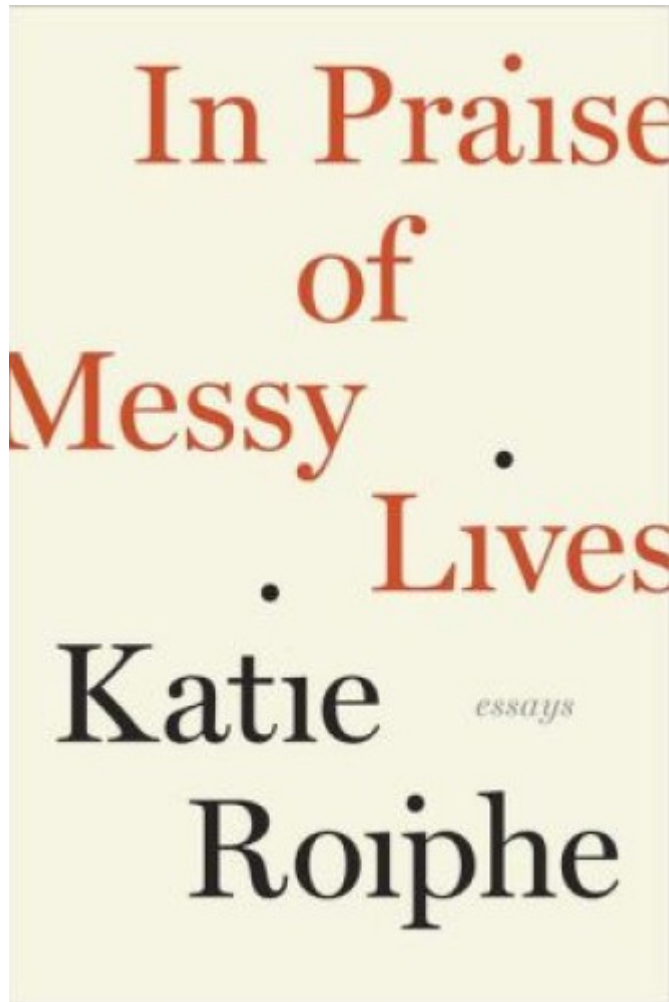


In Praise of Messy Lives, by Katie Roiphe

Books in the [July 24, 2013](#) issue

In Review



In Praise of Messy Lives

By Katie Roiphe

In the introduction to this collection of essays, Katie Roiphe addresses for the first (and not the last) time the existence of her many detractors and thereby her own insecurity. Much of the book might be more properly titled *In Defense of My Messy Life*. When focused on her own domestic situation, as a single mother with children

from two different fathers, Roiphe fancies herself quite the iconoclast. However, it is when she turns her focus outward onto something like *Mad Men*, *Austenmania* or postfeminist readings of sex scenes in novels by American male writers that her strength as a cultural critic comes through and she begins to make good on the promise of the book's great title, exploring what gets lost in the attempt to achieve pristine perfection. The breadth of topics she addresses is an asset. Her biographical essays tilt the book off center—yet they tend to be among the most memorable ones.