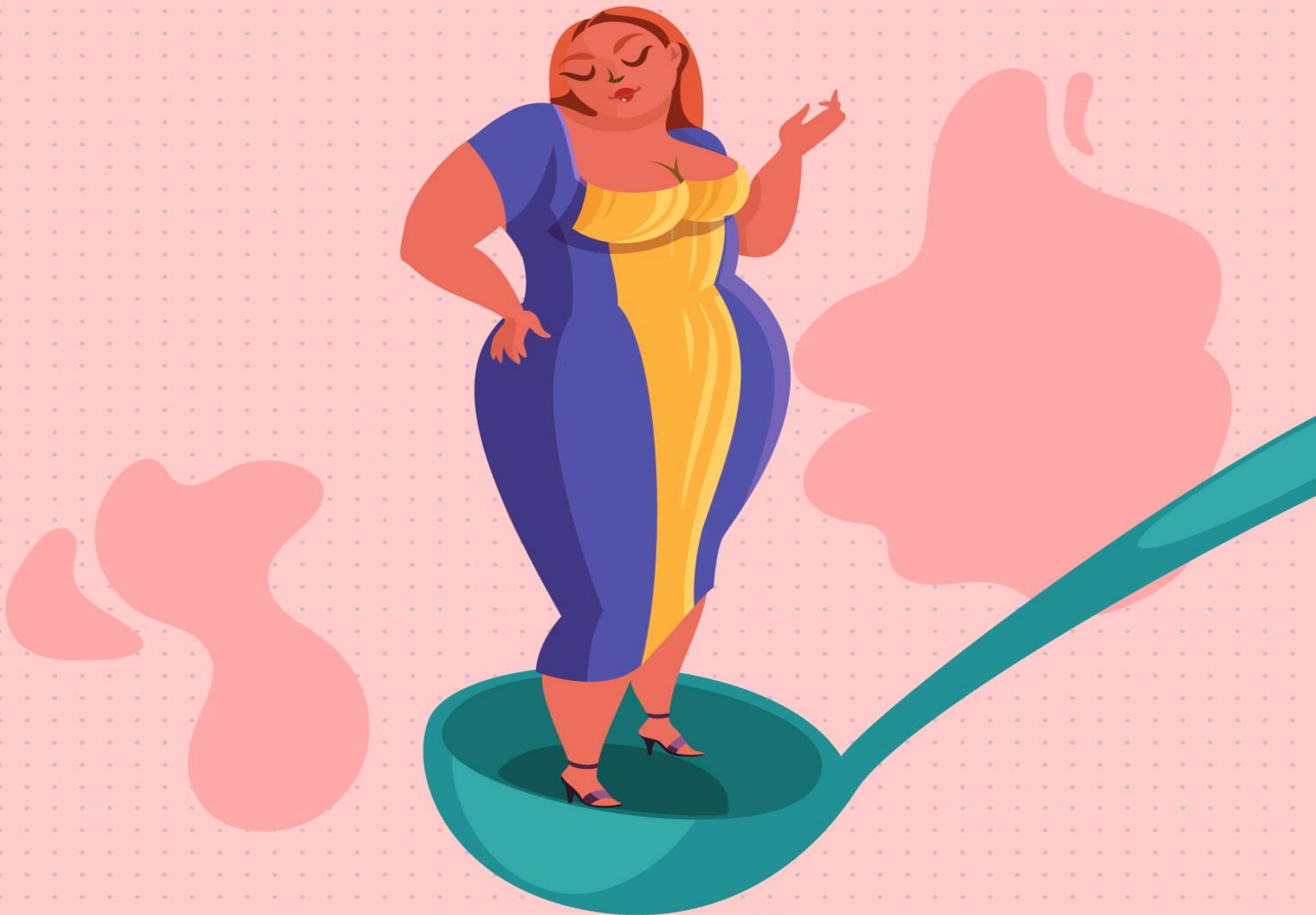


# SUMMARY

# HUNGER

ROXANE GAY



# **Summary of “Hunger” by Roxane Gay**

**Written by Alyssa Burnette**

A powerful memoir about food, fatness, and  
feminism.

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# Introduction

We've all read them: those gushy, feel-good memoirs that tell a rags-to-riches story. They make us feel good partly because they tell a story that we want to hear. Or, to put it more bluntly, they tell a story that embraces traditional values and conformity. If the author of the memoir was overweight, her story often ends with her finding "self-love" and "happiness" by achieving the thin, sexy body that society already wants her to have. These stories therefore feed into the larger social narrative that, if you want to be pretty, you need to be thin. If you want to be happy, you need to be thin. And if you are both happy and pretty, then you might be lucky enough to be desired by a man and find the ultimate happiness through a heterosexual relationship that conforms to social norms. But Roxane Gay affirms that the messages of these stories are incredibly toxic! And that's why her memoir doesn't fit into that narrative. Her story is honest, sad, and real. It's the type of story that isn't usually told, but it should be.



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## The Author's Early Years

How much did you understand about life when you were 12 years old? How much did you know about your changing body or your budding sexuality? How much did you know about consent for sexual activity? If you're like most twelve-year-old kids, you probably didn't know a lot! And Roxane Gay was no exception to that norm. Roxane grew up as the daughter of middle-class Haitian immigrants. She was also raised as a devout Catholic and she understood that this upbringing came with a certain set of rules and expectations. She knew that her parents expected her to do the right thing, to be a good person, and to do her best in school. Her parents taught her that Jesus loved her, but-- like most Christian parents-- they also taught that God punishes sin. As a result, Roxane's early sense of morality was steeped in the belief that obeying God was crucial.

Unsurprisingly, she also grew up with little knowledge about sexuality and sexual consent. Adequate sexual education is often absent in religious homes and schools and Roxane's experience was no different. So, when her crush lured her to a cabin in the woods, 12-year-old Roxane went with him willingly. She was excited that he wanted to spend time with her. She was hopeful that he liked her back. She had no idea that his friends were lurking in the cabin, waiting to hold her down and help him gang-rape her. And that was when all of her problems started. Like many young victims of sexual assault, the author didn't tell her parents what had happened to her. In an interview with NPR, she described her experience by saying:

"I had very little comprehension of what happened to me. I was stunned and I just assumed, "OK, we just had sex." And I didn't realize that there was a thing called rape. I didn't realize that there was a vocabulary to describe the experience, and that it wasn't my fault. I thought I didn't fight enough, I didn't get away, and so I was complicit in what happened. ...My 12-year-old self thought, "Oh, I must've asked for this." Not in the way that we say, "She asked for it," but I just thought I deserved it because I was that weak, and

that gullible and just that easily manipulated by some random boy I thought I knew.

...To this day, I don't know how I was able to cover up what happened. I just remember sneaking up to my room and doing my best to hide my clothes and to hide myself for as long as I could, to just try and pull myself together, and I did, because I was a really good kid. I did what I was supposed to, and I think when you're a really good kid, you know how to play that role, and you know how to hide that anything is wrong. A secret starts out small sometimes, but then it gets bigger and bigger and bigger, and it becomes scarier and scarier to imagine ever sharing it with someone. So the longer I kept the secret to myself, the more dire the consequences became for me, or the more dire I perceived the consequences of revealing my secret became. ...I was 12, so my fears were really that I was going to get in trouble and that I was going to go to hell, because I had had premarital sex. We were Catholic, and very devout Catholics. And though my parents raised us with the understanding that god was a god of love, I was really terrified nonetheless.

The boys' version of the story was that it was my choice and that I wanted it and that I initiated it. ... The other students in school believed it. I walked into class, I think it was French class, and I was sitting in my seat and the kid behind me tapped my shoulder and said, "You're a slut." And for the rest of the day I realized that pretty much everyone in school knew what had happened — well, they knew the boys' version of what had happened — and that's when I realized, "Now I can really never tell my family, because I will bring this much shame into our home." ...I didn't engage at all, I just shut down completely. I would go to class and try to hide in class by sitting in the back, and I would just endure the taunts and then eventually, as it is in middle school, the story moved on, but my reputation never changed. I was still an outcast, I was still a loser."

Left to deal with her pain and confusion on her own, 12-year-old Roxane devised her own coping mechanisms. She recalls that although no one ever told her fat women were completely undesirable, she had absorbed this message through her own observations about society. So, she decided that if

she wanted to be safe, she needed to be fat. And not just a little bit overweight-- she needed to be so fat that no man would ever desire her again. She needed to be so fat that she became invisible. So, that's exactly what she worked to become. The author observes that, for many people, fatness is an unwanted side effect of some other life circumstance. In most cases, people who are unhappy with their weight did not actively work to become fat. But that's where Roxane's story differs from the norm: because she cultivated fatness with a passion.

Even as she followed her parents' expected path for her-- continuing to get good grades, getting into med school at Yale University-- her mental and physical health rapidly deteriorated. Her parents, alarmed by her rapid weight gain, sent her to fat camp. But Roxane viewed this as another attempt to control her body, just as her rapists had. So, as soon as she lost the weight, she put it right back on. In an interview with the British newspaper *The Guardian*, she explained, "Putting on weight was an intense form of control. The boys in the woods had taken my body and they broke it. I will never get that body back, and I hate that, because it was a good body. But they took it; they ruined it. And so, when I ate, I got to make my body into what I wanted it to be, which is a fortress." Her pursuit of fatness continued well into her twenties, when she began to feel the lasting social impact of her size.

"It's interesting," she told *The Guardian*, "because the bigger you become, the less you're seen. You still deal with the shit, but it's nowhere near as much. When I'm with my hot friends, the amount of catcalling they deal with, well, I deal with a tenth of that. But it's weird that I even have to deal with it at all. I kept thinking, during my crazier years, 'Where is the point where I will no longer be catcalled?' Because that's what I was looking for. And that's not healthy, and I've changed. But I definitely was looking for that point, and I haven't found it." The fact that she never found that point is shocking in light of the fact that, at her heaviest, the author weighed 577 pounds. She was in her late twenties at that time. But a lot of things happened before she reached that point.



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# The Lost Years

Eventually, the author dropped out of med school. She felt that she had reached a fork in the road: a point at which she had to choose between the person her parents wanted her to be and the person she felt herself becoming. Because her family wanted her to be confident and successful and she felt anything but. In fact, the author felt as though she was completely ruined and devoid of worth. And so she began to seek out relationships that would reinforce that feeling. When she dropped out of med school in her junior year, she moved to Arizona to pursue a relationship with a much older man she had met online. She had never met him in real life. She refers to this time of her life as her “lost years.” In an interview with NPR, she remarked:

“When I look back now, knowing what I know about the Internet, I cannot believe I was not hurt or murdered, but I also have to say, the Internet was a lot different then. There were creepers, but it wasn't what it is today. People were just so thrilled to have this new technology, and it was all text-based, so it was different. I don't know that it was safer, but it felt safer. It felt like it was OK to meet people this way and I also had very little self-regard, so I just threw myself into the face of danger nonetheless. ...I was able to meet people and have them feel something for me and be interested in me for me before they saw me, and before they might judge me for my body, so that was really seductive.”

These early online relationships marked her first dangerous forays into the world of dating, but they were by no means her last. As she experimented with her sexuality, she pursued relationships with both men and women who devalued and abused her. Her partners humiliated and objectified her because of her fatness and she came to feel that her body was “a cage of her own making,” to quote a phrase that she has often referenced in multiple interviews. It took a lot of time, therapy, and personal development before she was able to accept her body and her sexuality.



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## Roxane's Relationship With Fatness

The concept of her body as “a cage of her own making” is a metaphor that the author has returned to time and time again. Because the cycle that she began as a twelve-year-old girl has had far-reaching and unintended consequences. Although she partially succeeded in making herself immune to male advances, she found that being fat made her a target for many other types of unwanted attention. She might have become invisible for men, but she soon found that she stood out more than she wanted to in every other situation. Because of her size, the author observes that she is constantly hyper-aware of how much space she is taking up. And in addition to the mental pressure she puts on herself, she also feels the pressure of other people's disapproval.

In an interview with NPR, the author paraphrased the meat of this memoir by summarizing her experience with fatness. She writes, “I am, perhaps, self-obsessed beyond measure. No matter where I am, I wonder about where I stand and how I look. I think, I am the fattest person in this apartment building. I am the fattest person in this class. I am the fattest person at this university. I am the fattest person in this theatre. I am the fattest person on this aeroplane. I am the fattest person in this airport. I am the fattest person in this city. I am the fattest person at this conference. I am the fattest person in this restaurant. I am the fattest person in this shopping mall. I am the fattest person on this panel. I am the fattest person in this casino. I am the fattest person. This is a constant refrain and I cannot escape it.

There is always a moment when I am losing weight when I feel better in my body. I breathe easier. I feel myself getting smaller and stronger. My clothes fall over my body the way they should and then they start to get baggy. I get terrified. I start to worry about my body becoming more vulnerable as it grows smaller. I start to imagine all the ways I could be hurt. But I also taste hope. I taste the idea of having more choices when I go clothes shopping. I taste the idea of walking into a crowded room without being stared at and talked about. I taste the idea of food shopping without strangers taking food they disapprove of out of my trolley or offering me unsolicited nutrition

advice. I taste the idea of being free of the realities of living in an overweight body. And then I worry that I am getting ahead of myself. I worry that I won't be able to keep up better eating, more exercise, taking care of myself. Inevitably, I stumble and then I fall, and then I lose the taste of being free. I am left feeling like a failure. I am left feeling ravenously hungry, and then I try to satisfy that hunger so I might undo all the progress I've made. And then I hunger even more."



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## Final Summary

Roxane Gay's relationship with her body and identity has been fraught with conflict for most of her life. After being gang-raped at the age of twelve, she felt the need to immerse herself in the invisibility cloak of fatness. If she were so fat that men considered her unattractive, she felt that she would be safe. But her size has also triggered new types of conflict as she attempts to navigate the contradicting pressures that are placed on women in our society.

As a feminist, the author believes that women should not be defined by their bodies or their physical attractiveness. But the objectification of women also governs the narrative that fat women are unattractive and therefore safe. This double standard fills the author with anger and anxiety as she seeks to accept her own body and break down barriers for women. Ultimately, Roxane Gay hopes that she can practice self-compassion and learn to love herself while using her voice to eradicate the toxic beauty standards that keep women ensnared.



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