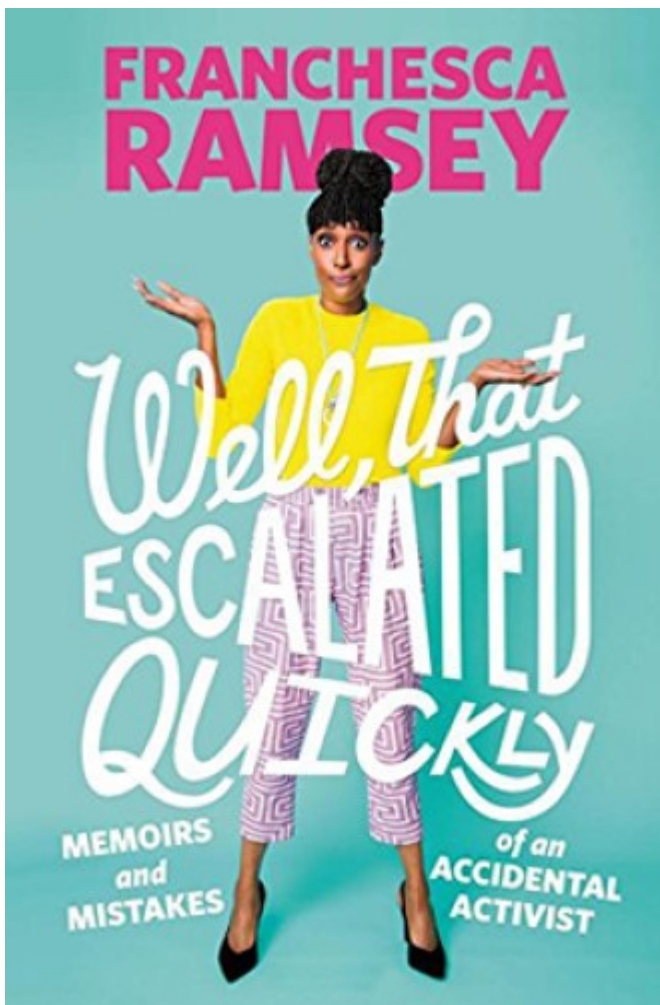


How I got schooled by Francesca Ramsey's hilarious memoir

Ramsey shows the high stakes (and common mistakes) of online activism.

by [Christina G. Kukuk](#) in the [November 21, 2018](#) issue

In Review



Well, That Escalated Quickly

Memoirs and Mistakes of an Accidental Activist

By Franchesca Ramsey
Grand Central Publishing

I loved Franchesca Ramsey's memoir from the very first sentence, where she confesses that if she could redo her breakout moment of viral YouTube fame, she'd have worn a better wig. Her hilarious 2012 YouTube video "Shit White Girls Say to Black Girls" hit an obvious nerve. Six years later, it has 12 million views.

I knew Ramsey best for her sharp and funny video commentaries on MTV's *Decoded*. On a quest to learn more about my new home state, I'd watched the *Decoded* episode that explains why certain states are so white. (Oregon's racist history is such a standout, we get an extended cameo in the episode.) Ramsey's videos are both hilarious and packed with mind-blowing facts.

Ramsey uses her trademark humor to disarm her readers and then reequip them with better tools. In other words, she schools us. But whereas a page of Austin Channing Brown or Ta-Nehisi Coates can feel like a sucker punch to anyone breathing the white supremacist air many of us don't even realize we are breathing, reading Ramsey's satire feels more like rolling on the floor laughing with our wittiest bestie.

Ramsey writes about her early online fame while revealing just how much she still had to learn about being a public voice for social justice—and how many mistakes she had yet to make. She stumbled into advocacy when her bad-wig video won her an appearance on Anderson Cooper's daytime show *Anderson Live*. She kind of bombed, actually. And the social activist universe let her know in no uncertain terms. She'd had an opportunity, they said. A platform. But she'd squandered it.

Not only does Ramsey share how she made that prime-time failure even worse, she offers her mistakes to a wider audience as a learning opportunity: this happens. Anyone negotiating a public platform for justice is going to fail. This lesson applies to pastors, preachers, and professors with any social media presence, as well as activists, editors, and leaders of nonprofits. Our fails can be epic. Imagine, say, regularly tearing apart someone like Lena Dunham online and then finding yourself at an intimate dinner with her. Ramsey does, and she lives to tell us what she learned.

Most readers are more likely to have botched a comment about a racist incident at the local high school on a community Facebook page than been forced to ask a

feminist vlogger whom we've criticized, one with 17 million subscribers, to please pass the salt. But Ramsey's advice still applies. "Social media means we're all living our lives in public now," she writes, "and many of us are learning how to be advocates, allies, and activists in public, too." What Ramsey learns by trial and error—a lot of error, error that will make the reader cringe in sympathy and recognition—applies to all our imperfect human relationships, now lived out in unforgivingly public ways.

Ramsey's story about Black Tumblr's "black-lash" response to the *Anderson Live* disaster hints that her stumbles in the public eye likely cost her in different ways than my own white feminist mistakes might. While she doesn't dwell on this, it would make for a spirited conversation among activists of differing social locations.

How much of Ramsey's name-dropping the reader recognizes will depend on how immersed they are in online social justice and activism. I needed the bones thrown my way in the occasional footnote. I didn't know Jenna Marbles or a number of other popular culture references and personalities sprinkled through these pages.

And I only made it to page 7 of the book before flipping to "Franchesca's Simple Explanations of Not-So-Simple Concepts" at the back. This is where readers can finally understand, from the anonymity of their closet or porch or bus seat, what it means to "call in," what those new letters in LGBTQIAA abbreviate, or how to define *misogynoir*. I devoured this salty glossary of activism before going back to finish the first chapter.

I also bookmarked Ramsey's handy chart for deciding whether to unfriend social media contacts when they use status updates to uphold systems of oppression or perpetuate misinformation, intolerance, prejudice, and ultimately white supremacy. "Facebook forces you to reckon with every single one of your relationships," Ramsey points out, because whether it's your great-aunt's racist meme or your college roomie's rants about women, "white supremacy works on every level, from the White House . . . to your uncle Ron."

My favorite guide, though, was "Eulogies for Cringeworthy Comments." Not only does Ramsey explain why comments like "Sorry if you're offended" and "Well, I don't see color!" are so unhelpful, she provides pretested comebacks for 12 of the worst offenders. If we all start using these eulogies, maybe some of the cringeworthy comments would finally die.

Not one of us popped out of the womb a fully-grown justice superhero. Sometimes I think “still learning” should be tattooed on every forehead that’s in front of a handheld camera or a pulpit mic. Ramsey’s willingness to confess her own faults and show her mistakes gives us permission to acknowledge and grow from our own. She does what she advises for everyone doing justice work with a public platform: show your work.