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## Best-selling author visits WKU

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When best-selling author Roxane Gay sat down to write her latest book, the last topic she wanted to confront was her own self-described “fatness” and the personal demons surrounding it.

“I decided to write a memoir of my body,” Gay said Thursday at Western Kentucky University’s latest Cultural Enhancement Series event.

To live as a fat person, Gay said, is to constantly endure the negative projections and assumptions of strangers.

“They think they know who you are,” she said. “They think they know how you eat. They think they know how healthy you are or not. And so I wanted to, in many ways, reinscribe that narrative.”

Gay, who describes herself as a feminist, is an associate professor of English at Purdue University. She’s also a contributing opinion writer for The New York Times and the author of many best-selling books, including “Bad Feminist,” “Difficult Women,” and her latest book, “Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body.” Her writing has also appeared in anthologies such as “Best American Mystery Stories” and “Best American Short Stories,” among other collections.

When she spoke to hundreds of WKU students and community members, she began by briefly reading from “Hunger” before taking questions from audience members for the rest of the event.

Gay's book explores her love of cooking and cooking shows such as "Barefoot Contessa," along with her disdain for exercise and often humiliating doctor's visits.

Through her book, Gay also confronts profoundly traumatic life experiences, including when she was gang-raped by a group of boys when she was 12 years old. In the aftermath, Gay said she began gaining weight, thinking "I'll be bigger and I'll be able to fight back and perhaps they won't even think of me next time."

When she began putting on weight and felt too ashamed to explain why, Gay said her parents put her on a diet, which only made things worse. Coming from a Haitian family, Gay said the culture looks down on fat people.

Gay didn't know most of the boys who raped her except one who she thought was a friend.

During her talk, Gay read a passage from her book about how she tracked down her rapist and called him.

At first, Gay began by searching the internet and guessing that he was the type of person to become either a lawyer or a politician. She was wrong, but not far off.

"He wears his hair in the same style he always has, real glossy catalog-preppy. He has a wide face," Gay said, reading from her book. "He's an executive at a major company. He has a fancy title. He has the same smug facial expression, that sort of the-world-is-mine cockiness."

Ever since finding him, Gay said she would Google him every few days to keep track of him. She often thought about what kind of person he'd become and if he still kept in touch with the other boys. Eventually, she decided to call him at work.

"I have called his office and asked for him. I have done this more than once. Mostly, I hang up immediately," she said, recalling one time she called. "When I heard his voice, I dropped the phone. His voice hasn't changed. When I picked up the phone again, he kept

saying ‘Hello. Hello. Hello.’ This went on for a long time, he wouldn’t stop saying ‘Hello.’ It was like he knew it was me, like he had been waiting too.”

After a long time, he stopped talking and she didn’t say anything, Gay said.



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“So we just sat there and listened to each other breathing,” Gay said.

After she finished reading, Gay took questions about parenting, how she responds to hatred and a new project she’s working on with actor Channing Tatum. Generally, Gay suggested that parents shouldn’t focus on their child’s weight and should encourage other healthy habits instead. She recommended shaming or ignoring critics.

“I refuse to hate myself because of my body,” she said.

As for her project with Tatum, Gay said it wasn’t a movie but it might be eventually.

“The best part I can tell you is that he insisted on equal pay (for women),” she said.

Saudi Arabian sophomore Ruba Alahdal said she enjoyed everything Gay had to say, and even bought her book after the event.

“I like her confidence,” she said. “She is very confident. She trusts herself.”

Ellen Glatman, box office manager for WKU's Department of Theater and Dance, also appreciated Gay's frankness, describing her as "very open, honest, direct."

"I was nodding a lot," she joked.

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