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ROXANE GAY: WRITER, PROFESSOR, COMMENTATOR, THINKER.

LETTER TO MY YOUNGER SELF
ROXANE GAY

Roxane Untamed

Self-confessed bad feminist and writer **Roxane Gay** on trauma and triumph...and teenage soaps.

IF I BUMPED into my 16-year-old self now I would think that she was very scared and very damaged. I was a mess in high school because I was dealing with a trauma that I had not told anyone about, and it was getting worse and worse to deal with. It was really difficult for me. If I was talking to my 16-year-old self now I would definitely tell her that it’s going to get better – not for a long time, but it is going to get better. You are not always going to be this scared; you’re not always going to be this unsupported. But at the time I was really feeling it and I had nowhere to put all those feelings. I had nowhere to contain all of that hurt. I don’t know if I am still feeling it today because I’ve been in therapy for many, many years and I’ve dealt with it as much as it can be dealt with.

If I could go back to any particular day in my life I guess I would go back to when I was 12 years old and I would tell myself “Don’t date that shit-head”. When I was 12, I was gang-raped by a group of young men and it definitely changed the course of my life, because before that I had been a normal kid with normal kid problems.

I went to boarding school at 13. I sent myself because my parents moved around a lot because of my dad’s job and I wanted to go to one high school for four years. Academically it was incredible and socially it was a nightmare because I was really geeky and I had all of this unresolved trauma and I was awkward. It was really hard. High school is hard for a lot of us and it was certainly hard for me, but I learned a lot.

At 16 I was obsessed with reading and writing, just like I am now, and also *Beverly Hills, 90210*. I don’t remember any particular books or authors from that time. It was anything I could get my hands on. I just loved reading. When I went to boarding school, I was away from home for the first time and we weren’t allowed to watch TV at home, so at school we watched a lot of TV. I would watch TV and marvel at our unfettered access to it. My favourite character on *90210*, even though he was a douchebag, was Dylan McKay. I also loved Kelly.

The biggest life lesson my parents have passed on to me is that family is incredibly important. And that family will always be there for you even when you push them away. Today family for me is a combination of my biological family, with whom I am very close, but also the family I’ve created of my friends and loved ones over the years. They are the people that I consider to be important. They are the people who are the most non-negotiable in my life, and that I choose above all else.

The biggest surprise of my life is that I am making a living as a writer. You never think you are going to make it as a writer. I mean, there are more writers than there are readers. It’s so hard to make it and get your shot. I got my shot when I sold *An Untamed State* and *Bad Feminist* to fairly large publishers [both were released in 2014]. It wasn’t for a lot of money but they put a lot of energy and effort into promoting the books and that was definitely my shot. It was incredibly surprising to me that

people connect to my work and that my work resonates with them even though I’m just a nerdy black girl from Omaha, Nebraska. It’s shocked the shit out of me.

The first publication I ever had was in a magazine called *Moxie* when I was 19 or 20. It was wonderful to know that someone other than myself was going to read my work. It was just amazing. It was an essay about identity and life and trying to understand where I belong; the same stuff as I write about now.

And I think my proudest moment has been that I am now writing the books that I want to write and there’s an audience for them – I’m very proud of that.

Yeah, I see myself as an educator. It was never my intention, but the reality is that there are a lot of people in this world who have a lot to learn about social justice and thinking about equity and progress. Part of that is that people have to learn one way or another. As long as people don’t expect me to do teaching outside of my writing or my classroom, where I’m paid to teach, it’s fine. I learn from writers every day. Yes, the interviews and talks and the rude questions from some journalists are challenging, because I’m a writer and my plan was to just be a writer and I never expected to have to do anything else. But it’s a good problem to have and no-one should cry for me because of it.

interview by **Anastasia Safioleas** (@Anast), Contributing Editor
» *Roxane Gay’s #FEMINIST speaking tour hits Sydney and Melbourne on 29 and 31 March respectively.*

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