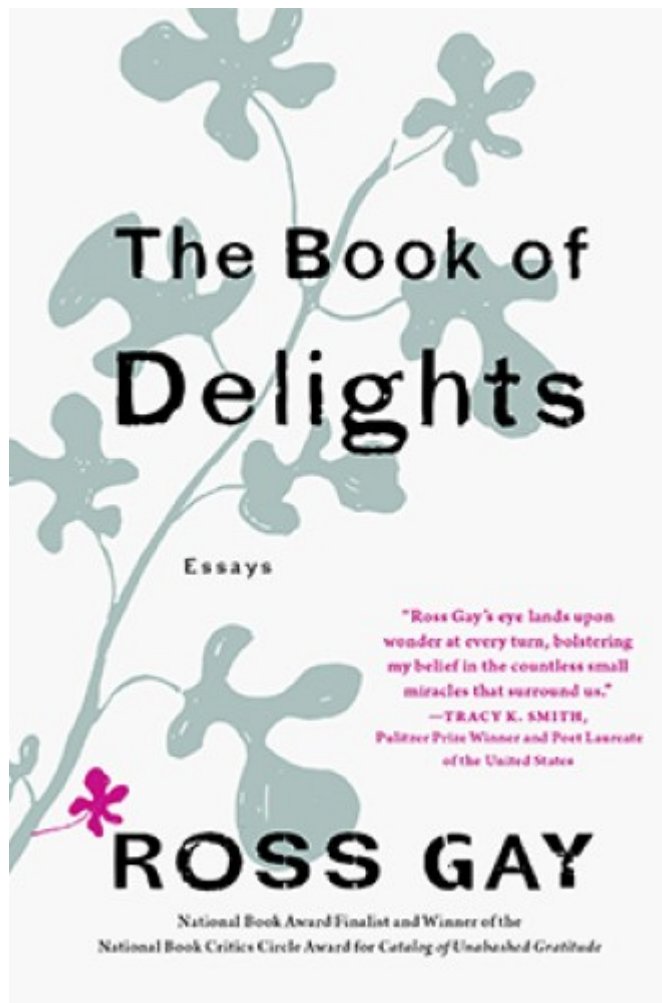


Ross Gay's fierce, radiant joy

To love the world as an American black man is a subversive act.

by [Sophie Lefens](#) in the [April 21, 2019](#) issue

In Review



The Book of Delights

By Ross Gay
Algonquin Books

In times of national or personal pain, the temptation is to go speechless, to become inert, to rage and destroy, or simply to weep. Ross Gay's collection of short essays offers us another option: joy.

Gay, the author of three poetry collections and winner of the 2015 National Book Critics Circle Award, began his "book of delights" project as a collection of daily essays handwritten over the course of a year, each about "something delightful." His warm and casual style invites us into the "common flourishes" of his everyday life. We're with him at the café, on an airplane, in the garden, at a friend's funeral, and all the while we feel that he sincerely wants us there. Gay is the ultimate host: generous, engaged, and seriously funny.

Delight emphatically sprawls across the pages in brazen celebration of the quotidian. The effect can be dizzying, the prose at times a little cute. Yet the startling violence and loss that Gay weaves throughout the collection requires a certain boundless freedom of language. In one of the collection's most pointed moments, Gay, with brilliant clarity and concision, unravels the relationship between blackness and suffering and reminds us, "you have been reading a book of delights written by a black person. A book of black delight. Daily as air." In these sharp and clear moments of disclosure, Gay's work becomes revelatory.

Gay joins a coalition of writers who, in the words of poet Toi Derricotte, believe in "joy as a form of resistance." Anne Sexton famously read a love poem written for her daughter at anti-Vietnam rallies, where other poets spoke of napalm and rifles. Starving and freezing to death in a Siberian prison camp, Osip Mandelstam, a Russian Jew imprisoned under Stalin's regime, wrote one of the most striking lines of 20th-century poetry: "And I was alive in the blizzard of the blossoming pear." These writers who lived beside death reveled in what was alive, blooming, and rooted.

As a black man in America, Gay is no different. Despite, or perhaps because of, the precarity of black lives in America, garden imagery abounds in Gay's essays. To love the enfolded world in all of its imperfections and frailties, "Oh broken, oh beautiful," is a subversive act, one that resists the shrill buzz of despair.

One of the collection's most striking essays, "Coco-baby," is a love song about Gay and his own body as he stands in front of the bathroom mirror applying lotion. There is a significant tradition of poets standing in front of mirrors and marveling. One thinks of William Carlos Williams in "Danse Russe," naked and dancing in front of his

mirror, calling himself “the happy genius of my household,” or Mark Strand in “Old Man Leaves Party,” who finds a mirror in the forest and strips naked to wonder at the “dream of flesh” before him. Or, in a slightly different iteration, Lucille Clifton’s “If I Stand in My Window,” when she presses her breasts against her apartment window and speaks of the imagined white man below, “let him watch my black body / push against my own glass / let him discover self.”

Gay’s version of this Whitmanic self-celebration is a song of triumph, the song of a truly free man well aware of his worth. And in an almost direct mirroring of Whitman’s “every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you,” Gay reminds us that “our bodies are the bodies of others” and joy is the syncing of our body’s sorrows with another’s.

Perhaps the greatest accomplishment of this collection of essays, other than the sheer pleasure of its bubbling and beaming poetry, is how gently Gay unites his reverence for the individual with his belief in the collective imperative of caring for one another. In the world Gay imagines, a person fully rooted in their own “wilderness” becomes all the more porous to their surroundings. Gay proves that you don’t have to be quiet to be soft. The fiercest joy “annihilates” and “resurrects.” Real delight cracks us open so light can come through.

One risk in writing a book on delight is the potential to slip into the saccharine. There were moments in reading this collection when I felt my cynicism flare. When a baby wraps its tiny hands around a man’s finger, or a stranger interrupts Gay’s walk to tell a joke, or two adult men play pickup basketball with neighborhood boys, I wondered what kind of harmonious fantasyland this was. But Gay never blinds himself to the world’s ugliness. Rather, he looks for what stands before us, radiant and open. By the end of the book, Gay had renewed my vision and filled it with light.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Ross Gay’s song of himself.”