

MY BODY IS A BOOK OF RULES

Elissa Washuta

{RED HEN PRESS}

Elissa Washuta is white and Native, bipolar, and lost her virginity to rape. Her first book, *My Body Is a Book of Rules*, is a modern coming of age memoir that reaches into these tangles of the body and mind through American pop culture. It's not a traditional memoir: Washuta employs linked essays that mimic the cyclical wrapping of her experiences. She draws from the lessons of her sixth-grade Catholic school and intertwines them with a *Cosmo* magazine quiz, tells the story of her rape as an episode of *Law & Order: SVU*, and counts down her lovers to the moment of trauma, where the broader context of her often self-destructive decisions are revealed. Chapters are divided by a 16-part autobiography of her Native heritage that asks what makes an "authentic" Indian. Is it regalia, the skin's ability to tan, the measurable drops of Indian blood quantum, or the historic traumas of genocide, war, and rape? These intervening sections, which she describes as the "backbone" of the book, are every bit as powerful as the chapters, and make a welcome and familiar resting place.



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At times I wanted to read this book through my fingers, the way I sometimes watch a scary movie. When Washuta describes her rapist, who she continued to date afterward, as “that boy who turned you from a girl to a gash,” I’m inside her body, feeling the wounds cauterize and rip open, again and again. That’s why this book and Washuta’s voice, matter. She does not turn away from her own agency and she does not let anyone off the hook. She intertwines the threads of her multi-ethnic identity, bipolar diagnosis, and rape, and sets them against the backdrop of culture and young adulthood. In doing so, she reveals the explicit and the implicit ways in which we are all injured, and also how we heal, one step at a time. As I read, I wasn’t sure I wanted to tear off my own band-aids, but Washuta’s just-the-facts ways of recording her journey left me no place to hide. Her honesty invites us explore questions we’re not usually encouraged to ask: What makes our experience of suffering legitimate? Why do some of us lose faith in the world so young? How do we reconcile our brains, bodies, and cultures and come out whole? — SAMANTHA CLAIRE UPDEGRAVE

PAIRS WELL WITH: Deborah A. Miranda’s *Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir*, Leslie Jamison’s *The Empathy Exams: Essays*.