

The Bitch is Back

William Morrow

By Cathi Hanauer

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Introduction

More than a decade after the *New York Times* bestselling anthology *The Bitch in the House* spoke up loud and clear for a generation of young women, nine of the original contributors are back—along with sixteen captivating new voices—sharing their ruminations from an older, stronger, and wiser perspective about love, sex, work, family, independence, body image, health, and aging: the critical flash points of women’s lives today.

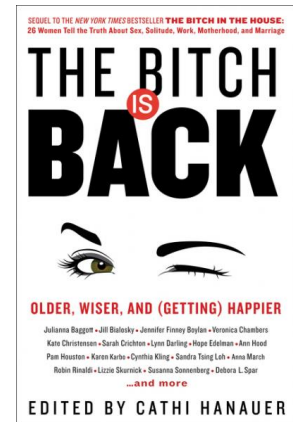
“Born out of anger,” the essays in *The Bitch in the House* chronicled the face of womanhood at the beginning of a new millennium. Now, nearly fifteen years later, editor and author Cathi Hanauer has compiled a new batch of passionate, enlightened, often hilarious pieces that are less bitter and resentful, and more confident and content—a provocative and compelling companion collection that captures the spirit of postfeminism with authority, acumen, and panache.

Having aged into their forties, fifties, and sixties, these “bitches”—bestselling authors, renowned journalists, and other extraordinary yet also ordinary women—have brilliant and bold things to say. In *The Bitch Is Back*, Cathi Hanauer, Kate Christensen, Sarah Crichton, Debora L. Spar, Ann Hood, Veronica Chambers, and twenty other powerful writers offer unique views on womanhood and feminism today.

Some of the “original bitches” (OBs) revisit their earlier essays to reflect on their previous selves. All reveal how their lives have changed in the intervening years—whether they stayed coupled, left marriages, or had affairs; developed cancer or other physical challenges; coped with partners who strayed, died, or remained faithful; became full-time wage earners or homemakers; opened up their marriages; remained childless or became parents; or experienced other meaningful life transitions.

Questions for Discussion

1. Did Jennifer Finney Boylan’s essay, “Vagina Notwithstanding,” teach you anything about being transgender that you didn’t already know? If so, what? What did you think of her decision to stay with her wife after transitioning—and vice-versa? Do you feel you have more sympathy for transgender people now than you did before reading this?
2. What did you think of Anna March’s decision, in “Gone Girl,” to walk away from her mother? Did you feel sorry for her mother or feel she got what she deserved? What would you have done in Anna’s position?



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3. In both “Wrinkles in Time. Or Not.” and “Stepping Off the Scale,” the authors, Debora Spar and Ann Hood, write about appearance in midlife. But they have very different approaches to it—particularly toward gaining weight. Which approach to you relate to more? Did you like or dislike these pieces? Why?
 4. If you were a parent of Lizzie Skurnick, author of “What’s Love Got to Do with It?,” what would you have told her when she said she planned to have a baby on her own? How about if you were her best friend? What did you, as a reader, think of this decision and its execution?
 5. How do you feel about Kerry Herlihy’s choice, in “The ‘Other Woman’—Then and Now,” to stay in a relationship with the man she loved and the father of her daughter, even though he was married to somebody else? Do you feel that adultery is always wrong? How do you think Kerry’s relationship with Michael would have changed, if at all, if they had gotten married?
 6. Did you find Robin Rinaldi’s experience in “Fifty Shades of Free” understandable—were you empathetic or sympathetic to it—even if you wouldn’t want to participate in these sort of sexual activities yourself? If so, how do you think Robin’s power/talent as a writer contributed to your feeling that way?
 7. What did you take away from the section about sex, particularly sex and marriage? Do you think any of these writers were wrong to stay in—or leave—their less than sexually ideal marriages? Do you admire the way Grace O’Malley compromises with her husband about sex in “Once a Week,” or do you think a marriage where one or both partners don’t want sex is like a ship without water, a tree without branches, a bun without a burger? What do you think of the section subtitle “Because this Ain’t Disney, Dolls. It’s Life.” ?
 8. What did Erin White’s piece, “Her Life. My Life,” teach you, if anything, about lesbian marriage versus straight? Did you sympathize with White’s partner, Chris, in this piece? If so, do you think you would have been equally sympathetic if Chris was male? Do you think their marriage has a good chance of surviving ’til death do them part?
 9. Did you admire Julianna Baggott, and her decisions around domestic care and making money, in her piece “Trading Places”? Did you admire her husband? Do you think you’d feel the same way if Julianna were the man and Dave the woman?
 10. In “Beyond the Myth of Co-Parenting,” Hope Edelman writes, “I wonder if a partnership that becomes less about two spouses’ ideas about equality and romance and even companionship, and more about raising two content, productive, well-adjusted citizens of the world together, is, despite occasional frustration and loneliness, a mostly ideal arrangement when children are involved—or as ideal as many couples can hope to get. Maybe that’s what it means to grow up and surrender to parenthood: to accept that my immediate happiness and fulfillment is not always what matters most.” Do you agree with this thought—or do you think that Hope compromised too much in her marriage? Do you think Hope’s marriage will—or should—endure when her daughters both grow up and leave home?

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11. What did you make of the opening quotes (epigraphs) to this section—particularly Rachel Cusk’s quote about marriage being “a system that involves a lot of compromise, but [also] means you are safe and you have bothered to make yourself safe and I never, never, never have. Any why haven’t I? Am I stupid? Clearly, yes.”
 12. Do you think that Susanna Sonnenberg, in “Yes,” is smart to jump into marriage again so fast? That Kate Christensen, in “Second Time Around,” was right to leave her marriage? That Karen Karbo, in “Getting It Right the Third Time,” is sensible not to marry again?
 13. Which pieces were your favorites in the book, and which your least favorite? Which author’s writing style did you most love or admire? Did any of these essays make you want to go read other work by that writer? If you were writing your own essay for a book like this, what would you choose to write about?
 14. When you hear the word “bitch,” what comes to mind? Do you like or dislike Hanauer’s use of the word “bitch” in these book titles? Does it feel gratuitous to you, or, particularly given the Virginia Woolf epigraph in *The Bitch in the House*, just right? What do you think is the overriding message, if any, of these pieces collectively?
 15. Were there topics you would have liked to see covered in this book that were not? Did you come away feeling these writers went too far in revealing things about their lives, or grateful to them for sharing? How do you think *The Bitch is Back* either succeeded or failed, or both, as a sequel? If you’d been the editor, what you have done differently?