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Ada Vilageliu-Diaz
University of the District of Columbia

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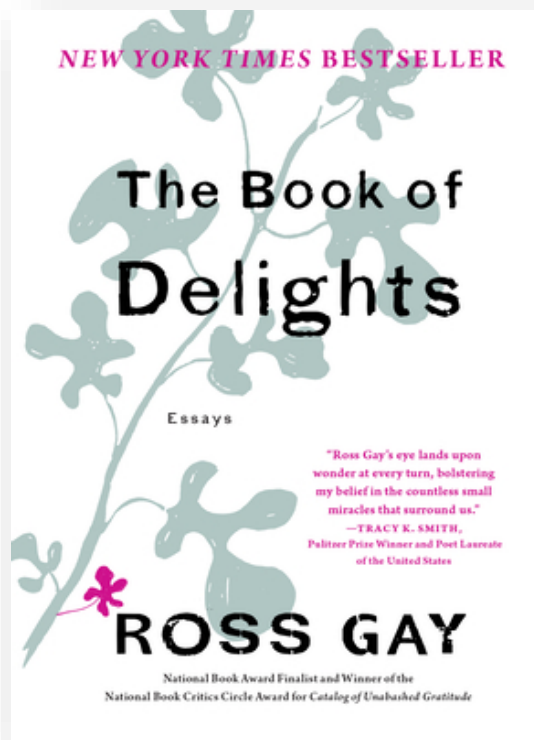
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The Book of Delights by Ross Gay



GAY, ROSS. *The Book of Delights*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2019. ISBN 9781616207922, 288 pages.

The Book of Delights by Ross Gay is a collection of journal entries written in a single year. The book starts with the author's birthday and ends full circle with his next birthday. In between, the author narrates daily episodes in his life as an avid gardener, observer, and writer. The entries are written to follow certain rules: They must focus on delight, and they have to be written on a daily basis. As he explains in the introduction, there are some patterns and

themes that overlap and repeat throughout his book (xi-xii). Overall, *The Book of Delights* creates a narrative that is nourished by Gay's love of gardening, writing, and daily observations. As such, this book is part gardening book and part delight. In fact, the intersections of natural observation, gardening techniques, and daily reflections create meditative writings on self and community that explore the idea of delight.

The author's theory of delight, which is applied throughout the book, is explained in "Joy is Such a Human Madness" (43). Here he addresses Zadie Smith's essay "Joy" in relation to his brief journal entries. Gay agrees with Smith in her differentiation between pleasure and joy but focuses on the differences between pleasure and delight instead. The author uses "the false etymology: de-light suggests both 'of light' and 'without light'" to explain how both can coexist "concurrently": the "intolerable" and the "terror" as coexisting with delight (43-44). There are many examples of this theory in his book such as in "Transplanting" where he writes about the accidental death of twenty-year-old Rachel (36). The writer describes someone seeing two butterflies on a bush after talking about her death and of finding a single elephant earring, Rachel's favorite animal. In

this way, this book explores the ways we can experience delight in all its contradictions, especially after harrowing experiences. They are all multiple attempts at finding delight everywhere.

Therefore, these 102 daily essays follow a similar structure: They are mostly written daily, and they reveal something delightful. Like in the natural world and its cycles, the book opens and closes with birthdays. In between, he writes almost daily about gardening, friends, writing, popular culture, and society. The author uses the definition of the essay as in “the French *essai*, meaning to try, or to attempt” (10) and applies that to his daily writing practice, the joy of trying to write everyday but also the joy of not writing some days. In “Blowing it off,” he describes the delight he feels on trying but also on skipping his writing ritual. Instead of thinking of his “occasional lack of discipline” as a “failure” (11), he considers it a delight, much like when he finds out that the handful of loquats he picked from a tree were not actually from a “public tree” (10). At the same time, he also explains the joy of “blowing it off” in honor of his father who was not able to delight in the ability to skip work and ended up being diagnosed with liver cancer. In contrast with ideas of illness, death, violence, punishment, and oppression, his writing depicts different types of delights in entries that are interconnected with the natural world and his role as gardener/writer: Someone who nourishes the written page with daily attempts at delight.

As such, writing and gardening usually intersect on the page and *produce* an organic symbiotic relationship between the creative mind and nature. These daily at-

tempts at writing, living, and garden and delight are as fluid and spontaneous as the natural world that surrounds the author such as a praying mantis standing next to him on a table in “Praying Mantis” (20). Similarly, each entry manages to find a balance between his daily observations of natural life, anecdotes, and memories. Many of these short essays typically open with natural references, like a passing bee, that are interconnected with daily reflections. These observation rituals reinforce the idea of a certain living that affirms our humanity, mortality, and delight: A hummingbird slurps on a flower during a garden conversation about a sick husband who encouraged his partner to have other lovers (56).

As part of the natural and social order, the human body is also an important element in this book, especially the Black body. It is a body that is part of this symbiotic natural world and part of the space that he occupies in society. On one hand, the body nourishes the earth in a symbiotic cycle in which the writer collects and uses his own urine to feed his garden (241). In this case, his body is needed to physically tend and nurture gardens as well as to enjoy the fruits emanating from plants and trees. However, even if the human body is part of the cycle of life, the author cannot escape the reality that his Black body is treated like a weed that others would want to pluck out. In “Negreeting,” the writer describes an incident in which the assumed nod of the head in the greeting exchange of Black individuals in public is broken by another Black man (24). This “non-negreeting” seems to challenge the need to greet each other as Black people in a society that assumes them as “presumed guilty”

(25). Instead, the non-negreeting “maybe” becomes a declaration of innocence; it imagines a world where that statement is not needed (26).

His almost-daily meditations include book and movie reviews, many of which address this human condition. One of his daily entries address the documentary “Hole in the Head” about a five-year-old Black boy whose body was abused through radiation experiments in the 1920s, Vertus Hardiman (14). He uses this as an example of medical violence, the abuse of Black children through medical experimentation. In this case, the writer tells the story to demonstrate the level of mistrust and paranoia some people have being Black in America. Similarly, in “Still Processing,” the author reflects on the representation of black pain while “unraveling bindweed from the squash and buckwheat” (219). In this entry, Gay addresses what he calls “the commodification of black suffering” such as in the stories about Whitney Houston or the success of *The Wire*. He explains how the media exploits Black culture by making Black pain seem “natural” while this representation of blackness is carefully planned to make it profitable. Once more, his encounter with the natural world serves a metaphor for what he gardens with his words; he plucks the narrative bind-weeds from the story of Black America, one that has been covered by popular media in one-dimensional profitable ways.

The entry called “Loitering” is an exploration of what it means to loiter in its cultural and social context. He explains the policing of loitering in the context of race and power, of how the Black body is monitored

and silenced in public spaces. By mentioning his own experiences in the Harvard Club at being “sushed” for laughing while Black, the author explains how the monitoring of Black people is based on the threat of Black delight, of the “ownership of one’s own time” (232). This “policer of delight” or “overseer” is thus in charge of removing moments of Black delight as a threat (232) to white spaces that are shaped based on the suppression of Black’s ownership of time and joy. Therefore, his “work is studying this kind of glee” that he observes and seeks (232). The book is claiming the time and space for delight, “loitering” with writing for a year.

In his last entry, “My birthday,” the author offers a final reflection on the meaning of delight in his book. A friend writes to him that delight is “etymologically connected to delicious, to delectable.” This again organically connects his writing practice to gardening, “connects delight also to cultivation. Makes it a garden” (270). What is most unique about this book is the ways in which the author’s quotidian observations seem at times fluttering, like a passing butterfly, but are *rooted* in an American storytelling tradition that exposes the ways the Black body and voice have been violently removed and distorted in mainstream narratives while simultaneously re-inserting, as in *planting* or transplanting, that same body and voice. The author is delighting in the continued *cultivation* of this tradition with this book.

Thus, Ross Gay offers his *Book of Delights* as a counternarrative that focuses on the delight of being Black while writing about delight. This book invites us to experience

reading and writing as a source of pleasure, a way of experiencing the world in nourishing ways by finding joy even when it is most distressing. At the end, all that is left of this book is a “door,” its final word in the text, where the author signs off and exits, but where others can enter and read (271). The book and its attempts at exploring delight are like doors that readers can open and close as they wander into this book as a garden.

Ada Vilageliu-Díaz
University of the District of Columbia

Ada Vilageliu-Díaz received her Ph.D. in English from Howard University and her B.A. in English Philology from Universidad de La Laguna in the Canary Islands. She has taught composition courses as a full-time lecturer at Howard University and Bowie State University. She teaches writing and literature courses at the University of the District of Columbia. Her research focuses on rhetoric and composition, community-based teaching, community-based scholarship, Latinx and Caribbean literature, and writing. Her poetry has been published in *Beltway Poetry Quarterly*, American University's *Festival Latino-Americano de Poesía*, and *Knocking on the Door of the White House: Latina and Latino Poets in Washington, D.C.* She is also a documentary filmmaker. Her directorial debut was in 2014 with the documentary *Near the River* about environmental women leaders in the DC area. This film was in the official selection of film festivals in Colombia, Brazil, India, Spain, and the US. She is the host and creator of two community-based projects in Washington, DC: *Mi Libro, Mi Espejo* (My Book, My Mirror) Virtual Story Time, and the Creative Community Writing Salon. She's on the Board of Directors for the Coalition for Community Writing. Her website is adavilageliudiaz.com