

Books I Hate (and Also Some I Like): with Sassafras Lowrey

written by Katharine Coldiron | May 25, 2018



The road I took to my conversation with [Sassafras Lowrey](#) was weird and winding. During my (brief but passionate) immersion in the backlash against *Fifty Shades of Grey*, I read [an anthology of writers responding to the book](#). I liked Sassafras's essay best of all of them; it was measured, intelligent, well-researched, and convincing. This was well before I had the courage to contact writers with my praise or interest in them, but years later, Sassafras commented on a mutual friend's Facebook post, and I saw my opportunity. I commented to hir how much I liked hir essay. We've had a casual, long-distance friendship ever since.

The award-winning author or editor of five books in wildly varying genres, Sassafras is a unique and valuable figure in the literary world. [Ze is a proud "little,"](#) but ze is also a complex thinker and a highly persuasive writer. Ze has been through hell, but is easily the most cheerful presence on my Facebook feed. Ze is unafraid to talk about, I suspect, anything at all, and that's why I wanted hir to answer my questions about books.

What books do you hate?

This is hard! I'm someone who tries really hard to center joy in my life so there aren't a lot of things that I hate, but sometimes a book is so bad it crosses the line and I just have to hate it. I read all kinds of books so there definitely isn't a genre that I tend to dislike, or even a specific type of book that's likely to cross the line from "not my thing" to outright "hatred."

I hear you! "Not my thing" is my default, too. But the interview must happen. Give me three examples of books you hate.

I had to go check out my Goodreads to decide on the top three books I hated most! It was much harder than I thought it would be to settle on three books that I did not just dislike and gave one star to (I'm really honest in my book reviews) but that I actually really really hated. I almost felt bad doing this because each book is (presumably) the result of someone's hard work, but you know what? Sometimes I really really hate a book.

Fifty Shades of Grey by E.L. James.

All God's Children: Inside the Dark and Violent World of America's Street Families by Rene Denfeld.

The Dog Merchants: Inside the Big Business of Breeders, Pet Stores, and Rescuers by Kim Kavin.

Why?

These are really different books. All are in genres that I read and write in, but more importantly for me all are about topics that are personally meaningful to me in terms of identities that I have in the world, work that I do, or beliefs that I hold very close. This means that not only am I biased but that I have really high standards. I don't expect books to get everything right, but I do expect books to be well-researched and well-articulated regardless of voice and genre.

All three of these books fell painfully flat for me because of the way they sensationalized communities/worlds that are important to me (BDSM/Leather culture, youth experiencing homelessness and the creation of chosen families, and responsible/ethical/purposeful breeding of purebred dogs and competitive dog sports). I hated these books because each of them relied upon deeply flawed, deeply biased "research" that completely missed the mark in key ways about communities that I call home. Also, they furthered inaccurate and dangerous stereotypes about those of us in the communities they were writing about.

Can you say more about Denfeld's book? I know her from her fiction writing, and I have friends (even friends from the foster world) who LOVE her work.

I haven't read anything else by her, but this book was so offensive. She seemed oddly obsessed with creating this portrayal of homeless youth that read like a bad occult movie/afterschool special. She repeatedly and oddly villainized service providers for following best practices for cultural competency when working with youth (using youth's chosen names, not releasing records or information to police or abusive parents). She also took a very dangerous, conservative approach of glorifying the parents these youth—many of whom were legal adults—had run away from.

Most disturbingly, she picked a VERY small sample of violent homeless youth to feature in her book, claiming them as an example of all homeless youth, when really there are literally millions of homeless youth on the streets of this country every year. Most youth experiencing homelessness create street/chosen families for the same reasons anyone else builds family—for

love, connection, etc. I was a homeless youth in Portland (where her “research” was conducted) at the time this book is focused, and I found her portrayal of homeless youth culture totally sensationalized and completely absent any understanding of the high rates of homelessness amongst LGBTQ youth, for example. Forty percent of all homeless youth are LGBTQ.

Do you think any of these hates have colored your reading of other works?

Thankfully, no. I have read enough (I read at least one or two books a week) to know that some books are great, some books are iffy, and some books are in the “I hate you I never want to read you again” pile. A bad book won’t ever keep me from reading more in a particular genre, nor will it lower my expectations for how good I know books can be!

Nothing personal, is what you’re saying.

Exactly!

Do you think it’s altered anything about your writing?

Absolutely! Bad books don’t change my reading habits (other than probably I won’t read anything else by an author whose work I hate) but they have huge impacts on my writing. These three books in particular inspire me deeply as an author. One of the primary reasons I feel called to write is to depict the subcultural worlds (especially LGBTQ/Queer worlds) that I have called home, and that have saved me as a formerly homeless queer youth, as a genderqueer person, and as someone deeply involved in BDSM/Leather. I want my work (fiction and nonfiction) to give voice to our lives/bodies/identities/families/relationships on the page. There is so little representation of these worlds in print, and I want my work to be a place where we can see ourselves reflected back.

Something that feels relevant about all three of these books I hate is that they are written by people who not native to these communities. Or, another way of saying that, they were written by people *studying or researching* us, not *by* us. I believe as authors we must be very cautious when writing about communities/identities that are not where we call home. Reading books that leave me feeling more “othered” than when I picked them up is a reminder to hold true to my commitments to writing work by and for queer communities, and in the case of my dog writing, to stay true to my history and ethics (20 years as a hobby dog trainer) of those worlds.

What was the last book you read that you recommend?

I just finished reading Michelle Tea’s *Against Memoir: Complaints, Confessions & Criticism*, which released this month from The Feminist Press, and I’ve been telling everyone about it! It’s so so good! I’m a big fan of Michelle Tea’s work in general but I think this new book of hers is absolutely brilliant and was fantastic to read.

On a personal level, I’m deep in writing my next nonfiction book (*Left Out: How Marriage Equality Abandoned Homeless LGBTQ Youth*, forthcoming from The New Press) and thinking a lot about the ethics and voice surrounding

nonfiction writing. So a lot of what she was talking about was very relevant to my own work. What I wrote on Goodreads about *Against Memoir* was “If you’re a writer you should read this. If you’re queer you should read this. Basically, everyone should probably read this and it’s easily in my top favorite books I’ve read so far this year. Damn. This book is raw and brave and everything I would expect from Michelle Tea but even more!”

Do you keep books or give them away?

I keep as many books as I possibly can. My partner and I bought a house a year and a half ago and we turned what others would call a “formal dining room” into our own private library. I also have shelves of books in my office where I write. Basically, I keep all the books I can, but every couple of years I’ll do a bit of a purge, getting rid of books that I got as review copies or as a judge for literary awards and just didn’t like/connect with. I also read a LOT of books from my local (Brooklyn) library which helps my house not be overrun with books. A librarian once called me a gold star library user, and I felt very proud.

Have you ever physically thrown a book across a room?

I don’t think so! Oh, wait, yes! I once threw a copy of V.C. Andrews’s *Flowers in The Attic* (which I loved at the time) across the room. I was fifteen or sixteen years old, definitely not allowed to be reading books like *that*. I grew up in a very controlling/abusive household. This was about a year before I ran away from home and so was being “rebellious” reading this book. I heard my mom coming down the hall, and threw the book across the room so it would land on the other side of my bed and I wouldn’t get caught with it!

That’s an amazing book-throwing story. But I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone who read *Flowers in the Attic* WITH their parents’ permission. I certainly didn’t, and I’m a teeny bit obsessed with V.C. Andrews books. Did you read any of the other ones?

Ha! Yeah, that’s probably true. I got pretty obsessed with V.C. Andrews after *Flowers in the Attic*. For a while, in high school, I set out to read every novel of hers I could find for sale at drugstores.

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

I have been reading Maurice Sendak’s *Higglety Pigglety Pop! Or, There Must Be More to Life*—a strange, dark, original fairy tale which I enjoyed very much. Next on my massive “to-read” stack is Susan Conant’s *Black Ribbon*, which is a dog lover’s mystery novel from the 1990s set at dog shows. It was my favorite book in high school (I was a very odd child). I haven’t read this book in over 16 years so I’m curious what I’m going to think of it now!