

UNFOLDING PRIMAL EMOTIONS WITH PATIENCE

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Somebody with a Little Hammer

By Mary Gaitskill

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THESE WIDE-RANGING ESSAYS BY MARY GAITSKILL were published between 1994 and 2016. The reviews cover Elizabeth Wurtzel's *Bitch: In Praise of Difficult Women*, Joyce Carol Oates' *Blonde*, John Updike's *Licks of Love*, Norman Mailer's *An American Dream* and *The Armies of the Night*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Letters to Véra*, as well as other books. On music, she discusses Bob Dylan, the Talking Heads, and the song "Nowhere Girl" by B-Movie. She reflects on date rape, the film *Secretary*, political scandals, *Lolita* book covers, a lost cat, and much more. My knowledge of Gaitskill was minimal. I have watched the dominant/submissive film *Secretary*, directed by Steven Shainberg (Lions Gate, 2002), not realizing that its source was a story from her *Bad Behavior* (1988). So, what is her peculiar gift?

But if Gaitskill has often shocked us, she's never done so in the name of "cool." Her strange gift is to unfold emotions, no matter how petty or upsetting, and describe them with disarming patience for their stutters and silences, their repetitions and contradictions. The result often feels both primal and electric, something like a latter-day D. H. Lawrence. (Gentry)

This quotation is from a 2015 review in the *Chicago Tribune*, from which I took my title. Dealing with the messiness of the human condition, Gaitskill's writing is irreverent but revelatory.

Readers of *The Mailer Review* will want to know what Gaitskill has written on Norman Mailer. Her essay, "This Doughty Nose: On Norman Mailer's *An American Dream* and *The Armies of the Night*" (Gaitskill pp. 120–130), has a different format. The *Nose* in the title is an allusion to Gogol's story, "The Nose." There are three paired sections, alternately in italics & regular font. The first pair, on *The Armies of the Night*, she labels Private/Public. The second and third sections, discussing both *Armies* and *Dream*, she calls Dream/Reality and Masturbation/Intercourse. Gaitskill has interesting insights in this essay, written in 2009 but first published in *A New Literary History of America*, edited by Greil Marcus & Werner Sollors (Harvard UP, 2012). On Mailer's *An American Dream*, in the Dream section (in italics), Gaitskill writes this,

... the book is driven by a desire to ecstatically swim in the larva of essential forces flowing beneath human life, the raw unknowns of sex and death that animate the endless social masks which charm, blur, and bedevil our existence . . . (Gaitskill 124)

This may remind us of Rojack's portrayal of Barney Oswald Kelly and the reflection that ends Chapter 8, "The Irish are the only men who know how to cry for the dirty polluted blood of all the world" (*An American Dream* 264). On *The Armies of the Night*, in the Reality section, Gaitskill calls Mailer's writings "narcissistic" (126) but suggests they are also "artifacts," illustrating an age very different from ours.

How bittersweet to read them now, the ramblings of this doughty Nose. They are precious, annoying, and narcissistic, and yet as such, they are artifacts from narcissism's golden age, when the revelation of the self, the man behind the curtain of Art, was a refreshing surprise . . . (126)

We may agree that today's narcissism—fueled by reality TV and social media—is in a wholly different category from 1968. We might also remem-

ber that Gaitskill is writing in 2009, well before the narcissism of the Trump era.

In her final section, Intercourse, she castigates Mailer in *An American Dream* for taking “big, forceful metaphors and making them literal and physical” (129). Returning to *The Armies of the Night*, she asks if Mailer is a kook. She answers that Mailer “embraced his kook status, and repeatedly, shamelessly refers to himself as a fool” (129–130). However, whether it be synchronicity or cosmic irony, “1968 was a historic moment for kooks” (130). Many recognize such significant times: the *Zeitgeist* has changed, the paradigm has shifted. Christopher Nolan’s film *Dunkirk* (2017) tells of such an event in World War II. The Greeks would use *kairos* for such moments, not the usual *chronos*. So what was the year 1968?

It was a moment when a door opened between the worlds of dream and reality, literal and metaphor . . . the most sober, serious, world-wise, experienced men in power were revealed as kooks—morally wrong kooks. The forces of the preposterous, the romantically costumed, the poetic, and the mad were for once right, magnificently right, about the ultimately real question of whether or a not a war should be fought. (130)

That is Mailer’s paradigm shift in *The Armies of the Night*. Yet 1968 remains ambiguous, as does every moment. Mailer said, “The March on the Pentagon was an ambiguous event whose essential value or absurdity may not be established for ten or twenty years, or indeed ever” (*The Armies of the Night* 53). In her perceptive essay, Gaitskill acknowledges the moment and Mailer’s role,

And in that moment, Norman Mailer was the ideal witness, journalist, and poet to record their victory in a truer-than-life dream world that only he could create. (130)

I found other essays fascinating and often profound. In “Pictures of Lo: On Covering *Lolita*” (Gaitskill 229–234), she writes about the visual representations of the book. *Lolita* is about “obsession and narcissistic appetite, misogyny and contemptuous rejection, not only of adult women but of humanity itself” (233). But, she says, “It is also about love; if it were not, the

book would not be so heart-stoppingly beautiful” (223). Humbert claimed no less, “I insist the world knows how much I loved my Lolita, *this* Lolita, pale and polluted, and big with another’s child . . .” (Nabokov 278). She concludes with these words,

Love itself is not selfish, devouring, or cruel, but in human beings it suffers a terrible coexistence with those qualities, as well as a host of milder evils. . . . In most people, this contradiction will never take the florid form it takes in Humbert Humbert. But such impossible, infernal combinations are there in all of us, and we know it. That *Lolita* renders this human condition at such an extreme, so truthfully, and yes, as Rezzori says, *convincingly*, is the book’s most shocking quality. It is why it will never be forgotten. (Gaitskill 234)

My favorite essay was “Lost Cat: A Memoir” (Gaitskill 131–179). At forty-nine pages it is the longest essay and tells the tale of a wretched cat, Gattino, from Tuscany. In Gaitskill’s hand, it becomes an extraordinary reflection on human love, cruelty, and loss. Many who share their lives with animals realize that those relationships may be metaphors for what else is happening in their lives. Gaitskill fleshes out that realization: the lost cat is a metonymy for a complex relationship with her dying father, the traumas of sisters Martha and Jane, and the difficulty of bringing three poor children from the city to the country each summer.

Ultimately, Gaitskill is writing about how we deal with pain, love, and loss in our lives. Early on, she writes this,

Human love is grossly flawed, and even when it isn’t, people routinely misunderstand it, reject it, use it, or manipulate it. It is hard to protect a person you love from pain, because people often choose pain; *I* am a person who often chooses pain. An animal will never choose pain; an animal can receive love far more easily than even a very young human, And so I thought it should be possible to shelter a kitten with love. (Gaitskill 138)

Her obsession with Gattino is paralleled by her desire to save poor children, to heal her sisters, to create a “real relationship” with her father—a veteran

of Anzio. Painfully, she must acknowledge that her dad's reality was not hers—and never could be.

But the bigger reality is this: My father was strong, much stronger than I am. If I had experienced what he had experienced by the age of ten, it would've broken me several times over. What happened to him hurt him, and badly. It did not break him. . . . Until the end. (159)

One night, driving young Caesar back to the city, Gaitskill talked with husband Peter about human love, “how perverted and cruel it can be on one hand, how bluntly, functionally biological on the other” (177). She doubts that love even exists. Then Caesar answers from the back seat, by bouncing a stuffed animal—a cow he had won at a fair—off her head. “What do you call that?” he asks (177). Caesar has a point, and Gaitskill has the grace to laugh. Yet, as writer, she must have the last word. On the final page of this poignant essay, Gaitskill makes this beautiful but terrible observation,

Love as a cheap toy bounced off your head—it's a brilliant metaphor and a true one. But the metaphor for love that I feel more deeply is a lost, hungry little animal dying as it tries to find its way back home in the cold. It isn't truer. But I feel it more.

Her stance is skeptical but never cynical. Her essays patiently “unfold” our emotions, looking for “their stutters and silences, their repetitions and contradictions” (Gentry). This book has informed me, moving me to laughter and tears. I think that was its purpose.

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