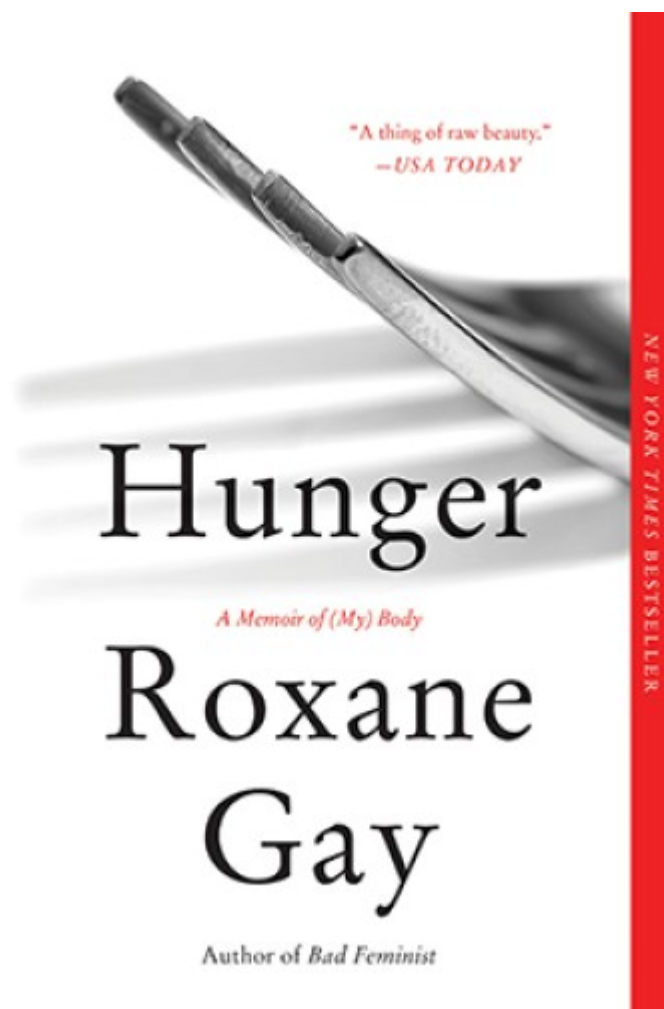


Why Roxane Gay resists the conversion narrative

Sexual violence doesn't always allow its survivors to claim redemption.

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [September 12, 2018](#) issue

In Review



Hunger

A Memoir of (My) Body

By Roxane Gay

HarperCollins

When Roxane Gay was 12 years old, a boy who she thought she loved orchestrated her gang rape in an abandoned cabin in the woods. For decades she was silent about this event. But the rape inscribed itself onto her body through fat. Gay's memoir begins at a weight-loss clinic where she steps onto the scale at 577 pounds.

Gay is aware that in order to write a memoir of her body, she ought to have a "before and after" story that leads the protagonist—in this case her body—on a trajectory of transformation through some form of conversion. The conversion narrative is familiar in both Christian and commercial cultures. But "the story of my body," she writes, "is not a story of triumph. This is not a weight-loss memoir. There will be no picture of a thin version of me, my slender body emblazoned across this book's cover. . . . I don't have any powerful insight into what it takes to overcome an unruly body and unruly appetites."

Without the expectations of a conversion narrative as a guide, readers can't cheer Gay on as she seeks the motivation to transform herself. We can't feel the familiar pleasure of horror combined with hope that conversion stories offer us.

Yet her story is timely, honest, and important. About half the book recounts the past: her Haitian-American family's fierce love for her, the "lost years" that she spent roaming the Internet for sex or help or equal parts of both, and the gradual recovery of her sanity.

The other half of the book takes place in the present as Gay grapples with life as a very large person in a society that cannot make space for her physically or emotionally. She lists the weight-loss strategies tried and failed, the kinds of things that strangers say, and the humiliations of trying to sit in a chair. She writes of her obsession with television shows like *The Biggest Loser* and their messages about undisciplined bodies. She wrestles with the everyday demand of caring for herself. Some days she can meet that demand and other days it feels too great.

The root experience in Gay's life was the rape that "broke" her, and the book is not coy about the connection between the extreme sexual violence and the means her body and mind used for protection. She insightfully points out that the rape was not a separate event that stood apart from the rest of her life. If it had been that, it might have been easier to deal with. Instead, it was part of a path that she had been

on with the boy she calls “Christopher.”

“I cannot bring myself to detail the things he did to me before I was broken,” she writes. “It’s too much, too humiliating. But with each new transgression we committed, I lost more of my body. I fell further from the possibility of the word ‘no.’” When she does say no on the day in the woods, her no is disregarded in the most severe terms. After that, she does not believe her no means anything in the world.

Gay’s rape is not simply a terrible thing that happened to her once upon a time, perpetrated by a small group of bad boys. Her particular horror is a part of our culture—a part of us. It is written into the sexual scripts that we hand to little boys and girls and into our collective dismissal of each other’s no’s. It’s also connected to the drive for physical perfection and body hatred that many of us carry from adolescence into adulthood. Gay connects it to both the Sweet Valley High books that she read in her early adolescence and the *Playboy* and *Hustler* magazines that Christopher brought into his bedroom for them to look at.

Christopher was, as Gay puts it, a “good boy” from a “good family.” He grew up to be a successful executive. Gay knows exactly where he lives and works. He appears, on the surface at least, to be free from the burden she carries. What destroyed her bolstered him.

Instead of looking for ways for Gay to lose weight, we might ask ourselves what dynamics of gender and power make that possible. We might look for ways that those dynamics have played out in our own lives.

I may never have weighed 577 pounds, but I learned early (around the same age that Gay was raped) to always be on the lookout for the next, best weight-loss strategy. I learned that my female body was, in Gay’s word, “unruly,” untrustworthy, and inherently faulty. I learned, as Gay has, that no feminist ideology can finally purge these lessons and no cultural critique silences the inner critic. Some part of me still believes that a thinner me will be a happier, healthier, more whole me.

Hunger doesn’t provide comfort but it does call forth compassion. The compassion I feel for Gay’s body is a compassion I can extend, perhaps, to my own body—and to that of the person seated next to me on the airplane or the person standing in front of me in the grocery store. I can acknowledge the untold stories that the bodies of the people around me are carrying.

Maybe, as Gay's memoir suggests, I can even write new stories that are a little truer.