The Audacity of Voice

**CONTENTS**

1. [Lena Dunham's new memoir speaks to—and from—a generation](http://web.a.ebscohost.com.proxy-library.ashford.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=f75401d4-1f02-47df-8e8d-f46538f9e265%40sessionmgr4008&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBlPWlwLGNwaWQmY3VzdGlkPXM4ODU2ODk3JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#AN0098516500-4)
2. [I'VE GOT A LITTLE LIST](http://web.a.ebscohost.com.proxy-library.ashford.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=f75401d4-1f02-47df-8e8d-f46538f9e265%40sessionmgr4008&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBlPWlwLGNwaWQmY3VzdGlkPXM4ODU2ODk3JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#AN0098516500-5)

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**Section:**

The Culture

Books

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[Lena Dunham's new memoir speaks to—and from—a generation](http://web.a.ebscohost.com.proxy-library.ashford.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=f75401d4-1f02-47df-8e8d-f46538f9e265%40sessionmgr4008&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBlPWlwLGNwaWQmY3VzdGlkPXM4ODU2ODk3JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#toc)

During the first season of her critically acclaimed HBO series, Girls, Lena Dunham's character Hannah Horvath, high on opium, tells her parents, "I don't want to freak you out, but I think that I may be the voice of my generation—or at least a voice of a generation." The line made waves as people conflated the fictional character with her creator, perhaps not wrongly. How dare a young woman make such a bold claim? All too often our culture tells young women their voices don't matter or deserve to be heard.

In her debut essay collection, Not That Kind of Girl: A Young Woman Tells You What She's "Learned," Dunham demonstrates her 28-year-old voice's admirable range. While some celebrity essay collections and memoirs are lackluster, even embarrassing to read, Not That Kind of Girl suffers few missteps. Dunham's cinematic flair translates to the page with vigor and clarity—not unlike the late Nora Ephron, to whom she is often compared and to whom the book is dedicated (along with Dunham's family and her boyfriend Jack Antonoff of the indie-rock band fun.). Instead of tossing pithy, pseudo-motivational observations at the reader, Dunham has crafted warm, intelligent writing that is both deeply personal and engaging, clustered in five topical sections: "Love & Sex," "Body," "Friendship," "Work" and "Big Picture."

Each of the 29 pieces—essays mixed with lists, like "18 Unlikely Things I've Said Flirtatiously"—is confident and assured, sidestepping self-deprecation and instead offering intense self-examination. Dunham's self-awareness can almost overwhelm with truthiness, as in "Barry," her glancing, tragicomic account of being raped by a "mustachioed campus Republican" who, among other nonconsensual acts, removes his condom without her permission or knowledge. "A sexual encounter that no one can classify properly" sounds precisely like a voice of her generation, one struggling to come to terms with rape culture. (And yet, "I feel like there are fifty ways it's my fault ... But I also know that at no moment did I consent to being handled that way" sounds like a voice of every generation of women.)

Unlike Hannah Horvath, Dunham in her self-awareness does not come across as self-obsessed. When she is absurd, she acknowledges that absurdity. "13 Things I've Learned Are Not Okay to Say to Friends" is among the most drolly enlightened of the lists, made up of ostensible real-life Dunham quotes like "No, please don't apologize. If I had your mother I'd be a nightmare, too" and "There's nothing about you in my book."

She reveals her vulnerabilities in a deadpan manner, showing us how she loves and has been loved, how she has wronged and been wronged. But it's not all laughing around the hard stuff. At the end of "Barry" comes a teary phone call with Antonoff, in which she tells him what happened with the hipster rapist; here the narrative turns deeply confidential, allowing the reader into what you realize is Dunham's truest interior life, as fragile and authentic as yours or anyone's.

Not That Kind of Girl is evidently what she has learned thus far, and Dunham is far from an autocratic memoirist, even warning us, "I'm an unreliable narrator. Because I add an invented detail to almost every story I tell about my mother. Because my sister claims every memory we 'share' has been fabricated by me to impress a crowd."

Dunham has received a great deal of criticism from critics, including me, over the lack of racial diversity on Girls. That assessment is well but narrowly placed. The lack of diversity is a fault of Hollywood more than of Dunham. Thankfully, this essay collection translates far beyond the white, urban demographic of Girls.

Some things, like our humanity, are universal. We all examine our families' bonds and oddities. We all experience the insecurity of becoming an adult and navigating the world in an imperfect, human body. In Dunham's case, body image and family are inextricably linked. She believes her penchant for exhibitionism and onscreen nudity came from her mother, the artist Laurie Simmons, who took nude ur-selfies with a Nikon back in the day. We all love and hate and nurture ambitions and nurse failings. We all worry about death and cancer—"I'm not scared enough to do any 10K walks, but I'm pretty scared," Dunham jokes in "My Top 10 Health Concerns" (which include tonsil stones and infertility). Her privilege is undeniable in her television work and even in these pages, but by revealing so much of herself in such an intelligent manner, she allows us to see past that privilege and into her person.

And what is a voice of a generation, really? The phrase offers a seductive rhetorical flourish that speaks, at its core, to a yearning. We are forever in search of someone who will speak not only to us but for us. In the introduction, Dunham writes, "There is nothing gutsier to me than a person announcing that their story is one that deserves to be told, especially if that person is a woman." Not That Kind of Girl is from that kind of girl: gutsy, audacious, willing to stand up and shout. And that is why Dunham is not only a voice who deserves to be heard but also one who will inspire other important voices to tell their stories too.

Gay is the author of Bad Feminist, a new collection of essays

Nearly two years after her book proposal fetched a $3.7 million advance, Dunham's debut essay collection finally hits shelves Sept. 30

[I'VE GOT A LITTLE LIST](http://web.a.ebscohost.com.proxy-library.ashford.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=f75401d4-1f02-47df-8e8d-f46538f9e265%40sessionmgr4008&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBlPWlwLGNwaWQmY3VzdGlkPXM4ODU2ODk3JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#toc)

Sprinkled among the essays in Dunham's book are lists that give quick rundowns of lessons she's learned, ranging from things not to say to friends (which includes telling them they don't appear in the book) to the best bits of advice her parents gave her