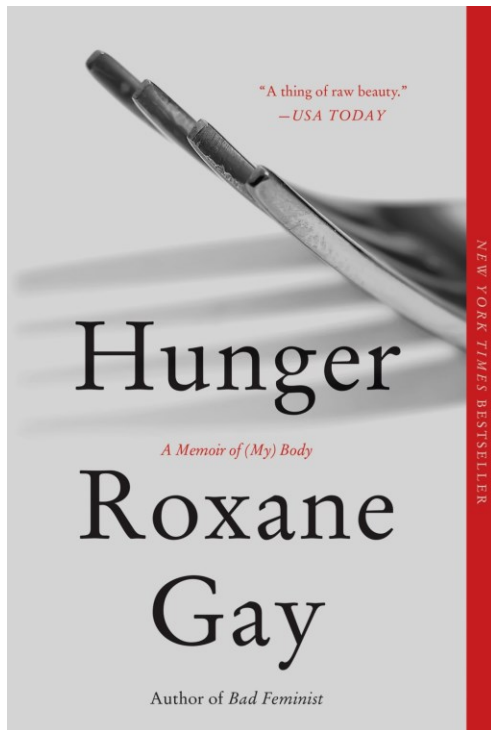


HUNGER: A MEMOIR OF (MY) BODY



Book Summary:

The author tells the reader her personal story related to the origin of and continuation of her overweight body.

Summary of Concerns:

This book contains sexual assault; sexual activities; alternate sexualities; self-harm involving bulimia; profanity; references to racism, pedophilia, suicide and alcohol use; and controversial racial, social, political, and religious commentary.

Adult

By Roxane Gay

ISBN: 978-0-06-236260-5



3 /5

Minor Restricted
BookLooks Review Rating

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16	<p>Losing control of my body was a matter of accretion. I began eating to change my body. I was willful in this. Some boys had destroyed me, and I barely survived it. I knew I wouldn't be able to endure another such violation, and so I ate because I thought that if my body became repulsive, I could keep men away. Even at that young age, I understood that to be fat was to be undesirable to men, to be beneath their contempt, and I already knew too much about their contempt. This is what most girls are taught—that we should be slender and small. We should not take up space. We should be seen and not heard, and if we are seen, we should be pleasing to men, acceptable to society. And most women know this, that we are supposed to disappear, but it's something that needs to be said, loudly, over and over again, so that we can resist surrendering to what is expected of us.</p>
18	<p>There is the before and the after. Before I gained weight. After I gained weight. Before I was raped. After I was raped.</p>
19	<p>I understood, from the way I saw people stare at fat people, from the way I stared at fat people, that too much weight was undesirable.</p>
21	<p>I'm a feminist and I believe in doing away with the rigid beauty standards that force women to conform to unrealistic ideals.</p> <p>...I know, having grown up in a culture that is generally toxic to women and constantly trying to discipline women's bodies, that it is important to resist unreasonable standards for how my body or any body should look.</p>
23	<p>Over the years, I have learned the importance of survival and claiming the label of "survivor," but I don't mind the label of "victim." I also don't think there's any shame in saying that when I was raped, I became a victim, and to this day, while I am also many other things, I am still a victim.</p> <p>It took me a long time, but I prefer "victim" to "survivor" now.</p>
25	<p>Intellectually, I recognize that I am not the problem. This world and its unwillingness to accept and accommodate me are the problem.</p>
34	<p>When I moved on from <i>Little House on the Prairie</i>, I read everything by Judy Blume. I mostly learned about sex from her novel <i>Forever . . .</i>, and for many years, I assumed that all men called their dicks "Ralph."</p>
39	<p>It is easier to use detached language like "assault" or "violation" or "incident" than it is to come out and say that when I was twelve years old, I was gang-raped by a boy I thought I loved and a group of his friends.</p> <p>When I was twelve years old, I was raped.</p> <p>...I was raped by Christopher and several of his friends in an abandoned hunting cabin in the woods where no one but those boys could hear me scream.</p> <p>...His friends were waiting and then we were standing inside the cabin and Christopher was bragging to them about things he and I had done, private things, and I was so embarrassed because I was a good Catholic girl and I already felt so very guilty that Christopher and I had done things we should not have done.</p> <p>...Christopher pushed me down in front of his laughing friends, so many bodies larger than mine. I was so scared and embarrassed and confused. I was hurt because I loved him and thought he loved me, and in a matter of moments, there I was, splayed out in front of his friends. I wasn't a girl to them. I was a thing, flesh and girl bones with which they could amuse themselves. When Christopher lay on top of me, he didn't take off his clothes. This detail stays with me, that he had such little regard for what he was about to do to me. He</p>

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	<p>just unzipped his jeans and knelt between my legs and shoved himself inside of me. Those other boys stared down at me, leered really, and egged Christopher on. I closed my eyes because I did not want to see them. I did not want to accept what was happening. As a sheltered, good Catholic girl, I barely understood what was happening. I did understand the pain, though, the sharpness and the immediacy of it. That pain was inescapable and held me in my body when I wanted to abandon it to those boys and hide myself somewhere safe. I begged Christopher to stop. I told him I would do anything he wanted if he would just make it all stop, but he didn't stop. He didn't look at me. Christopher took a long time or at least it felt like a long time because I did not want him inside me. It did not matter what I wanted.</p> <p>After Christopher came, he switched places with the boy who was holding my arms down. I fought, but my fighting didn't do much more than make those boys laugh. The friend held me down, his lips shiny, his beer breath in my face. To this day, I cannot stand beer breath. I thought I would break beneath the weight of those boys. I was already so sore. Christopher refused to look at me. He just held my wrists, spat on my face. I told myself, I still tell myself, he was just trying to impress his friends. I tell myself he didn't mean it. He laughed. All those boys raped me. They tried to see how far they could go. I was a toy, used recklessly. Eventually, I stopped screaming, I stopped moving, I stopped fighting. I stopped praying and believing God would save me. I did not stop hurting. The pain was constant. They took a break. I huddled into myself and shook. I couldn't move. I could not believe what was happening.</p>
42	<p>Later, those boys told everyone at school what happened or, rather, a version of the story that made my name "Slut" for the rest of the school year.</p>
45	<p>I no longer believed in God because surely if there were a God, he would have saved me from Christopher and those boys in the woods. I no longer believed in God because I had sinned. I had sinned in a way I hadn't even known was possible until I learned what was possible.</p>
48	<p>For many, many years to come, I would keep telling myself that the barest minimum of acknowledgment from lovers was enough.</p> <p>We would hang out in his bedroom and flip through worn copies of his older brother's Playboy and Hustler magazines. I studied these naked women, mostly young white blond thin taut. Their bodies seemed alien, unreal. I knew it was wrong to look at these women displaying such wanton nakedness, but I couldn't look away.</p> <p>He clearly found these women exciting, sexually attractive, and I knew, even then, that I was nothing like them. I didn't really want to be like those women but I wanted him to want me and I wanted him to look at me the way he looked at the magazines. He never did, and in his way, he punished me for what I wasn't and couldn't be. He punished me for being too young and too naïve, too adoring and too accommodating.</p> <p>I was a thing to him, even before he and his friends raped me. He wanted to try things and I was extraordinarily pliable. I didn't know how to say no.</p>
49	<p>I wish I could tell you I never spoke to Christopher again, but I did. That may be what shames me most, that after everything he did to me, I went back, and allowed him to continue using me until my family moved a few months later. I allowed him to continue using me because I didn't know what else to do. Or I let him use me because after what happened in the woods, I felt so worthless.</p>
56	<p>Since we had moved, I no longer had to go to a school where everyone called me Slut.</p>

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58	<p>As I was a black student from a reasonably well-off family, and I was from Nebraska, of all places, the white students didn't quite know what to do with me. I was an anomaly, and I didn't fit their assumed narrative about blackness. They assumed that all black students came from impoverished backgrounds and lived in the inner city. They assumed all black students attended Exeter by the grace of financial aid and white benevolence. Most of the black students only grudgingly accepted me into their social circles because I didn't fit their assumed narrative about blackness, either.</p>
60	<p>I was trying to forget what happened to me. I was trying to stop feeling those boys on and in my skin, how they laughed at me, how they laughed as they ruined me.</p>
68	<p>Mr. Bateman was notorious for walking around with a tumbler filled with Diet Coke and vodka. ...Shortly after I graduated in 1992, he was convicted of possessing child pornography and sending that pornography across state lines.</p>
70	<p>The enduring lesson I learned at Camp Kingsmont was how to smoke because the counselors let us bum cigarettes from them. Smoking was a habit I would lovingly nurture for eighteen years.</p> <p>Smoking felt good and always gave me a light buzz. Smoking also made me feel cool when I knew I was very, very uncool. I loved the ceremony of smoking. Back then, I was very much into the performance of it. I bought a Zippo lighter, and always kept it filled with lighter fluid. I liked to flip it open and shut it against my thigh as a nervous tic.</p> <p>I started with Virginia Slims, or Vagina Slimes as we called them, then moved on to Marlboro Reds, then Marlboro Lights, before finally settling on Camel Lights, hard pack, my cigarette of choice. Each time I got a new pack, I would tap the top of it against the palm of my hand several times to tamp the tobacco, then pull off the plastic wrap and the foil insert. I'd turn one cigarette upside down and then pull out another to smoke. I am sure I learned this little ritual from one of the camp counselors.</p> <p>I loved smoking after a meal, first thing in the morning, right before bed. In high school, I had to hide my smoking from faculty members, so I would walk downtown between classes and smoke behind the storefronts of Water Street, looking out onto the murky Exeter River.</p>
75	<p>I slept less and less because when I closed my eyes, I could feel boy bodies crushing my girl body, hurting my girl body. I smelled their sweat and beer breath and relived every terrible thing they did to me.</p>
77	<p>My senior year, some friends and I wrote and produced a play on sexual violence. We all had experiences with assault that we had shared in one way or another over the years.</p> <p>...A young white man standing near me, the kind of guy who played lacrosse, had not been accepted to the school of his choice. He looked at me with plain disgust. "Affirmative action," he sneered, unable to swallow the bitter truth that I, a black girl, had achieved something he could not.</p>
82	<p>The computer and modem were, purportedly, to help me with my studies, but really, I used them to chat with strangers all around the world on bulletin boards and in chat rooms and on IRC, an old-school chat program with thousands of channels populated by thousands of lonely people who were mostly interested in talking dirty to one another.</p>
83	<p>I liked the idea of a boy asking me out, taking me on a date, kissing me, but I did not want to actually be alone with a boy, because a boy could hurt me.</p> <p>The men I talked to online allowed me to enjoy the idea of romance and love and lust and</p>

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	<p>sex while keeping my body safe. I could pretend to be thin and sexy and confident. I discovered forums for rape and sexual abuse survivors, where, as with when I read <i>The Courage to Heal</i>, I saw that I was not alone. In those online forums, I saw that horrible things happened to so many girls and sometimes boys. I saw that however bad my secret was, many people had far worse secrets.</p> <p>In IRC chat rooms, I talked to people in the BDSM community, and I learned about safe, sane, and consensual sexual encounters, where power was exchanged, but you could have a safe word to make things stop when you wanted them to stop. I learned that there were people who would take the right kind of no as no, and that was powerful, intoxicating.</p> <p>...At twelve years old, I had no such words. I just knew that these boys had forced me to have sex with them, had used my body in ways I did not know a girl body could be used. Thanks to books and therapy and my new friends online, I knew ever more clearly that there was a thing called rape. I knew that when a woman said no, men were supposed to listen and stop what they were doing.</p>
86	<p>I worked the graveyard shift at a phone sex company in downtown Phoenix with a bunch of other lost girls. I mostly sat in my booth and did crossword puzzles while I talked to lonely men who wanted nothing more than the fantasy of a woman who might listen to them for ten minutes or an hour or two.</p> <p>...I was fat and I continued to eat to get fatter and I talked to men without having to be touched by men.</p> <p>...I thought about turning the gun on the boys who had hurt me. I thought about turning the gun on myself.</p>
87	<p>I let men, mostly, do terrible things to my body. I let them hurt me because I had already been hurt and so, really, I was looking for someone to finish what had already been started.</p> <p>...I went home with strangers. One man invited me over while his wife slept on the floor next to the bed where we lay. His floor was covered in cat litter. I can still remember the crunch of it beneath my bare feet as I snuck out the next morning, walked to a pay phone, and called the man I lived with to come get me. I started dating women because I naïvely thought that with women, I might be safe.</p>
88	<p>I went to Minnesota, in the dead of winter, to stay with a girl I met on the Internet. This would become a pattern—meeting lovers online. At first, I did it because it felt safer and I could be sexual without having to actually be sexual.</p>
91	<p>I turned twenty-one and celebrated by buying a six-pack of Corona even though I hate the taste and stink of beer. Later that night, a woman I was casually dating called, and when I mentioned it was my birthday and I was sitting alone in my apartment, with a sweaty six-pack of cheap beer, she offered to show me a good time. I don't even remember what we did.</p>
95	<p>She peered out at me and said, "You didn't sound like a colored girl on the phone."</p>
133	<p>I have been accused of being full of self-loathing and of being fat-phobic. There is truth to the former accusation and I reject the latter. I do, however, live in a world where the open hatred of fat people is vigorously tolerated and encouraged. I am a product of my environment.</p>
143	<p>I do not require the affirmation of strangers. Those affirmations are rarely about genuine encouragement or kindness. They are an expression of the fear of unruly bodies.</p>

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149	As a woman, as a fat woman, I am not supposed to take up space. And yet, as a feminist, I am encouraged to believe I can take up space.
164	When I am walking down the street, men lean out of their car windows and shout vulgar things at me about my body, how they see it, and how it upsets them that I am not catering to their gaze and their preferences and desires. I try not to take these men seriously because what they are really saying is, “I am not attracted to you. I do not want to fuck you, and this confuses my understanding of my masculinity, entitlement, and place in this world.” It is not my job to please them with my body.
169	<p>I have chronic heartburn because I used to make myself throw up after I ate. There’s a word for this, “bulimia,” but it always feels strange to use that word with regard to myself.</p> <p>...Once upon a time, I began to purge because I wanted to feel empty. I wanted to feel empty but I also wanted to fill myself. I was not a teenager or even in my twenties. I was in my thirties, and finally, I found the discipline to have an eating disorder. That first night, I wanted a huge rib eye steak, medium rare, over cold lettuce topped with salad dressing, croutons, and cheese. I found two thick cuts of rib eye at the grocery store, nicely marbled. I bought a package of Double Stuf Oreos. Like a thoroughly modern woman I consulted the Internet. I took that time to learn how to binge and purge and was both fascinated and appalled at the information I found. I learned that it helps to drink a lot of water right before you purge and that at the beginning of your binge you should eat carrots so you have a visual marker of when you’ve rid yourself of everything you’ve eaten. I learned that chocolate tastes the worst as it comes back up (and this would end up being absolutely true). I learned that my fingers might get cut from my teeth and that stomach acid would burn my knuckles (and these things were also true).</p> <p>When I felt sufficiently prepared, I made my dinner and enjoyed a rush of excitement at the prospect of being able to eat whatever I wanted without consequence. This, I assured myself, was the dream. I ate all of that food, the steaks, the huge salad, the package of cookies. My stomach ached and I felt bloated and nauseated in a way I had never felt before. I didn’t want to wait too long, so I rushed to my kitchen sink, gulped down three glasses of water, and stared into the aluminum basin as I shoved two fingers down my throat. It took a few jabs, but soon, I started gagging. My eyes watered. And then I was heaving and vomiting all that food I had just eaten. When I was done, I turned on the water and the disposal and all evidence of what I had done slowly disappeared. For once, I did not feel shame after eating. I felt incredible. I felt in control. I wondered why it had taken me so long to try purging.</p>
186	Ina loves rhetorical questions. “How good is that?” she’ll ask while sampling one of her delicious dishes. Or, “Who wouldn’t want that for their birthday?” while planning a surprise for one of her coterie of elegant Hamptons friends. Or, “We need a nice cocktail for breakfast, don’t we?” when preparing brunch for some of her many always attractive, wealthy, and often gay friends.
201	<p>When I was nineteen years old, I came out to my parents over the telephone.</p> <p>...The second to last woman I loved during my twenties, Fiona, finally made the grand gesture I always wanted her to make after I moved on or convinced myself I had moved on, because she would never give me what I needed—commitment, fidelity, affection. We were still friends, but I was seeing someone else, Adriana, who was beautiful and kind and crazy, though we too would ultimately be incompatible.</p>

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202	<p>My relationship with Fiona had been largely unspoken. We spent all our time together. Sometimes we were intimate.</p> <p>...I had gotten in the habit, you see, of dating women who wouldn't give me what I wanted, who couldn't possibly love me enough because I was a gaping wound of need.</p>
203	<p>I told them the one thing that I thought might finally sever the bond between us. It's not that I didn't want my parents in my life, but I did not know how to be broken and be the daughter they thought they knew. I blurted out, "I'm gay."</p> <p>...Saying I was gay wasn't true, but it wasn't a lie. I was and am attracted to women. I find them rather intriguing. At the time, I didn't know I could be attracted to both women and men and be part of this world. And, in those early days, I enjoyed dating women and having sex with them, but also, I was terrified of men.</p> <p>...The first woman I slept with was big and beautiful. I still remember how she smelled. Her skin was so soft. She was kind when I was starving for kindness. It was just a one-night stand at a party. Several CDs played during our tryst. It was an experience. My tongue tingles when I think of her name. The next woman I slept with I called my girlfriend, even though we barely knew each other. We met on the Internet, and I packed up my stuff, and I flew to Minnesota from Arizona to be with her in the dead of winter.</p>
205	<p>I was here and queer. In the way of young queers of my day, I wore an excessive number of pride rings and pins and such. I slathered my car in stickers. I was passionately militant about any number of issues without fully understanding why.</p>
206	<p>I simply gave myself, gave my body, to whoever offered me even the faintest of interest. This was all I deserved, I told myself.</p> <p>...In relationships, I never allowed myself to make the first move because I knew I was repulsive. I did not allow myself to initiate sex. I did not dare want something so fine as affection or sexual pleasure. I knew I had to wait until it was offered, each and every time. I had to be grateful for what was offered.</p> <p>...My body was nothing, so I let anything happen to my body. I had no idea what I enjoyed sexually because I was never asked and I knew my wants did not matter. I was supposed to be grateful; I had no right to seek satisfaction.</p> <p>Lovers were often rough with me as if that was the only way they could understand touching a body as fat as mine. I accepted this because I did not deserve kindness or a gentle touch.</p>
212	<p>In one of my past relationships, again in my twenties, things between us were not good but also not that bad. It was the kind of relationship that reminds me that sometimes emotional abuse is even worse than physical abuse. I don't mind getting knocked around.</p>
219	<p>When you are very tall and wide and, well, I guess the tattoos don't help, you all too often present as "not woman." Race plays a part in this too. Black women are rarely allowed their femininity.</p>
220	<p>Today, the people who misgender me aren't doing so because they perceive a queer aesthetic. They're doing so because they don't see me, my body, as something that should be treated or considered with care.</p>
222	<p>Once, I was at a restaurant with a large group of people and the waitress kept touching me. It was really fucking annoying because I don't want to be touched like that unless we are in a sexual relationship. Every time she passed by, she would rub my shoulders or run her hand down my arm and I kept getting more and more irritated but I said nothing.</p>

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225	Sometimes Google Alerts takes me to a forum of MRA acolytes or conservative assholes having a field day insulting my looks with a picture of me from an event or magazine.
250	I wonder if he eats red meat and if he still likes to look at Playboys and if he has any hobbies and if he's still mean to fat kids. I was crazy for him. I probably would have done anything if he had bothered to ask.
251	I wonder what he would think if he knew that unless I thought of him I felt nothing at all while having sex, I went through the motions, I was very convincing, and that when I did think of him the pleasure was so intense it was breathtaking. I wonder if he is familiar with the Sword of Damocles.
253	The man didn't understand why I would not, could not, raise brown children in the only place he had ever called home. ...We were three hours from Chicago, so my blackness was less of a curiosity, more of a threat. And there were the black students on campus, the nerve of them, daring to pursue higher education. In the local newspaper, residents wrote angry letters about a new criminal element—the scourge of youthful black ambition, black joy. In my more generous moments, I tried to believe the locals were using anger to mask their fear of living in a dying town in a changing world. ...In the first weeks, I was racially profiled in an electronics store. Living here never got better. When I lamented how uncomfortable I was and am here, local acquaintances often tried to tell me, in different ways, "Not all Hoosiers," much in the same way men on social media would say, "Not all men," to derail discussions about misogyny. ...The confederacy is alive and well here though we are hundreds of miles from the Old South. There is a man who drives around in an imposing black pickup truck with white-supremacist flags flying from the rear. My dental hygienist tells me I live in a bad part of town. There are no bad parts of town here, not really. In the local newspaper, residents write angry letters about a new criminal element in town. "People from Chicago," they say, which is code for black people. On campus, pro-life students chalk messages on sidewalks like "Planned Parenthood #1 Killer of Black Lives" and "Hands up, don't abort." My blackness is, again, a threat. I don't feel safe, but I know how lucky I am, which leaves me wondering how unsafe black people leading more precarious lives must feel.
259	When I was twelve years old I was raped and then I ate and ate and ate to build my body into a fortress.

Profanity	Count
Ass	9
Dick	1
Fuck	12
Shit	4