the judge.² On September 23, 2019, Chanel Miller, who had been raped in Stanford, California, by Brock Turner, published *Know My Name*, a memoir in which for the first time she publicly shared her identity, which was formerly hidden under the pseudonym "Emily Doe" while her rapist was being tried for his crime of assaulting her in an alleyway while she was unconscious.³ On October 4, 2019, National Public Radio's *This American Life* re-aired a two-part radio broadcast that explored two women's reports of rape some years before: one case had been terribly mishandled and characterized the victim as lacking in credibility, while the other had led to redemption for both of the women.⁴ And on October 14, 2019, record producer Pharrell Williams acknowledged that his popular song "Blurred Lines," whose lyrics suggest sexual consent can be challenged and/or negotiated, was chauvinistic.⁵

Rape culture, in short, is dizzying in its omnipresence and the frequen-

cy of its manifestations. We don't have to look hard to be confronted by a slew of testimonies recounting stories of people forcing themselves on others or disavowing the need to approach sex through a lens of consent. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised, given how our nation and



many of our societies have been built: as results of rape, slaughter, oppression, slavery, servitude/serfdom, and other impositions. Rape culture, it seems, is largely a reflection of the macrocosm of systems that are responsible for the power and strength the United States wields today. (Don't call me unpatriotic for telling the whole truth.) That is, through inflicting fear, intimidation and violence, we have achieved our so-

called greatness. Rape culture harms so many lives and it appears there's hardly any escaping some aspect of its reach.

That's what brings us to *Not that Bad: Dispatches from Rape Culture*, an anthology of testimonies from people who have been sexually assaulted or who fight for the rights of people who have been sexually assaulted (or both). The work is a compilation of 30 personal stories, but perhaps it should also be cataloged as journalism — text that describes the daily phenomena of our world. Its editor, Roxane Gay, author of *Bad Feminist* (2014), *Hunger* (2017), and *Difficult Women* (2017), intimately knows the unforgiving impact of rape and minces no words in her introduction:

When I was twelve years old, I was gang-raped in the woods behind my neighborhood by a group of boys with the dangerous intentions of bad men. Before that, I had been naive, sheltered. I believed people were inherently good and that the meek should inherit. I was faithful and believed in God. And then I didn't. I was broken. I was changed. I will never know who I would have been had I not become the girl in the woods. (p. i)

Having suffered the abuses of rape and rape culture, Gay is a knowledgeable and apt compiler of testimonies surrounding the theme. The book's title references an ideology that many of us have internalized, knowingly

and unknowingly. It is a commentary on an imagined hierarchy of trauma. A paper cut, for example, might be perceived as worse than a splinter, and a broken arm is considered more severe than a skinned knee. We tend to measure the impact of injury often by the time it takes to heal, by how many people can see the disfigurement it causes, and by how long it takes us to recuperate our sense of normalcy. However, in this anthology, the writers suggest that irrespective of the perceived severity of an injury inflicted as a result of rape culture's pervasiveness, every wound hurts, women are disproportionately impacted, and larger questions about misogyny and consent are not being asked with enough reach and/or urgency. What type of culture have we created in which sexual assault is so commonplace, underreported, and unreliably punished? These writers' testimonies reveal that some wounds inflicted as a result of rape culture never fully heal; some wounds cause a disfigurement that cannot be perceived with the naked eye; and normalcy is not guaranteed a return after sexual assault.

The collection has many strengths. One is the variety of voices it engages in terms of race, origin, gender, and class. Testimonies from people from all walks of life demonstrate that rape culture touches the naive, the informed, the familiar, the foreign, the rich, the poor, the strong, the weak, and everyone in between. Date rape, incest, and rape committed by intimate partners are all represented in this rather inclusive study of rape culture. The writers talk about fathers, boyfriends, teachers, uncles, classmates, neighbors, and others violating their bodies and the burdensome repercussions, often

falling on the victims' shoulders, that followed: Some victims were seen as irrecoverable, sullied, guilty, broken, and/or weak. Others were seen as attention-seeking traitors for reporting their attackers to authorities. And still others would indefinitely struggle to be sexually vulnerable and intimate with future sexual partners because their capacity to trust had been indelibly compromised. Overall, *Not That Bad* allows readers to see that rape culture is not limited to news reports. Its impact is not

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resolved by the admonishment to "Never walk alone at night" or the advice to carry mace on a keychain. The insidious nature of rape culture means that it's lurking almost everywhere, and that the toxic discourses surrounding victimhood can retraumatize people who have already been deeply hurt by sexual violence and its related precursor, predatory sexual objectification.

Entries like Elissa Bassist's "Why I Didn't Say No" (pp. 323-339) brilliantly capture how women's entire socialization preps, primes, and grooms us to become victims of sexually predatory behavior. Bassist says that she expected love to hurt (p. 323), that she believed sexual violence was supposed to look a certain way — happening in a setting of "fraternity-sponsored spring break booze cruises" (p. 323) — and that

she had accepted the belief that "a man's pleasure was fundamental... and hers optional" (p. 326). Her desire "to be perceived as having...a bomb-ass pussy" (p. 326) caused her to exercise few protective mechanisms, even when having sex with a close, intimate partner. It kept her from informing her partner that she was in pain, which ultimately "shredded" (p. 338) her cervix. It kept her from objecting and telling him to stop. It kept her from prioritizing her pleasure. "Speaking up for myself," she writes, "was not how I learned English...I'm fluent in Apology, in Question Mark, in Giggle, in Bowing Down, in Self-Sacrifice" (p. 333). And her experience is likely common. While intentionally violent rape by a stranger is more of an anomaly, sex that is uncomfortable, questionably consensual, and absent of pleasure for a female partner in a heterosexual encounter is likely closer to typical. Media depictions of sexual assault in secluded hideouts or related to kidnapping or sex trafficking can make victims whose experiences fall outside of those narratives question whether or not they have been attacked, taken advantage of, assaulted, or raped. Sexual assault can happen in a king-sized bed with silken sheets. It can happen on a honeymoon during an island getaway. And it can certainly happen at a party involving multiple assailants and aggressors who are well known by the victim. Its manifestations are limitless.

Interestingly, actor Ally Sheedy's piece, "Stasis" (pp. 105-113), doesn't speak explicitly to sexual assault, but rather to the morass of forces that can desensitize the masses to its prevalence. Sheedy critiques a Hollywood culture that

aims to sexualize girls early and often, shaping their expectations and careers for continuous sexual objectification. Both Sheedy and fellow celebrity Gabrielle Union, who also has a piece in this anthology, write about their experiences as women in an industry that churns out and promulgates harmful beliefs and practices surrounding women's bodies, appearance, and autonomy. These women's narratives demonstrate that rape culture transcends class — even the highest-paid women in coveted professions cannot escape being unwillingly sexualized. Sheedy was told early on in her career, for example, that her opportunities were stalling not because she lacked talent, but because “nobody want[ed] to fuck [her]” (p. 106). And with painful irony, some of her peers were not winning roles because they were *too* fuckable, “too busty...too curvy” (p. 107). Sheedy describes the ideal body type of the current era:

Apparently, the look is now a superthin stomach area, big breasts, big butt, gorgeous face, and a freed nipple. When they first told me about the nipple thing, I tried to understand but it was clear that it was not the “burn the bra” mentality with which I was raised. These young women must be comfortable without a bra and with visible nipples under a thin shirt as part of a perfect breast — big enough to be sexual, but not so big that it's “slutty.” (p. 108)

Many of the career opportunities Sheedy encountered were not about how compelling she could be on-screen but about how much desire and arousal her appearance could

conjure for a male audience. “The best characters I get to play,” she writes, “are the complicated, dark, kind of crazy ones. I love those characters because I can just do my job and not deal with whether or not some producers find me ‘sexy’” (p. 110). So while sexual assault occurs off-screen, many of the narratives that appear onscreen communicate that women are designed primarily for sexual consumption and that the most desirable bodies belong to people who are only hovering around the age of sexual consent.

Sharing themes with Bassist's essay, xTx's “The Ways We Are Taught to Be

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a Girl” (pp. 115–128) looks at how girls are socialized. Many girls experience so many pervasive assaults on their bodily autonomy that they come to forget — if they ever knew in the first place — how autonomy is exercised. Imagining a point system in which “the girls who have the most points are not the winners and the girls who have the lowest points do not win either” (p. 115), xTx recounts several punitive lessons learned while growing up regarding what it meant to live within a girl's body, finding that there's a price paid “for...curves [and] holes” (p. 116). Her “lessons” track a variety of times in her life in which her consent was not sought in intimate and sexual encounters. As a girl, she was pressured to kiss when she didn't want to (p. 117); once a boy tried to force his fingers inside of her (p. 118) against her will; she was inappropri-

ately cuddled by a drunk, adult man (p. 120) who was a family friend; and she was instructed to fellate her camp counselor's thumb (p. 122). Until she “became a *seasoned* adult,” xTx writes, “I thought this was a normal part of growing up” (p. 127). The continued, if not chronic, exposure to trampled, diminished, and erased boundaries confused and befuddled the author's understanding of what it means to be an autonomous individual with agency, given that boys and men in her life regularly placed a higher point value on their desires than her own. Importantly, the examples shared in xTx's essay also make it clear that rape culture does not exclusively orbit about penetrative sex between male and female persons and their genitalia. There are many ways to usurp and challenge someone's dignity and self-respect that fall short of rape, as recounted here.

Another entry that stands out is Amy Jo Burns's “Good Girls” (pp. 167–176), which tells of a town more interested in protecting adult men who are sexual abusers than the girl children who have been sexually abused. And Anthony Frame's “I Said Yes” (pp. 213–227) exposes the long-lasting shame that can follow a victim of sexual abuse throughout the trajectory of his life, even in his happiest moments. AJ McKenna's essay “Sixty-Three Days” (pp. 79–88) offers a story that is different in some ways from the rest in the collection as it highlights how gender dysphoria can make even the language we use surrounding sexual assault clumsy and difficult to define. The naming of body parts used in an assault and who can be named as an assailant based on gender and anatomy are two fraught discussions this chapter raises.

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Not That Bad proves that rape culture refers to an unwieldy body of unwelcome, intrusive, unjust, and vindictive acts, behaviors, beliefs, repercussions, and traditions that are embedded within our laws, mores, policies, politics, religion, and culture. Rape culture is active before any two bodies touch. This work, coming in the wake of the 2017 #MeToo movement, underscores how

contemporary and widespread these narratives are and how pressing the need for change is. I'd recommend *Not That Bad* to all people regardless of gender who are survivors, to all who are looking for ways to actively resist rape culture, and to anyone who creates mass media. For a memoir that treats the phenomenon of rape as a public discourse, see *Know My Name* by Chanel Miller

(also reviewed in this issue of *RGWS*). For a work that offers advice to men about navigating sexual consent, see *Respect: Everything a Guy Needs to Know about Sex, Love, and Consent* by Inti Chavez Perez. And for a work that celebrates women's sexual pleasure, see *Moan: Anonymous Essays on Female Orgasm* by Emma Koenig.

Notes

1. Dave Philipps, "Six Men Tell Their Stories of Sexual Assault in the Military," *New York Times*, September 10, 2019; <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/09/10/us/men-military-sexual-assault.html>.
2. "Rep. Pressley Calls for Brett Kavanaugh Impeachment Inquiry," press release, September 17, 2019; <https://pressley.house.gov/media/press-releases/rep-pressley-calls-brett-kavanaugh-impeachment-inquiry>.
3. Colin Dwyer and Rachel Martin, "Chanel Miller, Sexual Assault Survivor, On The 'Immense Relief' Of Going Public," interview, NPR; <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/23/763376211/chanel-miller-sexual-assault-survivor-on-the-immense-relief-of-going-public>.
4. Ira Glass, Ken Armstrong, and Robyn Semien, "Anatomy of Doubt," first aired February 26, 2016 on *This American Life*, NPR; <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/581/anatomy-of-doubt>; based on Ken Armstrong and T. Christian Miller's print story, "An Unbelievable Story of Rape"; <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2015/12/16/an-unbelievable-story-of-rape?ref=hp-5-122#.mJyutafEo>.
5. Laura Snapes, "'I Realised We Live in a Chauvinist Culture': Pharrell Denounces 'Blurred Lines,'" *The Guardian*, October 14, 2019; <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/oct/14/pharrell-williams-denounces-blurred-lines>.

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