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TEACHING GUIDE

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Not

Dispatches  
*from*  
Rape Culture

That

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Bad

*Edited by* Roxane Gay

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## About the Book

*Not That Bad: Dispatches from Rape Culture* is a valuable and timely anthology edited by best-selling author Roxane Gay. Collecting original and previously published essays, *Not That Bad* addresses what it means to live in a world where women, as well as gender nonconforming people and men, have to measure the harassment, violence, and aggression they face, and where they are “routinely second-guessed, blown off, discredited, denigrated, besmirched, belittled, patronized, mocked, shamed, gaslit, insulted, and bullied” for speaking out about their experiences.

Often deeply personal and unflinchingly honest, this collection both reflects the current cultural climate in which we live and offers a call to arms, insisting that “not that bad” must no longer be good enough.

## About the Editor and Contributors

Roxane Gay is the author of *New York Times* best-sellers *Bad Feminist* and the memoir *Hunger*, which was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award and received the NBCC Members’ Choice Award; the novel *An Untamed State*, and the short story collections *Difficult Women* and *Ayiti*. Roxane is a contributing opinion writer to the *New York Times*, the author of *World of Wakanda* for Marvel, and the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Essays by: Aubrey Hirsch, Jill Christman, Claire Schwartz, Lynn Melnick, Brandon Taylor, Emma Smith-Stevens, AJ McKenna, Lisa Mecham, Vanessa Mártir, Ally Sheedy, xTx, So Mayer, Nora Salem, Lyz Lenz, Amy Jo Burns, V.L. Sleek, Michelle Chen, Gabrielle Union, Liz Rosema, Anthony Frame, Samhita Mukhopadhyay, Miriam Zoila Pérez, Zoë Medeiros, Sharisse Tracey, Stacey May Fowles, Elisabeth Fairfield Stokes, Meredith Talusan, Nicole Boyce, and Elissa Bassist. Contributor biographical notes are included at the end of the anthology.

## About this Guide

This guide is organized into two sections: discussion questions that ask both larger thematic questions about the anthology as a whole, as a means of allowing students to think across the entire text, as well as questions which put certain essays in conversation with each other. As with any anthology, the essays grouped in questions should be seen as starting points for comparison, not the totality of comparison possible among the essays in the text.

A set of writing prompts is also included; these questions can also be used for discussion.

## A Note on Content and Resources

Every essay in *Not That Bad* deals with sexual violence, assault, harassment, or rape in sometimes explicit detail. Faculty should bear in mind that students may have difficulty talking about, or in some instances trouble reading in full, the essays in this anthology. Classroom discussion may involve students disclosing personal information about themselves and their experiences with sexual violence, assault, and harassment.

Recognizing your own training limitations in providing assistance and care to your students is not failing your students. It would be prudent to familiarize yourself with campus resources available to students who express difficulty with the content of *Not That Bad*, such as college or university counseling centers or rape and sexual violence hotlines both on campus and in your institution’s local community.

Nationally, [RAINN](#)’s crisis hotline is available 24/7 at: 800-656-HOPE (4673).

## Discussion Questions

- Nearly every essay in *Not That Bad* uses a variation of the title phrase. How does the meaning of the phrase 'not that bad' evolve throughout the anthology?
- What are ways in which the essayists internalize the blame or fault for their assault or harassment? Why do they feel responsible for the violence enacted against them?
- Many of the essays talk about rape in relation to power dynamics: hierarchical, familial, and, in the case of Michelle Chen's essay, "Bodies Against Borders," the systemic cultural and transactional powers of rape globally. Why, and in what ways, is rape an act of power? How is this power illustrated in some of the narratives in *Not That Bad*?
- Two essays, Claire Schwartz's "& The Truth Is, I Have No Story" and Zoë Medeiros' "Why I Stopped," deal with not talking about their rapes. In Schwartz's essay, she talks not about her assault, but about the time after her assault took place. In Medeiros' essay, she writes, "This story is in the bedrock of me. It's in my bones, what happened, and I have grown around it and over it, and you can't have it. It's mine" (251). What is the effect of these essays asserting their right not to talk about their assault? How does not talking about it construct a different kind of assault narrative? How does this version of an assault narrative construct a different kind of narrative agency and power?
- In "Good Girls," Amy Jo Burns writes, "You knew that a girl, even a good one, was at best an unreliable source, and, at worst, a liar" (169). How do the essayists talk about the validity of their voices, and therefore their stories, in retelling their assaults? Who believed them? Who didn't? Were they ostracized from friends, family, or their community because they spoke out?
- Essays by Ally Sheedy and Gabrielle Union address aspects of the Harvey Weinstein scandal in Hollywood. Do you think Hollywood's attitudes toward sexual harassment and assault have changed since the Weinstein stories broke? How would you advocate for change in Hollywood and broader media culture? How do Sheedy and Union use their experiences in Hollywood to advise others?
- *Not That Bad* has contributors that fall all along the gender and sexuality spectrum. Why is this breadth of representation significant when thinking about sexual harassment and sexual violence?
- Liz Rosema's graphic essay "What We Didn't Say" is one of a number of essays that discusses not speaking up about assault when it happens, a silence of contemporaneous omission. Other essays in the collection talk about similar silences: not asking after a mother's insistence on keeping away from certain men; between friends or acquaintances. How do these silences, or moments of omission, function? Are they a coping mechanism? How do they influence relationships?
- Across the anthology, how are we to understand women's agency in the context of sexual violence?
- Essays by Meredith Talusan, Miriam Zoila Pérez, Anthony Frame, and V.L. Sleck discuss queer lives and rape. How has sexual violence impacted these stories? In what ways do these narratives differ from heteronormative accounts of sexual assault?
- "Floccinaucinihilipilification" and "Sixty-Three Days" discuss why being called a survivor is problematic. Why do these authors find it challenging to be called a survivor? Do their points of view change how you think about and use the word?
- Lyz Lenz, in her essay "All the Angry Women," writes of her frustration at cultural disapproval of female anger: "The faith I grew up with demands forgiveness for abusers, but angry women? They must be silent" (158). Several essays across *Not That Bad* discuss their authors' anger. How does anger function for these writers?
- In "Not That Loud," Miriam Zoila Pérez writes about not having been sexually assaulted, but having many partners who have experienced sexual violence. How do we see rape affecting Pérez and these partners in her essay? What does the breadth of the effect mean for our understanding of the impact of rape?
- "Slaughterhouse Island," "Utmost Resistance," and "What We Don't Say" talk about sexual assault in school or higher education settings. Do you think educational institutions do enough to combat sexual violence on campus? If not, what more could be done to address campus climates?

- Many of the essays in *Not That Bad*, in the context of talking about their assaults, talk about how their attackers, communities, or prevailing cultural narratives perceive or construct girlhood or womanhood. What are these narratives? How does sexual violence alter the way girlhood and womanhood are constructed both in cultural and personal narratives?

## Writing Prompts

- Readers of *Not That Bad* likely have many responses to the narratives they read. What was the reading experience of *Not That Bad* like for you?
- Grammatically, the title phrase, *Not That Bad*, contains two adverbs modifying an adjective—the phrase, even in its grammatical roots, if not silences, at least obfuscates the subject of the phrase. It minimizes experience, suffering, and the self, and creates a discursive distance from its unnamed subject. At the same time, the phrase “not that bad” is conversational shorthand—people know what the phrase references. “Not that bad” is simultaneously intensely intimate and self-diluting. How does the title phrase reflect the fraught nature of telling sexual violence narratives? How is this anxiety and uncertainty reflected in some of the essays in this anthology?
- Given the #MeToo movement, do you think we are at a cultural moment of reckoning for sexual violence and rape culture, both in the United States and globally?
- In her Introduction, Roxane Gay writes of her own trauma, “For years, I fostered wildly unrealistic expectations of the kinds of experiences worthy of suffering until very little was worthy of suffering. The surfaces of my empathy became calloused” (x). Nearly all the essayists in *Not That Bad* struggle in placing their experience as something “worthy of suffering.” Some, as in “I Said Yes” and “Only the Lonely” for example, also discuss how sexual violence affects their sense of desire, or figuring out what their desire even is. How do we see sexual violence affecting the essence of personhood throughout this anthology?
- Importantly, *Not That Bad* includes contributions from writers across the gender and sexuality spectrum. Does news and media coverage reflect diverse reporting of sexual violence across genders and sexualities? What bias do you see in reporting? How do we go about changing news culture to reflect more accurately the realities of sexual violence in society?
- The Clery Act is a law which requires all colleges and universities that participate in federal financial aid programs to keep and disclose information about crime on or near their campuses. It’s named after Jeanne Clery, a 19-year-old young woman who was raped and murdered in her hall of residence in 1986. What does your institution’s Clery report tell you about violence on or around your campus? Does reading your school’s Clery report change how you relate to the campus space around you?

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