



INTERVIEW WITH

*Roxanne Gay*

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**Roxane Gay** is a writer, editor, blogger, and professor with a diverse bibliography. Her written works include *Bad Feminist*, *An Untamed State*, and the forthcoming *Hunger*. She is also a contributing op-ed writer for *The New York Times* and a professor at Purdue University. Her work often handles race, gender, and sexuality through the lens of her own personal experiences. During her visit to Butler University as part of the Vivian S. Delbrook Visiting Writers Series, Gay took the time to speak with *Manuscripts* staff member Chelsea Yedinak.

**Chelsea Yedinak:** *In Bad Feminist, you reference a large number of different books and movies and pop culture items, and you also place an emphasis on how important reading has been in your life. I was wondering what books and authors serve as your inspiration and which you continue to hold close to your heart?*

**Roxane Gay:** Edith Wharton's *Age of Innocence* is definitely a book that is important to me. And the *Little House on the Prairie* books are also ones that you really hold in your heart forever.

**CY:** *Are there any specific authors that have inspired you as you've come into your writing?*

**RG:** Zadie Smith, Toni Morrison, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Edith Wharton. And really anyone that I'm reading. I get inspiration from everything that I read, and I read a lot. Catherine Chung is a contemporary writer, and she's one of my favorite writers. Alexander Chee. The indie writer xTx. I get inspiration from everything I read, good or bad.

**CY:** *You have a really diverse bibliography in terms of style, with your essays and short stories and then your novel, plus a memoir coming out soon. So how do you decide what stories and issues you want to write about next and in what form you want to write them?*

**RG:** I don't have a really good answer for that. Oftentimes my decisions are deadline-based, especially in terms of nonfiction. Somebody asks me to write about something, and there's often a really tight deadline. And so that's my motivation for doing it. So mostly that. But then, once in a while—not once in a while, a lot of the time, really—you get this sort of idea, and it just becomes a fire in your gut, and you just think I have to write about this, I have to write about this. And so I just follow my gut.

**CY:** *Your novel, An Untamed State, originally had a less happy ending that was changed after you received some feedback. About the change, you wrote, "Maybe it won't be completely realistic. Maybe that's okay." How do you decide when you're going to lean more towards that fantasy and when to go more realistic for an ending?*

**RG:** I don't know. It depends. It really depends on how it serves the overall story. It really is about what serves the interest of the story. With the novel, in working with my editor at Grove, Amy Hundley, I realized the reader had been on such a journey alongside Mireille and not only did she deserve a happier ending, so did the reader. There is no happy ending for someone like her who's been through what she's been through. But I do believe she was strong enough to find her way back to herself, slowly but surely, and that it was important to give the reader that. And so, for me, making that choice served the best interest of the novel. It's always about the best interest of whatever I'm writing that is my guide in making narrative decisions.

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**CY:** *You talk in Bad Feminist about the careless language regarding sexual violence in our culture. For example, how we make a spectacle of it in Law and Order: SVU and other shows. You handle those topics in your writing, but you do a really good job of making it so that it's not entertaining. Do you have any advice for someone who's considering writing about sexual violence and handling it sensitively?*

**RG:** The first thing is to not consider it a plot device, but rather something that happens in the story. Don't use it as a device; let it be an organic part of the story. And let there be good narrative reasons for including it. I think you start from there. It's all about being genuine and organic. Then make sure that you don't exploit the violence to titillate the reader or to repulse the reader just for the sake of repulsion. And there are a lot of different ways to go about doing that.

**CY:** *Since you've written Bad Feminist, some of the issues addressed in the book have changed, such as marriage equality. Do you think that we might see more of those issues being fixed in the near future?*

**RG:** It depends on who the next president is. Yeah, I think the social tide has certainly turned in terms of marriage equality. But those gains could just as easily be taken away from us if a Republican president is elected and controls 3 or 4 seats on the Supreme Court. I mean, it's terrifying that there are people whose rights depend on who's in power. That's not the way civil rights should work. And so I think that we have to celebrate the gains that we've made while staying extraordinarily mindful of the work yet to be done.

**CY:** *You talk at the end of Bad Feminist about how the goal isn't necessarily for everyone to be a feminist. They should be, but you can't force everyone to. There should be more of an open dialogue and a more accurate representation of feminism.*

*Do you think we've gotten some of that in recent years with movements like He for She? Is there a specific way to start that activism?*

**RG:** I think we're starting to have more open dialogue, yes. And hopefully we continue. And I hope we also go beyond dialogue. The issues we're facing demand more than simply conversation. I think we see it in these programs like He for She from the United Nations. Emma Watson starting a feminist book club. Any time a young woman who's in the public eye claims feminism, I think it offers an opportunity for conversation. And I think we can do these same kinds of things in our day-to-day lives for those of us who aren't famous. We can just find these moments where we can have a good conversation about feminism and go from there.

*CY: Several of your essays discuss very personal experiences from your life. How do you maintain the personal aspect of your writing?*

**RG:** I just try to maintain boundaries for myself, but recognize that sometimes you need to write from experience. And so I'm willing to write from experience when I know that it's going to serve a greater purpose in an essay.

*CY: You said that the style of your upcoming memoir, Hunger, was influenced by other nonfiction that changed how you viewed it. What sort of style will that be?*

**RG:** I read Maggie Nelson's *Argonauts* last year. Just a great book. And she had no real sections or chapters; it was just fragments. And I'm borrowing from that. There are no chapter headings, there are sections, but there are no chapter headings in *Hunger*. And some chapters, for lack of a better word, are one paragraph, while others might be ten pages. So I'm just playing with structure and form and really trying

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to deconstruct form a lot in the book.

**CY:** *On Tumblr, writing about 2015, you said, “My skin has not gotten thicker. I can hear a hundred compliments, but it’s the random teenager on Tumblr saying, ‘Roxane Gay is unoriginal and untalented’ that is a knife through my tender heart.” How do you keep going and writing in spite of the criticism or backlash you receive from those random teenagers on Tumblr and others?*

**RG:** You have to just keep it all in its proper place. The reality is that I’m always going to write. I was writing when I was four years old. It was my favorite thing to do. It still is. And so I always just try to separate writing from publishing, which are two very different things. You know, eventually I’m able to gain perspective on that little fucking twerp who has some nonsense to say and they just don’t like my work. That’s fine. You always want to be liked, but at some point, you have to accept that you will not be universally liked and that, quite frankly, anyone who’s universally liked is suspect.

**CY:** *Was there a moment when you realized that? Because I think a lot of younger people are taught that you need to be liked. You’ve mentioned that female characters that are unlikeable are often viewed much more negatively in reviews.*

**RG:** I’m still learning. It’s something I have to actively remind myself and to tell myself and reassure myself of.

**CY:** *You’ve spoken about how, as a black, bisexual Haitian-American, you’re often told by society to be silent. Do you have advice for other writers who are being told to be silent?*

**RG:** You just have to write anyway. You can’t really listen to people who tell you, “Don’t speak.” Those are not people who have your best interests at heart. So you have to write

despite so many of the negative messages that we receive in this world.

**CY:** *How do you deal with the criticism you receive for writing and speaking out?*

**RG:** It depends. Criticism is always difficult, but when people are criticizing me because they want me to be quiet, that says more about them than it does about me. And I'm not particularly interested in that. But when criticism is going to make me a better writer and thinker, then I definitely try to sit with the criticism and see what I can learn from it.

**CY:** *Do you have any advice for creating constructive criticism and how to give someone the tools to make a piece better?*

**RG:** I think you have to point out what's not working in writing. There's just no flowery way to do that. It is what it is. The nature of criticism is that you are going to say, "This is what is not working." But you want to make sure that it's about intentionality and where you are coming from in terms of the criticism that you're offering. And making sure that your criticism is not just "I hate this kind of sentence." That's a personal preference, that's not a criticism. You want to always make sure that your commentary is in the best interest of the piece that you're criticizing.

**CY:** *You've written about how you weren't always interested in using the term "feminist" to describe yourself, particularly in your teens and twenties. Was there a particular moment when you realized you wanted to claim that title?*

**RG:** Yeah, when I turned 30, really. Right before I got my Ph.D., I had this moment where I was working in the College of Engineering at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and I was working in communications and I recognized that

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I could do what these faculty members around me were doing. And most of them were men. So I decided to get my Ph.D. and I think that was really part of the catalyst for my feminism. I don't know if it was an awakening, but I was willing to embrace feminism and to claim feminism and that willingness has just gotten stronger and stronger throughout my thirties and now into my early forties.

**CY:** *Do you have any advice for young people who are interested in feminism but might have some of the same reservations that you had when you were younger?*

**RG:** Yeah. Don't worry about those reservations. People are going to think what they're going to think. Try not to let that shape the choices and the decisions that you make for yourself and how you see the world.

**CY:** *There's a long-running joke about an English major being worthless. Do you have any advice for young English majors going into the world and what they might do to keep writing alongside careers?*

**RG:** Yeah, I think that you have to believe in the value of your major despite the rhetoric that an English major is worthless. It's not worthless. It's one of the most valuable majors. You can do anything with an English major. And just recognize that if you want to be a writer, you have to have a day job. And it's okay. There's no shame in that, and it doesn't make you less of a writer and it doesn't make you less committed to your art, it just makes you committed to your rent and health insurance and things like that.

**CY:** *What do you get out of your reading and writing?*

**RG:** It's just my favorite thing to do. It makes me happy. It makes me relaxed. It helps me make sense of the world. It



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helps me make sense of myself. It allows me to be creative and free, so reading and writing are everything.

**CY:** *What are some good books that you've read recently or that are coming out soon?*

**RG:** I loved *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara. Just outstanding, melodramatic, dark. I loved it. Best book I read last year. *Great Kitchens of the Midwest* by J. Ryan Stradal was a lot of fun. *Voyage of the Sabled Venus* is this gorgeous book of poetry by Robin Coste Lewis that I loved.

**CY:** *All of the major awards tend to go to pieces that are more dramatic as opposed to comedies. Do you think there's a reason why people discount happiness?*

**RG:** I think comedies aren't necessarily focused on happiness; they're focused on laughter. I think that people tend to equate struggle with authenticity and with merit. And I think that we're very suspicious of happiness, as a people, and so I think that is what is reflected when awards generally go to darker work.

**CY:** *There is a responsibility for art to reflect life and point out problems, but fiction is also often a way to escape those problems. Do you think that a happy ending can be important in fiction? Is there a way to do both?*

**RG:** Yeah, absolutely. I think we can have happy endings. They exist. And really, for me, the interesting story is what did it take to get to the happy ending? That's really where my attention is drawn and so I think happy endings can exist while also acknowledging that a happy ending isn't a perfect ending. I think people hear "happy ending" and assume bliss, but that's not necessarily the case. And so we just have to remember that happiness has as much texture as sorrow.