

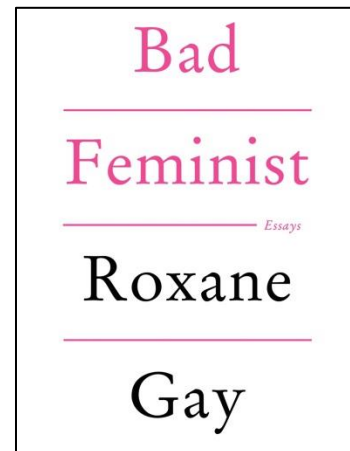


Discussion Questions for Bad Feminist by Roxane Gay

These discussion questions were prepared by the National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV) for the *Reader with a Cause* book club on Goodreads.

If you like our questions please feel free to use them – and don't forget to join the conversation online at:

https://www.goodreads.com/topic/group_folder/259030?group_id=114966



1. Thoughts & Opinions

Overall, what did you think of Roxane Gay's Bad Feminist? Did you like the book and/or the essay format?

Why or why not?

2. On "Bad" Feminism

Gay ascribes to what she calls "bad" feminism, wherein people are allowed to be people and make mistakes, learn, and evolve.

"I openly embrace the label of bad feminist. I do so because I am flawed and human...I cannot tell you how freeing it has been to accept this about myself. I embrace the label of bad feminist because I am human. I am messy. I'm not trying to be an example. I am not trying to be perfect. I am not trying to say that I have all the answers. I am not trying to say that I'm right. I am just trying--trying to support what I believe in, trying to do some good in this world..." (x-xi)

"We don't all have to believe in the same feminism...I hear many young women say they can't find well-known feminists with whom they identify. That can be disheartening, but I say, let us (try to) become the feminists we would like to see moving through the world." (xiii-xiv)

What does feminism mean to you? What do you think about the concept of "bad" feminism?

3. Fifty Shades of Fairy Tales

“The thing about fairy tales is that the princess finds her prince, but there’s usually a price to pay. A compromise is required for happily ever after. The woman in the fairy tale is generally the one who pays the price.” (193)

In “The Trouble with Prince Charming, or He Who Trespasses Against Us,” Gay looks at two modern-day fairy tales, the Twilight series and the Fifty Shades series, reminding us that, once again, it is the woman in these stories who is required to sacrifice in order to find what we’re led to believe is her happy ending.

“The books are, essentially, a detailed primer for how to successfully engage in a controlling abusive relationship. The trilogy represents the darkest kind of fairy tale, one where controlling, obsessive, and borderline abusive tendencies are made to seem intensely desirable.” (201)

“When considering the overwhelming popularity of this trilogy, we cannot simply dismiss the flaws because the books are fun and the sex is hot. The damaging tone has too broad a reach. That tone reinforces pervasive cultural messages women are already swallowing about what they should tolerate in romantic relationships, about what they should tolerate to be loved by their Prince Charming.” (204)

If you’ve read the Twilight and/or Fifty Shades series, what do you think about Gay’s characterization of these stories? Are they damaging or just in good fun?

What other popular or well-known stories do you think fall into this category?

4. Diversity in OITNB: Counterpoint

“Time and again, people of color are supposed to be grateful for scraps from the table. There’s this strange implication that we should enjoy certain movies or television shows simply because they exist.” (250)

In “When Less is More,” Gay takes the opposing viewpoint on Internet sensation, *Orange is the New Black*. While it has been celebrated for its diversity and for sharing women’s stories that aren’t often heard in the mainstream, it only does so because it centers on the experiences of a white woman. Gay argues this isn’t something to celebrate.

“OITNB is a lovingly crafted monument to White Girl Problems...And still, we cannot ignore how the show’s diverse characters are planets orbiting Piper’s sun. The women of color don’t have the privilege of inhabiting their own solar systems. This is what we consider diversity these days.” (252)



OITNB was also a previous RWAC pick - did you watch the show after reading the book it was based on? What do you think: should we celebrate *OITNB* for making strides in the right direction or should we demand more?

5. On Leaning In

In “Bad Feminist: Take One,” Gay returns to the concept of bad feminism, this time in reference to other public figures, including Sheryl Sandberg and her book *Lean In* (also a previous RWAC pick). She says:

“The critical response to Lean In is not entirely misplaced, but it is emblematic of the dangers of public womanhood. Public women, and feminists in particular, have to be everything to everyone; when they aren’t, they are excoriated for their failure... Perhaps we can consider Lean In for what it is--just one more reminder that the rules are different for girls, no matter who they are and no matter what they do.” (313)

If you read *Lean In*, and if you’re familiar with the pushback Sandberg received as a result of it, do you agree with Gay’s characterization? Why or why not?

6. Trigger Warnings

“Over the years, I have seen trigger warnings for eating disorders, poverty, self-injury, bullying, heteronormativity, suicide, sizeism, genocide, slavery, mental illness, explicit fiction, explicit discussions of sexuality, homosexuality, homophobia, addiction, alcoholism, racism, the Holocaust, ableism, and Dan Savage. Life, apparently, requires a trigger warning.” (150)

In “The Illusion of Safety / The Safety of Illusion,” Gay takes on trigger warnings...and comes out against them:

“When I see trigger warnings, I think, How dare you presume what I need to be protected from? Trigger warnings also, when used in excess, start to feel like censorship. They suggest that there are experiences or perspectives too inappropriate, too explicit, too bare to be voiced publicly.” (151)

“That said, there is value in learning, where possible, how to deal with and respond to the triggers that cut you open, the triggers that put you back in terrible places, that remind you of painful history...This is the truth of my trouble with trigger warnings: there is nothing words on the screen can do that has not already been done. A visceral reaction to a trigger is nothing compared to the actual experience that created the trigger.” (152)



What do you think about trigger warnings? Did your opinion change after reading this essay? Why or why not?

7. Checking your Privilege

In “Peculiar Benefits,” Gay addresses privilege (“a right or immunity granted as a peculiar benefit, advantage, or favor”): her own, others’, and what to do about it.

“One of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do is accept and acknowledge my privilege. It’s an ongoing project...My life has been far from perfect, but it’s somewhat embarrassing for me to accept just how much privilege I have.” (16)

“We tend to believe that accusations of privilege imply we have it easy, which we resent because life is hard for nearly everyone....To have privilege in one or more areas does not mean you are wholly privileged.” (17)

“You don’t necessarily have to do anything once you acknowledge your privilege. You don’t have to apologize for it. You need to understand the extent of your privilege, the consequences of your privilege, and remain aware that people who are different from you move through and experience the world in ways you might never know anything about. They might endure situations you can never know anything about. You could, however, use that privilege for the greater good -- to try to level the playing field for everyone, to work for social justice, to bring attention to how those without certain privileges are disenfranchised.” (17)

Did this essay influence the ways that you think about your own privilege or about privilege as a larger concept? How?

Do you think we have a further responsibility regarding privilege, beyond just acknowledging it?

8. Defusing Male Anger

In “To Scratch, Claw, or Grope Clumsily or Frantically,” Gay describes her experiences as a competitive Scrabble player and her “nemesis” Henry. In their first encounter, he acted in an unsportsmanlike manner - refusing to shake Gay’s hand, rolling his eyes, all with anger rolling off him. Gay describes her reaction:

“Male anger makes me intensely uncomfortable, so I tried to sit very still and hoped the uncomfortable moment would pass quickly.” (39)

She describes a situation that likely resonates with most or all women: being in a situation with a man whose anger is disconcerting - and not knowing if this behavior will escalate.



Did this passage resonate with you? Why or why not?

9. Rapist Culture

In “The Careless Language of Sexual Violence,” Gay writes about the ways that the media fail victims and survivors of domestic and sexual violence: by sympathizing with perpetrators and blaming the victim for the crime in first place.

“The right stories are not being told, or we’re not writing enough about the topic of rape in the right ways. Perhaps we too casually use the term ‘rape culture’ to address the very specific problems that rise from a culture mired in sexual violence. Should we, instead, focus on ‘rapist culture’ because decades of addressing ‘rape culture’ has accomplished so little?” (133)

Have you seen examples of this (outside of the examples she provided)? What do you think we can do to hold the media accountable and support survivors?

Did this essay inspire you to examine your own language? Why or why not?

10. The Cost of Survival

In “What We Hunger For,” Gay talks about the Hunger Games and the importance of that series to her personally and to our cultural landscape overall.

“I identify with Katniss because throughout the trilogy, the people around Katniss expect her to be strong and she does her best to meet those expectations, even when it costs her a great deal...Just because you survive something does not mean you are strong.” (141-4)

Labels like “victim” and “survivor” come with a lot of connotations. People who have experienced domestic & sexual violence must have the freedom to heal in their own way, without having to live up to our expectations of what a victim or survivor “should” be.

“At times, I thought, This is too much, but I know something of the world now, and there are rarely limits to suffering. In this trilogy, suffering has few limits, and suffering has consequences that, all too often, we forget when narratives neatly imply that everything turns out okay, when narratives imply that it gets better without demonstrating what it takes to get better. In the Hunger Games, it takes everything.” (146)

What do you think about the way that the Hunger Games series characterized survival? How do you understand survival, healing, and moving forward?



11. Other Thoughts?

Aside from the essays mentioned above, what other excerpts, concepts, or quotes resonated or stayed with you? Why?