

'There has never been anyone like Lena Dunham.
To a generation of girls, she is the very thing'

Caitlin Moran



Lena Dunham

'Spectacularly
witty and
well-written'

Heat

NOT

'As funny,
filthy and
open as *Girls*'
Sunday Times

THAT

KIND OF

GIRL

Including Two
New Exclusive
Chapters

A young woman
tells you what
she's "learned"



Lena Dunham

**Not That Kind of Girl: A
Young Woman Tells You
What She's “Learned”**

«HarperCollins»

Dunham L.

Not That Kind of Girl: A Young Woman Tells You What She's
“Learned” / L. Dunham — «HarperCollins»,

Lena Dunham, acclaimed writer-director-star of HBO and Sky Atlantic's 'Girls' and the award-winning movie 'Tiny Furniture', displays her unique powers of observation, wisdom and humour in this exceptional collection of essays. "If I could take what I've learned and make one menial job easier for you, or prevent you from having the kind of sex where you feel you must keep your sneakers on in case you want to run away during the act, then every misstep of mine was worthwhile. I'm already predicting my future shame at thinking I had anything to offer you, but also my future glory in having stopped you from trying an expensive juice cleanse or thinking that it was your fault when the person you are dating suddenly backs away, intimidated by the clarity of your personal mission here on earth. No, I am not a sexpert, a psychologist, or a dietician. I am not a mother of three or the owner of a successful hosiery franchise. But I am a girl with a keen interest in having it all, and what follows are hopeful dispatches from the frontlines of that struggle."

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NOT THAT KIND OF GIRL



*A Young Woman Tells You What
She's "Learned"*

Lena Dunham

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Copyright



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Not That Kind of Girl is a work of nonfiction. Some names and identifying details have been changed.

Illustrations by Joana Avillez

Edna St. Vincent Millay, excerpt from a letter to Edith Wynne Matthison (July 6, 1917)

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Dedication

For my family, of course.

For Nora.

And for Jack,

who is just as she said he would be.

Epigraph

Deep in her soul, however, she was waiting for something to happen. Like a sailor in distress, she would gaze out over the solitude of her life with desperate eyes, seeking some white sail in the mists of the far-off horizon. She did not know what this chance event would be, what wind would drive it to her, what shore it would carry her to, whether it was a longboat or a three-decked vessel, loaded with anguish or filled with happiness up to the portholes. But each morning, when she awoke, she hoped it would arrive that day....

—GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, *Madame Bovary*

How quickly you transform the energy life throws you into folded bows of art.

—MY FATHER, admonishing me

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Introdu



I AM TWENTY years old and I hate myself. My hair, my face, the curve of my stomach. The way my voice comes out wavering and my poems come out maudlin. The way my parents talk to me in a slightly higher register than they talk to my sister, as if I'm a government worker that's snapped and, if pushed hard enough, might blow up the hostages I've got tied up in my basement.

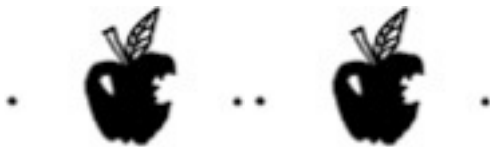
I cover up this hatred with a kind of aggressive self-acceptance. I dye my hair a fluorescent shade of yellow, cutting it into a mullet more inspired by photos of 1980s teen mothers than by any current beauty trend. I dress in neon spandex that hugs in all the wrong places. My mother and I have a massive fight when I choose to wear a banana-printed belly shirt and pink leggings to the Vatican and religious tourists gawk and turn away.

I'm living in a dormitory that was, not too long ago, an old-age home for low-income townspeople and I don't like thinking about where they might be now. My roommate has moved to New York to explore farm-to-fork cooking and lesbianism, so I'm alone, in a ground-floor one-bedroom, a fact I relish until one night a female rugby player rips my screen door off the hinges and barges into the dorm to attack her philandering girlfriend. I've bought a VHS player and a pair of knitting needles and spend most nights on the sofa, making half a scarf for a boy I like who had a manic break and dropped out. I've made two short films, both of which my father deemed "interesting but beside the point," and am so paralyzed as a writer that I've started translating poems from languages I don't speak, some kind of Surrealist exercise meant to inspire me but also prevent me from thinking the perverse, looping thoughts that come unbidden: I am hideous. I am going to be living in a mental hospital by the time I am twenty-nine. I will never amount to anything.

You wouldn't know it to see me at a party. In a crowd I am recklessly cheerful, dressed to the nines in thrift-shop gowns and press-on fingernails, fighting the sleepiness that comes from the 350 milligrams of medication I take every night. I dance the hardest, laugh the hardest at my own jokes, and make casual reference to my vagina, like it's a car or a chest of drawers. I got mono last year, but it never really went away. Occasionally, one of my glands blows up to the size of a golf ball and protrudes from my neck like one of the bolts that keep Frankenstein's monster intact.

I have friends: a kind group of girls whose passions (baking, pressing flowers, community organizing) do not stir me. I feel guilt about this, a sense that my inability to be at home with them proves, once and for all, that I am no good. I laugh, I agree, I find reasons to go home early. I have the nagging sense that my *true* friends are waiting for me, beyond college, unusual women whose ambitions are as big as their past transgressions, whose hair is piled high, dramatic like topiaries at Versailles, and who never, ever say "too much information" when you mention a sex dream you had about your father.

But that's also how I felt in high school, sure that *my* people were from elsewhere and going elsewhere and that they would recognize me when they saw me. They would like me enough that it wouldn't matter if I liked myself. They would see the good in me so that I could, too.



On Saturdays my friends and I load into somebody's old Volvo and head to a thrift store, where we buy tchotchkes that reek of other people's lives and clothes that we believe will enhance our own. We all want to look like characters on the sitcoms of our youth, the teenagers we admired when we were still kids. None of the pants ever fit me, unless I head into the maternity section, so I buy mostly sacklike dresses and Cosby sweaters.

Some days, my haul is massive: a peach power suit with subtle coffee stains, leggings with trompe l'oeil chains running down the sides, a pair of boots specially made for someone with legs of different lengths. But some days the spread is meager. The usual bounty of patterned off-brand Keds and ripped negligees has been snapped up. On one such day, I wander over to the book section, where

people discard their guides to better divorce and crafting how-tos, sometimes even their scrapbooks and family photo albums.

I scan the dusty shelf, which looks like the book collection of an unhappy and maybe even illiterate family. I ignore get-rich-quick advice, stop briefly at Miss Piggy's autobiography, contemplate a book called *Sisters: The Gift of Love*. But when I reach a faded paperback with edges so yellowed they have almost gone green, I stop. *Having It All*, by Helen Gurley Brown, who graces her own cover, leaning against her tidy desk in the kind of shoulder-padded plum suit I have taken to wearing ironically, all pearls and knowing smile.

I spend the sixty-five cents required to take the book home. In the car I show it to my friends like it's a decorative joke, something for my shelf of kitschy trophies and Sears photo-studio shots of strangers' kids. This is our hobby, appropriating meaningful artifacts and displaying them as evidence of who we will never be. But I know I'm going to devour this book, and when I get home I head straight to bed, shivering under my patchwork quilt, an Ohio snowstorm swirling in the parking lot outside my window.

The book is from 1982, and on the inside cover is an inscription, written in ballpoint pen: "To Betty! Love, Margaret, your Optifast friend. ☺" This moves me, the idea that the book was handed from one woman to another in some long-ago weight-loss support group. I extend her message in my mind: *Betty, we can do it. We are doing it. Let this book take you to the stars and beyond.*



I race home from class every day for a week to devour Helen's teachings. I'm electrified by the way that, in *Having It All*, Gurley Brown shares her assorted humiliations and occasional triumphs and explains, with Idiot's Guide precision, how you too can be blessed with "love, success, sex, money, even if you're starting with nothing."

Most of her advice, it should be noted, is absolutely bananas. She encourages readers to eat fewer than a thousand calories a day (“crashing is okay, so is fasting ... Satisfied is out of the question. You have to feel slightly uncomfortable and hungry during your weight loss or it probably isn’t happening”), avoid having children if you possibly can, and be blow job ready at all times (“the more sex you have, the more you can tolerate”). Helen has little tolerance for free will in this department: “Exhaustion, preoccupation with a problem, menstrual cramps—nothing is a good excuse for not making love unless you happen to be so angry with the man in your bed your eyes are darting around their sockets and your teeth are grinding.”

Some of her advice is a little more reasonable: “Always leave for the airport fifteen minutes earlier than you *could*. It will save your valves wearing out,” or “If you have severe personal problems then I think you go to a shrink for advice and support. I can no more imagine not going to get your hurting head and *heart* taken care of than one would go around the streets with blood spurting out of your throat ...” But her frank wisdom loses some of its power because it’s forced to occupy the same space as gems such as “to me, avoiding married men totally when you’re single would be like passing up first aid in a Tijuana hospital when you’re bleeding to death because you prefer an immaculate American hospital some unreachable distance across the border.”

Having It All is divided into sections, each section a journey into some usually sacrosanct aspect of feminine life such as diet, sex, or the intricacies of marriage. But despite her demented theories, which jibe not even a little bit with my distinctly feminist upbringing, I appreciate the way Helen shares her own embarrassing, acne-ridden history in an attempt to say *Look, happiness and satisfaction can happen to anyone*. In the process she reveals her own unique pathos (a passage about binge eating baklava stands out in my mind), but maybe I underestimated her. Maybe that is not an accident but is, in fact, her gift.



When I found her book, I did not yet understand Helen Gurley Brown’s position in the canon, that she had been written about and reacted to by the women who would come to guide me, women like Gloria Steinem and Nora Ephron. I did not know that she was the bane of both the women’s movement and the smut-police, or that she was still alive and in her late eighties, still peddling her particular brand of chipper, oblivious help for the downtrodden. All I knew was that she painted a picture of a life made much richer by having once been, as she calls it, a *Mouseburger*: unpretty, unspecial, unformed. She believed that, ultimately, Mouseburgers are the women who will triumph, having lived to tell the tale of being overlooked and underloved. Hers is a self-serving perspective, but one I needed more than anything. Maybe, as Helen preached, a powerful, confident, and, yes, even sexy woman could be made, not born. Maybe.

There is nothing gutsier to me than a person announcing that their story is one that deserves to be told, especially if that person is a woman. As hard as we have worked and as far as we have come, there are still so many forces conspiring to tell women that our concerns are petty, our opinions aren’t needed, that we lack the gravitas necessary for our stories to matter. That personal writing by women is no more than an exercise in vanity and that we should appreciate this new world for women, sit down, and shut up.

But I want to tell my stories and, more than that, I *have to* in order to stay sane: stories about waking up to my adult female body and being disgusted and terrified. About getting my butt touched at an internship, having to prove myself in a meeting full of fifty-year-old men, and going to a black-tie event with the crustiest red nose you ever saw. About allowing myself to be treated by men in ways I knew were wrong. Stories about my mother, my grandmother, the first guy I loved who turned semi-gay, and the first girl I loved who turned into my enemy. And if I could take what I’ve learned and make one menial job easier for you, or prevent you from having the kind of sex where you feel

you must keep your sneakers on in case you want to run away during the act, then every misstep of mine was worthwhile. I'm already predicting my future shame at thinking I had anything to offer you, but also my future glory in having stopped you from trying an expensive juice cleanse or thinking that it was your fault when the person you are dating suddenly backs away, intimidated by the clarity of your personal mission here on earth. No, I am not a sexpert, a psychologist, or a dietitian. I am not a mother of three or the owner of a successful hosiery franchise. But I am a girl with a keen interest in having it all, and what follows are hopeful dispatches from the frontlines of that struggle.



SE

Love





WHEN I WAS NINE, I wrote a vow of celibacy on a piece of paper and ate it. I promised myself, in orange Magic Marker, that I would remain a virgin until I graduated from high school. This seemed important because I knew my mother had waited until the summer before college and also because Angela Chase seemed pretty messed up by her experience at that flophouse where high school kids went to copulate. If my relationship to liver pâté was any indication—and I had recently eaten so much that I barfed—then my willpower left much to be desired. I would need something stronger than resolve to prevent me from having intercourse too early in life, so I wrote the vow up and asked my mother to sign the document. She refused. “You just don’t know what life will bring, and I don’t want you feeling guilty,” she said.

Ultimately, the contract was an unnecessary precaution. The opportunity never arose in high school, nor even during my first year of college at the New School, unless you count a near miss with a stocky, aspiring pilot named James. Though never consummated, that encounter went far enough that I had to fish a mint-colored, never-used condom out from behind my dormitory bunk bed the next day. Everything had been moving along nicely, and my shirt and pants were off, but when I revealed my virgin status, he became (perhaps rightfully) afraid I would form an unbreakable one-way bond with him and fled. Sophomore year, I transferred to a small liberal arts school in Ohio that was known for having been the first college to admit women and African Americans, as well as for its polyamorous, bi-curious student body. I was neither, but it did seem like a good, supportive environment in which to finally get the ball rolling.

Oberlin was a free-love fantasia. During the first rainstorm of the year, nude students took to the quad, slathering one another’s bodies in mud. (I wore a tankini.) People referred to each other as “former lovers, current friends.” There was a student-run sex seminar where every year a boy and a girl were recruited to show their penis and vagina, respectively, to an eager crowd of aspiring Dr. Ruth Westheimers.

I really felt like the oldest virgin in town, and I probably was, save for a busty punk girl from Olympia, Washington, who was equally frustrated; she and I would often meet up in our nightgowns to discuss the lack of prospects. Just two Emily Dickinsons with facial piercings, wondering what life had in store for us and whether we had unwittingly crossed the divide between innocent and pathetic.

“Josh Krolnik ran his fingers along the elastic band of my underwear! What do we think that means?”

“He did that to me, too ...”

We even noted, with no small amount of terror, that the guy who wore a purple bathrobe to every class had a girl in Superman-print pajamas who seemed to love him. They looked at each other gooeey eyed, deep in their own (no doubt sexual) world of loungewear.

The pickings were slim, especially if, like me, you were over bisexuals. At least half the straight men on campus played Dungeons & Dragons, and another quarter eschewed footwear entirely. The cutest guy I had seen at school so far, a long-haired rock-climber named Privan, had risen from his desk at the end of class to reveal he was wearing a flowing white skirt. It was clear that I was going to have to make some concessions in order to experience carnal love.



I met Jonah¹ in the cafeteria. He didn’t have a specific style beyond dressing vaguely like a middle-aged lesbian. He was small but strong. (Guys under five-foot-five seemed to be my lot in life.) He wore a t-shirt from his high school spirit day (a high school with a spirit day! how quaint!), and his approach to the eternal buffet that was the cafeteria was pretty genteel, which I liked—even the vegans tended to pile their plates like the apocalypse was coming and return to their dorms catatonic

from the effort of digesting. I casually mentioned how frustrated I was by my inability to get to Kentucky for a journalism project, and he immediately offered his services. Though struck by his generosity, I didn't really want to take a five-hour drive with a stranger. However, five to forty-five minutes of sex seemed okay.

The best way to do this, obviously, was to throw a wine-and-cheese party, which I did, in my eight-by-ten-foot room on the "quiet floor" of East Hall. Procuring wine entailed mounting my bike and riding seven subzero miles to a package store in nearby Lorain that didn't ID, so it ended up being beer and cheese and a big box of Carr's assorted party crackers. Jonah was "casually" invited in a group email that made me sound a lot more relaxed ("Hey y'all, sometimes on a Thursday night I just need to chill. DON'T YOU?") than I actually was. And he came, and he stayed, even after all my guests had packed up and gone. That's when I knew that we would at least go to sloppy second base. We talked, at first animatedly and then in the nervous half exclamations that substitute for kissing when everyone is too shy. Finally, I told him that my dad painted huge pictures of penises for a job. When he asked if we could see them online, I grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and went for it. I removed my shirt almost immediately, as I had with the pilot, which seemed to impress him. Continuing in the key of bold, I hopped up to get the condom from the "freshman survival pack" we had been given (even though I was a sophomore, and even though I was pretty sure if the apocalypse did come we were going to need a lot more than fake Ray-Bans, a granola bar, and some mini-Band-Aids).

Meanwhile, across campus, my friend Audrey was in a private hell of her own creation. She had been in a war with her roommate all semester, a voluptuous, Ren Faire-loving Philadelphian who was the lust object of every LARPer and black-metal aficionado on campus. Audrey just wanted some quiet time to read *The New Republic* and iChat with her boyfriend in Virginia, while her roommate was now dating a kid who had tried to cook meth in the dorm kitchen, warranting an emergency visit from men in hazmat suits. Audrey asked that her roommate not keep her NuvaRing birth control in the minifridge, which the girl took as an unforgivable affront to her honor.

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U R A FRIGID
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U R A FRIGID
BITCH

Before coming out to my beer-and-cheese soiree, Audrey had left her roommate a note: “If you could please have quieter sex as we approach our midterms, I’d really appreciate it.” Her roommate’s response was to burn Audrey’s note, scatter the ashes across the floor, and leave a note of her own: “U R a frigid bitch. Get the sand out of UR vagina.”

Audrey ran back to my room, hoping for a sleepover. She was sobbing, terrified that the burnt note was just a precursor to serious bodily harm, and also pretty sure I was alone, finishing the cheese, so she flung my door open without knocking—only to find Jonah on top of me. She immediately understood the magnitude of the occasion and, through her tears, cried, “Mazel tov!”

I didn’t tell Jonah I was a virgin, just that I hadn’t done it “that much.” I was sure I had already broken my hymen in high school while crawling over a fence in Brooklyn in pursuit of a cat that didn’t want to be rescued. Still, it hurt more than I’d expected and in a different way, too—duller, less like a stab wound and more like a headache. He was nervous, and, in a nod to gender equality, neither of us came. Afterward we lay there and talked, and I could tell he was a good person, whatever that even means.



I awoke the next morning, just like I did every morning, and proceeded to do all my normal things: I called my mother, drank three cups of orange juice, ate half a block of the sharp cheddar that had been sitting out since the night before, and listened to girl-with-guitar music. I looked at pictures of cute things on the Internet and inspected my bikini line for exciting ingrown hairs. I checked my email, folded my sweaters, then unfolded all the sweaters in the process of trying to decide which sweater to wear. That night, lying down felt the same, and sleep came easily. No floodgate had been opened. No vault of true womanhood unlocked. She remained, and she was me.

Jonah and I only had sex once. The next day, he stopped by to say that he thought we’d done it too soon, and we should take a few weeks to get to know each other better. Then he asked me to be his girlfriend, put on my hot-pink bicycle helmet, and proclaimed it was “the going-steady helmet,” giving me a manic thumbs-up. I “dated” him for twelve hours, then ended it in the laundry room of his dormitory. Over Christmas break, he sent me a Facebook message that read, simply: “Your Hot.”

Sex was clearly easier to have than I had given it credit for. It occurred to me that I had, for the past few years, set my sights on boys who weren’t interested in me, and this was because *I* wasn’t ready. Despite all the movies about wayward prep-school girls I liked to watch, my high school years had been devoted to loving my pets, writing poems about back-alley love, and surrendering my body only to my own fantasies. And I wasn’t ready to let go of that yet. I was sure that, once I let someone penetrate me, my world would change in some indescribable yet fundamental way. I would never be able to hug my parents with the same innocence, and being alone with myself would have a different tenor. How could I ever experience true solitude again when I’d had someone poking around my insides?

How permanent virginity feels, and then how inconsequential. After Jonah, I could barely remember the sensation of lack, the embarrassment, and the feelings of urgency. I remember passing the punk girl arm in arm with her boyfriend senior year, and we didn’t even exchange a survivor’s nod. She was likely having sex every night, her ample bosom heaving in time to some hard-core music, our bond erased by experience. We weren’t part of any club anymore, just part of the world. Good for her.

Only later did sex and identity become one. I wrote that virginity-loss scene almost word for word in my first film, *Creative Nonfiction*, minus the part where Audrey busted down the door, afraid for her life. When I performed that sex scene, my first, I felt more changed than I had by the actual experience of having sex with Jonah. Like that was just sex, but this was my work.

¹ Name changed to protect the truly innocent.

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