

# Things to Do

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**BELOVED NOVELIST, ESSAYIST,** blogger, professor and Twitter queen Roxane Gay became a household name with her wryly philosophical and resolute *Bad Feminist*. This weekend, she comes to town as the keynote speaker for the giant PEN World Voices Festival of International Literature. This year's weeklong fest explores the theme On Mexico through dozens of events—including a discussion on Chicano/a culture, a celebration of female Mexican authors and a conversation with Salman Rushdie—and culminates with Gay's lecture on Sunday 1. We spoke with Gay about living off the popular literature grid, pushing diversity and the problem with woke men.

**You're traveling to a lot of literary gatherings this year. Why is the PEN World Voices Festival intriguing to you?**

I think that it's always exciting to see international voices celebrated, so I wanted to be a part of it. Freedom of speech is something every writer holds sacred, so it becomes even more important to participate.

**You're asked to speak at conferences often—how do you deal with the pervasive issue of all-male, all-white panels?**

It's something I always think about, because it gets tiring to always be the only person of color or the only woman and to see organizers think they're doing their part. Because they're not doing their part—they're doing the bare minimum. So I always try to find out who else I'm appearing with at events so I can be sure I'm not put into that supremely awkward position.

**Tell me about your new memoir, *Hunger*, due out later this year.**

*Hunger* is a memoir essentially of my body. It looks at trauma and obesity and what it's like to live in this world with an unruly, overweight body. Writing the book has been really difficult—more difficult than I thought. I generally write pretending

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other people will never read my work, but this work requires a level of vulnerability that makes me uncomfortable.

**You teach at Purdue University in Indiana. Do a lot of people assume you live in New York City?**

All the time. People have this misapprehension that all writers live in New York, and that's simply not true. There are those of us who do live outside of New York and somehow manage to write.

**Are there any negatives or positives to being outside of the New York lit bubble?**

Sometimes there's envy when you see all the events happening, events I'd love to go to, but I feel just as able to participate in literary culture from where I live. People always ask, “Why are you so prolific?” Well, I live in rural Indiana. I don't know what you want me to do other than write.

**What's your advice for aspiring writers looking for that magic in New York?**

I think it's totally fine to hold that magic, because that magic is real. Just remember that your writing career and your publishing career are different, and neither are the measure of your self-worth. Just remember to once in a while write, in addition to just being part of it all.

**How do you feel about woke men, and do men need a female feminist to help them get there?**

No, they don't. Because that means women have yet another job in their day. Men should wake themselves up—they shouldn't need a special woman sidekick to help them find the promised land. I think woke men are great, but sometimes they're not really woke; they're performing wokeness. What's even worse is they want to be congratulated for being aware of their privilege and the benefit they have as they move through the world, and I'm not going to play that game.

→ The PEN World Voices Festival of International Literature runs through Sun 1. See [worldvoices.pen.org](http://worldvoices.pen.org) for full schedule and prices.