

## “How to Write an Honest Memoir: A Conversation with Evette Dionne”

December 2022, *The Rumpus*

Evette Dionne, journalist, editor and pop-culture critic, uses strong cultural reporting and analysis to cut through the cultural expectations that exist around appearance, in her new memoir, *Weightless* (Harper Collins, 2022). In reflective essays, Dionne is unafraid to turn the lens on herself, exploring size, race, health, and gender, including her own harmful experiences with fatphobia and hostile encounters in doctors’ offices, on dating sites, as well as with partners and family. Dionne also discusses her heart failure diagnosis at age twenty-nine, and showcases her own dichotomies to prove the depth of our shared prejudice.

But *Weightless* isn’t a memoir exactly, she explains in the introduction; “*Weightless* is an excavation of a culture that hates fat people and uses institutions, including media, medicine, and marriage, to reinforce that repulsion.” Ultimately, Dionne uses her book to promote the belief that all of us should be able to live the lives we deserve.

Former editor-in-chief of Bitch Media, Dionne has also authored *Lifting as We Climb: Black Women’s Battle for the Ballot Box* (Penguin Random House, 2020), which received the Coretta Scott King Author Honor for 2020, and was nominated for the National Book Award. Her work has appeared in *Glamour*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Time*, *The New York Times*, and the *Guardian*.

I was delighted to talk to Dionne by phone, where we discussed the importance of context in history and writing, problematic TV shows that manage to captivate our interest, and what to do with the difficult emotions that arise when writing memoir.

\*\*\*

**The Rumpus:** *Weightless* follows your first nonfiction book, *Lifting as We Climb*, a work aimed at middle-grade readers that tells the overlooked stories of Black women as forces in the suffrage movement. But in *Weightless*, you focus on your own story. How did this book come to be?

**Evette Dionne:** *Weightless* started out as a different book project, which got shelved. During that process, I was diagnosed with heart failure and was doing a lot of journaling, trying to be present in my body and understand the experience. So often I feel like I’m hovering over my own life, watching it happen. When it came to this illness, I wanted to feel every ache and pain and pay attention to how the medications were making my body feel. When I spoke with my agent about the journaling, she knew it was a book. Something that would talk about fatness, of course, but also about chronic illness.

**Rumpus:** You quickly reveal your diagnosis of heart failure and stage two pulmonary hypertension in the introduction. What role did vulnerability play for you in writing this book?

**Dionne:** Vulnerability was essential, especially navigating the sorts of illnesses I have. People have to know what these illnesses do to a body. So often I feel like my disabilities are invisible. When I walk down the street, most people have no idea. Vulnerability is a way for me to say, this is what's actually happening beneath the surface that you as a reader or you as a person encountering someone with an invisible illness can't see.

In terms of writing, I didn't see any other way to create this book. I thought a lot about what to keep for myself and what to share, and [I decided that] if I was going to talk about heart failure in an essay collection that weaves my personal life in, I needed to be vulnerable and honest or it would've really defeated the purpose. It could have been a nonfiction book about heart disease, in which case my vulnerability doesn't add anything to that story. But in this format, about these particular issues and how they affect my life on a day-to-day basis, there was no other way I could have written this book.

**Rumpus:** You are a journalist, and I know from my own experience in journalism that editors, and the industry itself, tell us to keep our own stories to ourselves. At what point did you decide to tell your own story?

**Dionne:** I went to journalism school in the early 2010's. We were trained that our story is not the story, the story that we are telling is someone else's story. In order to appear objective and unbiased—both of which I don't believe are possible—you have to remove yourself from the story. I'm very fortunate that I had to unlearn that pretty quickly when I came out of journalism school. At that time in publishing and journalism, there were very few jobs and I had to establish a career as an essayist before I could come back to journalism as an editor. Sometimes, I had to display my whole life for fifty dollars in order to build up my reputation—when I didn't have the kind of boundaries I do now. It felt very natural to transition into doing this sort of book and for it not to be a knock against my credibility as a journalist but as something that enhances it. I'm able to connect with people, which is the whole point.

**Rumpus:** It also seemed that you were able to find your own story in your reporting. One of the most successful parts of the book was how you dissected how fat bodies are treated across our culture and found your own connections to it.

**Dionne:** Thank you! I didn't just want it to be my individual story, though I know the way that people are coming into this book is through me. I wanted it to be a chorus of voices around what our cultural mistreatment of fat people does to us and what the consequences are. It's so insidious that people don't typically realize they are encountering fat phobia in the way that most people know they're encountering racism or sexism. I wanted people to see the various touch-points where they experience fat phobia.

**Rumpus:** You must have unshakable self-awareness to understand how your day-to-day interactions illuminate the issues that surround you as a Black woman, as someone who is fat,

and as someone who is battling chronic illness. Was there a point where you realized you could see yourself from different angles that would allow you to illustrate these broader issues in your writing?

**Dionne:** I always say that journalism is a skill, but everything else I've learned is context. I was very intentional in graduate school about taking theory, analysis, and history courses that could round out my reporting. Once you can create a timeline of experience, you understand that no one's story is individually unique—it's usually a continuation of a movement or an oppression that exists on a spectrum. My experience of being trained as a critical race-theorist, as a Black feminist theorist, and applying that [training] has definitely enriched my work and allowed me to recognize when I was encountering the system. Most of us just move through the world and aren't able to contextualize it within the realm of broader oppression. But because I studied it, I can spot and contextualize it. Not only does this show people what it is on an interpersonal level, but what it is on a systemic level. When I'm thinking about oppression, I'm usually not thinking about individual people but about a system, and fat phobia is a system.

**Rumpus:** What has it meant for you to incorporate history into your work?

**Dionne:** James Baldwin said (and I'm paraphrasing) that you think your story is unique until you read. You realize that everything you have experienced is what other people have experienced at various extremes before you—and that people will experience after you. I love to spend a lot of time in archives. I'm really excited about the [Freedmen's Bureau Project](#) at the National Museum of African American History and Culture where they digitally archived records of how formerly enslaved people make the transition from slavery to freedom and citizenship. This really allows you to see experiences similar to mine throughout history. Black people are repeatedly misdiagnosed and unbelievably when they say something is wrong.

I wrote an article for *Teen Vogue* in 2017 ["Women's Suffrage Leaders Left Out Black Women"] and it was the first time that I had to do research about the Suffrage Movement. I went beyond what we are taught in school, which is that Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony were at the forefront and the movement took decades and in 1920 it was over. When I immersed myself in archives, I saw that suffrage was not only a longer timeline but that it intersected with all these other movements—abolition, the Civil Rights Movement, and movements in the late 1800s and early 1900s when Black women created their own hospitals, schools, and banks to instill Black people with the resources they needed to succeed. *Lifting as We Climb* put these women in the forefront and encouraged people to do their work as it relates to other movements.

**Rumpus:** Your book was a strong reminder for me that history is evolving and that our interpretations of it change, specifically the conventionally held beliefs involving fatness and chronic illness.

**Dionne:** History is a very contested thing. Look no further than the [1619 Project](#) to find this to be true. It should be very clear to people that the United States went to war to preserve the institution of slavery but it isn't. History is not just a historical fact. It's also about memory and legacy—about people's lives, their ancestors, their lineage. The consequences of a historical moment. We're at a time when people debate whether the Holocaust, the mass genocide of Jewish people, happened. That's contested space. Books like *Lifting as We Climb* really aim to broaden history and pull out stories so that we don't just have a single narrative about suffrage, or, another thing I'm passionate about, the Civil Rights Movement. The way we are taught about the Civil Rights Movement is through this very singular lens of Martin Luther King, Jr. being at the forefront, when there are so many other organizers who were involved in the movement—which really evolved from wanting to end sexual violence against Black women in the 1960s, most of which was committed by law enforcement. That gets flattened in order to create a singular narrative.

**Rumpus:** And history is frequently separated into categories of “right” and “wrong”—these were the good people; these were the bad. To bring it back to *Weightless*, one of the aspects I appreciated was how you depicted the amazing support of your family members, but whom you also portrayed as human beings, who are flawed, and proliferated unhealthy body stereotypes.

**Dionne:** One of the questions I was asked a lot when I was touring for *Lifting as We Climb* was what we should do about Susan B. Anthony, or any of the other white suffragettes who thought that endorsing racism or supporting lynchings was a means to an end. I had to be careful not to apply this century's lens to a movement that was happening two hundred years ago. In this moment, we have the Internet and we connect with people across all sorts of intersections at a rapid speed on social media. The eighteen and nineteen hundreds was a different time with different sensibilities. That's how I think about history and my own family. No one is entirely good or bad, everyone is complex, nuanced, and has different considerations that influence our interactions. My mother's relationship with her body and her dieting journey and understanding and learning of fat phobia is her own. I cannot apply my perspective on her because that's her journey, which affects her interactions with me. I've had to learn, and am still learning, not to take that personally. It's not about me; it's about her. I really wanted to display that in the book and not condemn anyone, including myself. I'm very vulnerable about my missteps, and I have to give myself grace, understanding, and compassion because I'm unlearning, like everyone else.

**Rumpus:** I really appreciated your admission of watching and being captivated by the TLC show *My 600-lb Life*, and how this disclosure might cause you to be cancelled.

**Dionne:** People have this moral high ground that I believe is quicksand. The way we present ourselves, particularly in public on social media, is that we have it all together: We don't do anything wrong because we are knowledgeable enough, and we have read enough and done enough work. We don't participate in anything that could be considered problematic. That's just untrue. I can't say that for every person, but I can say that for myself and be honest about where I fall short and hope that it gives people permission to be honest with themselves, even if not

publicly, about the places they fall short. It would not be honest for me to say I have written this particular book and yet pretend as if I'm not still unlearning fat phobia too.

**Rumpus:** Now that you have gone through the process of writing this book, what are your hopes for it?

**Dionne:** I am grateful that my book can exist because other fat people wrote books about fatness. I hope that publishing this book opens a door for other fat people to write about *their* experience. Storytelling is essential to organizing and movement building. People have to feel like they can relate and understand, and that is a controversial thing sometimes, to organize around an issue. My dream is that no one can ever say, 'I've never encountered a fat person before' because they are able to read these books, step into these experiences, have empathy for us, and join a movement to end fat phobia.

**Rumpus:** What do you think are the key elements a writer should consider when writing a book like this one?

**Dionne:** In terms of writing this sort of book, I think authors have to be willing to mine really traumatic experiences and figure out whether it's worth sharing those experiences. And if there are moments in their lives that create a cohesive and complete narrative, are [they] willing to sit down and write it? That does require honesty and vulnerability. To be honest, it also involves a lot of therapy. I highly recommend being in therapy when writing a book like this, so you can have mental and emotional support. Also, being willing to go deep, peel back the layers of the onion, put your hand in that onion and pull out the experiences, tears and all, to see if there's something there. That requires courage and a willingness to piss some people off, to be the villain, the person who injects humanity into an experience that people have divorced themselves from or pretend isn't happening. That's not an easy place to be in, but I think it's necessary.

**Rumpus:** How do you prepare yourself for the emotions that arise when you start to peel back those experiences?

**Dionne:** I don't ever do anything from a place of fear—which is an odd place for me to be in because I have anxiety—but I have to do it because that's where growth happens. If you're comfortable, you're not growing. I'm willing to step into places of discomfort, and if there's backlash, I deal with that discomfort as it comes. What I held in the back of my mind when I was writing this book was that I hoped people would approach it with the good will that I put into it. If that doesn't happen, I'll deal with that as it comes, but it can't stop me from writing this book. It was a necessity for me to write. Even if no one ever reads it, I needed to write it.

**Rumpus:** What's next for you?

**Dionne:** I'm probably going to go back to the middle-grade space and do another nonfiction book. I also want to go younger and do a children's book. There aren't a lot of stories about fat children. I think it's important to go even younger than middle-grade, like preschool, kindergarten, first and second grade. I want to offer them protagonists they can root for.

After those two books, I'll probably come back to adult spaces. What I care most about right now, where my brain is, is writing about heart failure. My brother now also has heart failure; he's thirty-seven. I'm thinking about genetics and environment and the stress that Black people experience and what it does to our bodies over time. I don't know what shape that will take exactly, whether it's an essay collection or a reported book. The statistic is that one in two Black people will develop heart disease in their lifetime, and it's happening to younger Black people, particularly women. And what do we do about that?