

My Body Is a Book of Rules
A Memoir by Elissa Washuta
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Elissa Washuta



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A MEMOIR

Elissa Washuta

In *My Body Is a Book of Rules*, Elissa Washuta corrals the synaptic gymnastics of her teeming bipolar brain, interweaving pop culture with neurobiology and memories of sexual trauma to tell the story of her fight to calm her aching mind and slip beyond the tormenting cycles of memory.

As Elissa Washuta makes the transition from college kid to independent adult, she finds herself overwhelmed by the calamities piling up in her brain. When her mood-stabilizing medications aren't threatening her life, they're shoving her from depression to mania and back in the space of an hour. Her crisis of American Indian identity bleeds into other areas of self-doubt; mental illness, sexual trauma, ethnic identity, and independence become intertwined. Sifting through the scraps of her past in seventeen formally inventive chapters, Washuta aligns the strictures of her Catholic school education with *Cosmopolitan's* mandates for womanhood, views memories through the distorting lens of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, and contrasts her bipolar highs and lows with those of Britney Spears and Kurt Cobain. Built on the bones of fundamental identity questions as contorted by a distressed brain, *My Body Is a Book of Rules* pulls no punches in its self-deprecating and ferocious look at human fallibility.

Praise for *My Body Is a Book of Rules*

"In her harrowing chronicle of bipolar disorder, sexual violence, and struggles with Native identity, she provides a window into this country's failures when it comes to responding to mental illness, rape and the negative messages women receive about their sexual agency. ... It's [a story] that parents, educators, mental health providers, and young women will find immensely valuable."

—*Publishers Weekly*

"In a reliably honest, original and frank fashion, Washuta's ruminations lift the veil of her chronic (and highly medicated) bouts of mental illness to reveal the confused, frenetic and often traumatic reality of living with overwhelming bouts of depression and mania. A fever dream of darkly personal memories and musings from the shadowy corners of sexual violence and mental illness."

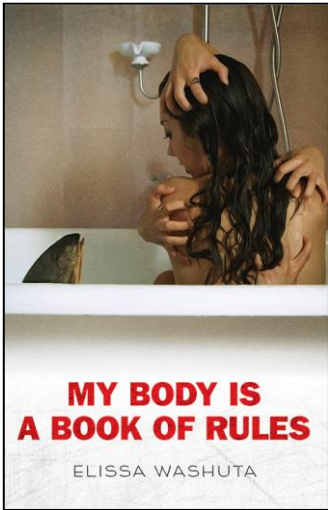
—*Kirkus Reviews*

"You should have [*My Body Is a Book of Rules*] on your radar now. . . . Washuta's story is . . . an ultra-modern take on contemporary femininity, mental illness, and identity."

—*Cosmopolitan*

Biographical Note

Elissa Washuta, a member of the Cowlitz Indian Tribe, is the author of *My Body Is a Book of Rules* and *Starvation Mode*. She serves as adviser for the Department of American Indian Studies at the University of Washington and nonfiction faculty for the MFA program at the Institute of American Indian Arts.



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More Praise for *My Body Is a Book of Rules*

“Washuta lays bare all of her pain and frustration in a staggeringly personal memoir that will leave a deep impression on readers. . . . She searches and yearns for answers in this brutally honest and utterly unforgettable narrative.”

—*Booklist*

“No matter how prepared you think you are for Washuta, she’s sure to knock you over.”

—*The Stranger*

“*My Body Is a Book of Rules* transcends the tropes of the genre by virtue of the unsentimental strength of her prose. She’s reflective without being solipsistic, insightful without being pedantic, and wise beyond her years.”

—*Seattle Met*, “20 Books Every Seattleite Should Read”

“The old saying goes that rules are meant to be broken, but what happens when mental illness defaces the rule book? *My Body is a Book of Rules* is a collection of calamities—bitterly funny, fierce, sometimes crass and sometimes heartbreaking.”

—*The Seattle Times*



Elissa Washuta

Excerpt from an interview with Elissa from *HTMLGiant*

Q: Your memoir, “*My Body Is a Book of Rules*” will be published next year by Red Hen Press (congratulations!). But, tell us, please, how it differs from all this bad, boring Memoir?

A: I’m not running for president; I was never an NFL quarterback; I have not spent any time in an Italian prison.

Early in the writing process, I read memoirs concerning similar subjects to mine. I found that many of the most commercially successful memoirs about bipolar disorder and rape were more concerned with what happened than the ways complicated emotions could be explored through prose. I also think that the narrative structure of many of those memoirs set up the narrator to travel through the story as a victim-turned-conqueror, slaying the beast and banishing the demons at the end. But I am skeptical of the redemptive power of the narrative arc.

I didn’t set out to write *My Body Is a Book of Rules* as the story of these things that happened to me and how I overcame them in a triumphant way. I started with theme (the hard work of mastering a troubled body) and form and used my life as raw material. I use such forms and setups as a college term paper, a Match.com online dating profile, lines from *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* stacked against a personal recounting, and a revision of a real letter from my college psychiatrist. Each time I use a new chapter to circle around the same problems, I fail to solve them and dig myself into a deeper hole. I believe the most powerful way to evoke emotion in a reader is not to describe how something felt, but to build it on the page; formal gymnastics helped me do that with this well-trod, difficult subject matter.



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As you read *Book of Rules*, it feels like you're learning about Elissa Washuta's life just as she's processing it, too. Nothing in the book really feels self-serving or like she's trying to tell a story that isn't interesting but necessary for the sake of memoir. She states upfront that "I will say right now that my childhood was as close to perfect as any can possibly be, with thickets and cats and forts and books and loving parents who raised me right and have always told me that I am brilliant and special, but still, my brain was askew, and no day ever felt completely right."