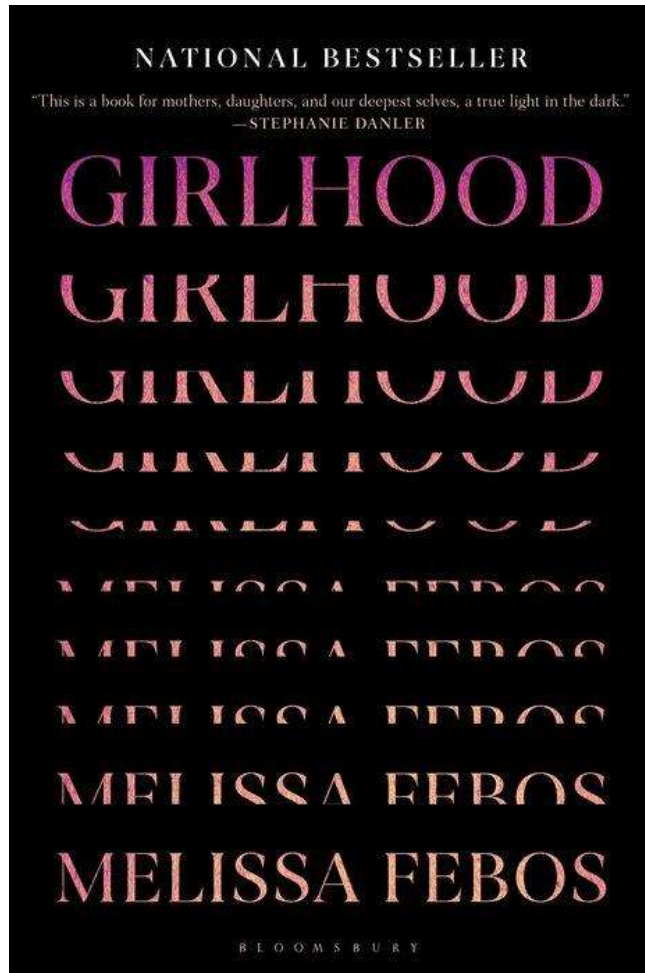


An Eye-Opener: Febos' 'Girlhood' succeeds on many levels

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"Girlhood" by Melissa Febos. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021, 336 pages, \$27 (hardcover).



“In the locker room, you perfect the art of changing your clothes under your clothes,” Melissa Febos writes in “Scarification,” the prologue to “Girlhood,” her new collection of essays on feminine identity in a world that is still largely patriarchal. “Your body is a secret you keep, a white rabbit, and you the magician who disappears it. Remember: this is a hard hustle to break. It is difficult to keep some secrets and not others. Hustle now, across that field, forgetting your body as only this allows, and reach for the ball that scorches your hand with pain. See what happens when you forget yourself? It is better to choose your pain than to let it choose you.”

“At 16, you shave your head, disappointed that no curb or wall or rock has altered its perfect sphere,” she continues a little later. “Your father’s stricken face pleases you. When you pierce your nose, he tells you no one will ever see your face again for the glare. You don’t tell him that’s the point. When he looks at you, he sees only the message you carry, written in a language he never taught you, not Spanish, but the other

language of his childhood, the one that leaves marks. You quit baseball and move out of his house.”

Wow. This was an eye-opener for me. I consider myself pretty cosmopolitan when it comes to understanding those around me – regardless of how divergent their background and experiences have been from my own. How naïve could I have been? “Girlhood” consists of a prologue and seven additional essays (each featuring an illustration by Forsyth Harmon) dealing with the complex and interrelated dimensions that characterize what it means to be “female,” particularly in today’s culture. The author’s literary style is visceral and soul-searching; her sophisticated level of introspection and empathy are evident on virtually every page. It is painfully obvious she knows her subject matter all too well.

The book succeeds on many levels; first it is a vivid (and all-too-often graphic) coming-of-age/awareness story of individual discovery, self-analysis and an endless quest to make sense of a world that is only coherent from a particular perspective. Second, it is a damning indictment of

the masculine worldview and the cruelty it has inflicted on anyone who does not espouse that narrow-minded and inherently-prejudiced ideology. Finally, “Girlhood” constitutes a much-needed roadmap for younger women and gender-fluid individuals who are forced to grow up in an alien world where everything they encounter seems preprogrammed to constantly thwart the expression of their true selves.

And this can be mind-numbingly confusing to those who just want to be happy – something that is virtually impossible for anyone who doesn’t adhere meticulously to the predetermined script – as well as those who try their best to follow the prescribed pathway. Does this sound suspiciously like the proverbial “no-win” scenario? If it does, congratulations. There may be hope for you yet.

“What we hate or fear most in ourselves tends to be among the things we first notice in others,” Febos explains in “Wild America,” the third essay and one I found to be acutely enlightening. “As anorexics read cookbooks, I started to read hands. They reveal us all, it turns out. Even our fingerprints are the evidence of how we touch. First, when we are 3-month-old fetuses, our fingertips’ skin outgrows its outer layers, buckles under the swiftness of change. Then we form ridges by grasping the walls of our mothers’ wombs and our own bodies, feeling our way through that first small world. In this way, that world shapes us, defines our physical selves more permanently, more individually, than any part of this greater one.”

“By the time I was 13, I had divorced my body,” she goes on a paragraph or so later. “Like a bitter divorced parent, I accepted that our collaboration was mandatory. I needed her and hated her all the more for it. Despite my deep sympathy for all other animals, I was sociopathic in my cruelty toward this one. When she disobeyed me – in her hunger, in her clumsiness – I was punitive and withholding. I scrutinized and denigrated her ceaselessly, even in dreams. Not before or since have I felt such animosity toward another being.”

The inaugural winner of the Jeanne Córdova Prize for Lesbian/Queer Nonfiction from Lambda Literary and the recipient of fellowships from the MacDowell Colony, The BAU Institute, The Barbara Deming Foundation, Vermont Studio Center, Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference, and The Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, Febos is an associate professor at The University of Iowa, where she teaches in the nonfiction writing program.

OK. I realize that, as an older White male, any interpretation I might offer is immediately suspect; still, I feel strangely qualified to speak to the essence of what Febos is trying to convey with her eloquent, articulate, succinct yet infinitely meaningful snapshots from the life she has been forced to endure. For me, the bottom line is authenticity. You are never going to be fulfilled – or even remotely happy on any level – as long as you feel compelled to abide by the expectations of others, especially those closest to you from whom you have a natural inclination to seek approval.

As Alex Marzano-Lesnevich, author of “The Fact of A Body: A Murder and a Memoir,” incisively notes, “Reading ‘Girlhood’ felt like having a spell whispered into my ear. ... Intimate, urgent, and stunningly beautiful, this is a book that will be passed from hand to hand, from heart to heart.”

I could not agree more. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.