

# Books I Hate (and Also Some I Like): with Eileen G'Sell

written by Katharine Coldiron | June 26, 2018



[Eileen G'Sell](#) and I have never met in person, but we met over the internet because of a girl on a bike. At the time, she was an editor at the Rumpus, and she edited [my essay about that girl](#) more lightly and elegantly than I thought possible. (She's the kind of editor who makes my dread of editors shrink a little.) I found out later that Eileen writes cultural criticism for Salon, Vice, Hyperallergic, and ALIVE, among other outlets, and that she writes poetry with enormous attention and grace. She wields her words like needles: equal parts delicate, shiny, and sharp.

Eileen's chapbooks have been published by [Dancing Girl](#) and [BOAAT Press](#), and her debut collection, [Life After Rugby](#), came out last winter from Gold Wake Press. Her kindness made this interview a pleasure, but it also meant that this installment of *Books I Hate* contains almost no trash talk. Ah, well. Next time.

**You told me you were dubious about having enough material to talk about for this interview. Why?**

The only books I verge on truly hating are those of the self-help business sector targeting readers who wish to attract even more power and wealth than they already have, simply by thinking about it—as though they're not already overly blessed by the fiscal cosmos! These books are all across the airport and often fly off the shelf. I suppose in general I'm suspicious of any philosophy which is touted as spiritual, but actually suggests to people, often rich white people, that *they* control what happens to them—and others—through magical thinking. In my experience, those who ascribe to such philosophies usually have way too much. They should be trying to attract LESS, not dressing up power hunger in pseudo-spiritual diction.

**I find that a totally fair read on that kind of book. Do you think this suspicion has spread to other kinds of books?**

Well, I still like Pema Chodron and other pop Buddhist books, so I don't think I'm overly cynical about spirituality as a genre. It's the intersection of spirituality and capitalistic accumulation that I find dangerous, and

loathsome. Capitalism is already a default religion in the United States, so the spiritual take on it feels at once redundant and insulting to Eastern cultures whose terminology is often appropriated.

**If you can, give me a couple of examples of books you hate.**

I recall as a child that I hated the initial books used to teach us to read—based on the placid friendship between Buffy, a panda, and Mack, a bunny. Within the Buffy-Mackdom of the series, I suppose “Sun up. The sun is up.” for a two-page spread made the labor of reading less daunting and more inviting to children, but I remember thinking that if the book was that boring, there is no reason to read it in the first place—even to learn to read! I had already learned how to read at home to some extent, and found these books insulting to my intelligence.

At some point in kindergarten or first grade, we moved on to “The Magical Afternoon” section of the series, and based on the syllable count of each word of the title, I knew that *The Time Had Come*, that the book might not be too easy for me, and that the unlikely friendship of Buffy and Mack might actually be of interest.

I don’t think I genuinely hate any particular author, though, in terms of hating the person. If I’m bored by a book I usually don’t buy it or read it through to the end.

**How can it be that so few books bother you?**

As a grown-up, I don’t hate books that insult their readers’ intelligence because I feel that almost *any* reading is better than none at all. I remember having this revelation in high school over controversies surrounding the quality of singer-songwriter Jewel’s [\*A Night Without Armor\*](#). I knew it was probably bad (unlike her debut album, which I’d still defend to this day), but I thought, “If it’s bringing teenage girls into the poetry section of the bookstore, isn’t that a good thing?” Most people don’t even know there *is* a poetry section of the bookstore! You might start with Jewel, move on to Maya, then end up buying a book of Plath—or Gertrude Stein! I feel the same when I see people reading genre fiction or sentimental memoir on an airplane (as I am between two women doing so right this instant as I type). We live in an age in which books and the act of reading themselves are in singular peril. So if the lady next to me wants to learn about someone’s near-death experience in San Diego, go for it!

**Do you think your reading prejudices (such as they are) have altered anything about your writing?**

That’s an interesting question! It’s making me realize how contempt, for me, is a much more exciting, rewarding emotion than boredom. But I can’t think of any poetry I “hate” so intently that I’d want to avoid writing like it. I can think of poetry that feels so *boring* I’d want to avoid writing like it. I find poetry that ends with a sense of moral lesson pretty tedious, so I do try to avoid that, I suppose.

But in general I don't think I ever made a decision about my poetry or criticism predicated on something I hated in another's work. I think sometimes the overall packaging of a book—especially books peddled as sanctimonious or earth-shattering—bugs me on some level, though not the extent of hatred. It also bothers me when women authors are packaged for their own personality and attractiveness level, though it feels almost unavoidable.

I think that authors should take their work more seriously than they take themselves, but the two are often marketed together as the same thing, so sometimes it's hard to be taken seriously as an author if you don't overtly take yourself more seriously than you should. I also think women sometimes have to present themselves as *extra* serious to be taken seriously at all. Which is a shame. I take my work seriously but I don't think "being an author" makes me all that special as a human being, even though I'd like to be as good of an author as possible.

### **Have you ever physically thrown a book across a room?**

Hmmm...I don't think so, which is odd, because I do enjoy throwing things (and being thrown). I guess I don't feel *anger* at a book the same way some might. If I think a book is a waste of my time, I close it, just like I walk out of the theater if a film is that bad. But then I rarely walk out of the theatre.

### **What was the last book you read that you recommend?**

My friend JoAnna Novak's [Noirmania](#) is very special. I'm biased because I'm her friend, but I definitely felt I should recommend it to anyone interested in an experimental, sensory, yet incredibly soulful dazzle dirge.

I also just finished Rachel Kushner's [The Mars Room](#) and had high expectations because I was emotionally floored by [Telex from Cuba](#), her debut novel, and intellectually stunned by [The Flamethrowers](#). At first the lack of sweeping historical context felt a little disappointing, but then after a while I realized that Kushner was doing something even *more* ambitious in not relying on the automatic gravity of the past. *The Mars Room* is more accessible in both its language and narrative, but no less daring. By the final chapter, my hands were shaking, not only to see how the story would end but with the feeling of gratitude that I was even permitted to enter Kushner's imaginative world in the first place.

### **Do you keep books or give them away?**

I keep about  $\frac{3}{4}$  and give probably the rest away. I give a lot of books to my incarcerated students because they usually appreciate them more than human beings outside prison. I also have a ridiculous habit of giving copies of Carson McCullers's [The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter](#) away to almost all my serious boyfriends—it starts out as a way to convey to them my values and emotions, and ends up being a paperback parting gift!

### **What are you reading right now, and do you like it or hate it?**

I'm rereading Virginia Konchan's [The End of Spectacle](#), a poetry collection

that I'm writing about in terms of a kind of "cerebral baroque" factor that fascinates me. On a selfish level I'm fascinated by how her work resembles my own in theme and voice, yet overall maintains this willful precision that mine lacks. It's like our poems are both circus performers in the same costumes, but hers are on the tightrope and mine are on the trapeze. They're both trying to do something difficult and flashy, if in different ways, and they're both going to land on the same net if they fall.