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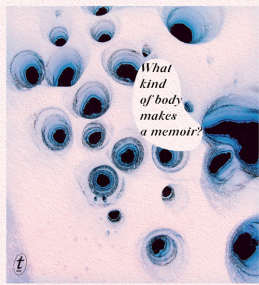
REVIEW: ALIX BEESTON ON ELLENA SAVAGE

Fingers Stained with Fruit and Ink

Menu

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Blueberries



Ellena Savage

Blueberries

by Ellena Savage

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Eat one blueberry and you'll eat them all. In Robert McCloskey's *Blueberries for Sal*, an award-winning illustrated children's book published in 1948, plucky Sal sets out with her mother to pick fruit on Blueberry Hill. 'We will take our berries home and can them,' her mother says. 'Then we will have food for the winter.' Sal can't help herself. The blueberries barely hit the bottom of her tin pail – '*kuplink, kuplank, kuplunk!*' – before they're scooped into her mouth, a cheeky smile on her lips.

In Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), Willy Wonka forbids Miss Violet Beauregarde from chewing his magic gum, a new and untested invention. But she, a self-proclaimed chewing-gum champion, grabs a stick and shoves it into her mouth. The gum contains a three-course dinner, with blueberry pie for dessert, and it's in this final course that things go wrong. From nose to cheeks, hands to arms and legs, a 'brilliant, purplish-blue, the colour of blueberry juice' spreads like a dye over Violet's skin and hair. 'Violet, you're turning violet, Violet!' shrieks her mother, as her daughter becomes 'an enormous round blue ball – a gigantic blueberry, in fact – and all that remained of Violet Beauregarde herself was a tiny pair of legs and a tiny pair of arms sticking out of the great round fruit and little head on top'. In the 1971 film adaptation, *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*, Violet's red belt makes a satisfying *pop* as it gives under the pressure of her expanding stomach. Ballooning with berry juice, consumed by that which she consumes, she's rolled off by the Oompa Loompas as they sing their smug, moralising song: 'It's repulsive, revolting, and wrong, chewing all day long – the way that a cow does!'

Violet, that rude little cow! So disdainful, in her marathon mastication, of the manners and prohibitions of adults, with the perfectly devastating contempt of an almost-teenaged girl. And so unseemly in her bald-faced competitiveness, her elbow-jostling self-interest.

By design – Dahl's design, his un-prim but still reactionary morality tale – the prideful and indecorous Violet is far less likeable than the cheerful Sal. Yet both of these girls are rebellious blueberry-eaters. They refuse to defer to the adults or to delay the gratification of their desires. Blueberries, in these stories, are associated with young women's illicit acts of consumption, illicit in both timing and excess. The girls eat when they shouldn't and they eat too much. Once they start, in different ways, they can't stop.

Ellena Savage doesn't mention Sal or Violet in her debut collection, *Blueberries*. Yet her blueberries, too, are the preferred snack of voracious girls and women. Recalling in the title essay a period spent at a writers' workshop in the United States, Savage writes,

I was in America at a very expensive liberal arts college... trying to punch words on my two-hundred-dollar laptop that would turn 'I went to a very expensive writers' workshop and it wasn't perfect' into a salient political argument about the friction of class and gender and race against the surface of art in real-world institutions, and I was eating blueberries and I was naked but for my black silk robe, and I was disappointed not for the first time that 'excellence' was turning out to be mediocrity dressed up in money and maybe masculinity too.

The expensive liberal arts college, the blueberries, and the black silk robe are mentioned repeatedly in the essay. They materialise the ethical offenses and entanglements of wealth in contemporary life. The silk against the skin and the blueberries in the mouth – these are points of contact where privilege presses on or penetrates the body, and this is why Savage emphasises their immoderate, sensuous pleasures. 'I was wrapped in my black silk robe sucking blueberry juice from my fingers, relishing the colour of it inky and regal, pure

decadence', she writes; or again, 'I was wrapped in my black silk robe pushing velvet blueberry skin against the roof of my mouth, a fleshy eruption'.

The juice of a fruit only briefly in season in Australia, an uncommon treat for Savage, sucked from her fingers, exploding against her tongue. The sexual innuendo feeds the sense of limits being breached, of pleasures guilty, furtive, and delicious: the blueberry as the thing women shouldn't eat but do, one and two and three and four: moreish and succulent, pearly and plump, a bewitching midnight blue. As Maggie Nelson points out in her 2009 book *Bluets*, 'There is so little blue food in nature – in fact blue in the wild tends to mark food to avoid (mold, poisonous berries) – that cautionary advisers generally recommend against blue light, blue paint, and blue plates when and where serving food.' So, blueberries as poison apples, Eve's temptation in miniature. There's danger in that squat plastic carton, and knowledge in the bargain – whether or not you put up for the organic option.

Blueberries, for Savage, bring other lessons. Entering the body, they carry with them the wider flows and currents in which the body is already submerged: of late capitalism, of colonialism, of sexism and racism and classism. What erupts, fleshily, are the gendered ideologies that define women's desires – sexual or artistic or otherwise – as wrong. Also in the mix are the seductions of class aspiration; the hypocrisies of white, liberal institutions; and the peril of neoliberal self-optimisation. These are the conditions under which a twenty-something Australian woman finds herself at a too-expensive writer's workshop at a too-rich university in the United States, eating blueberries and unable to write anything other than an essay which is, Savage concludes, 'only ever about articulating how best to go about reproducing – without pay, with minimal pay – the cultural capital that is exchanged between wealthy women and men' – in spite of her attempts in lively, tenacious, dog-with-a-bone prose to get out from under the structures she describes.

Savage's treatment of the blueberries in 'Blueberries' is emblematic of her strategy across the essays collected here, diverse though they are in form. This is a book in which body meets world and finds, inevitably, that world has already met body; in which an individual's experiences dilate to the systems that first formed them. *Dilate*: to make larger or more open, like eyes wide with horror, like a twelve-year-old girl bloated blue; but also to speak or write at length, to keep at it until you're blue in the face. Violet Beauregarde, with her grasping entitlement and her studied disinterest in the cares or needs of those around her, is hardly the patron saint of *Blueberries*. Savage is sharp in her critique of the cultures and institutions of 'aggressive accumulation' and 'expansion,' and she wants to recapture the moral high ground from the 'elites who eat organic blueberries' (*chew chew chew*) on behalf of 'the people whose labour creates the organic-blueberry wealth'. Even so, Violet's radically distended body works as a figure for the central conceit of Savage's essays, which is to register the world's infiltration of and impact on the individual, how it pulls our bodies out of shape, deforming them around its routines, logics, and atrocities.

Savage's is an extended exercise, in other words, in finding a context for herself, the fruit gathered on her lap, the robe that cloaks her bare shoulders, the many different rooms and

units and houses that shelter her over years of (somewhat) 'elective insecurity'. As we read in 'Allen Ginsberg,' an essay-cum-poem in the style of the American poet,

The truth is I am averse to narratives of pure romance in the way that I am averse to the avant-garde. In the sense that I am averse to that which is removed from its context. Poetry is often this. So is critical theory. Sorry.

Romance and the avant-garde are no purer, no less contaminated, than are blueberries in their 'pure decadence': they're nothing without context. 'We're rats walking on tightropes we never thought existed,' Kathy Acker writes in her correspondence with McKenzie Wark, a line Savage cites later in the book. In *Blueberries*, Savage seeks to discern the tightropes she treads, to trace the toxins in the berries she puts, one after the other, into her mouth.

Menu Unsurprisingly, given that Savage's experiences provide the book's points of departure, of dilation, *Blueberries* evokes most powerfully the pressures and forms of complicity that govern the lives of young white women in the patriarchal, neocolonial, neoliberal place called Australia. The question of memory as it relates to trauma – as it is bullet-holed by trauma, shot through with absences and uncertainties – defines Savage's experience of sexual assault as a backpacking eighteen-year-old in Lisbon, an event that is narrated in diaristic, prevaricating fragments in the opening essay, 'Yellow City,' and that casts a shadow over the rest of the book. But other forms of amnesia, deliberate ones, are for Savage essential to Australian life: the refusal to mark and mourn 'the persistent all-encompassing mundane treachery of rape' as we do 'every tragedy, every genocide'; and the disavowed fact of colonial invasion, the colossal, founding violence of theft, pillage, and more rape that Savage sees repressed and returned in the banal obsession with property ownership in contemporary Australian culture. 'Some people call the whole of Australia a Crime Scene,' Savage writes, 'but this Crime Scene isn't glamorous or attractive, because... we're all, settlers at least, a little bit implicated in it.' Yes: if the nation's a crime scene it's not one settler Australians gather around nervy and gawking, straining at the police tape for a better view of the blood and debris. We're trampling one another in our rush to flee the scene, to get on with, you know, renovating our bathrooms.

Savage wrenches us back, yanking us, *ow*, by the arm. *Just look*, she says. The ground is a grave, the medium-density apartment block is a converted prison (complete with 'wine cellars *ha-ha*'), the structures are unsound, barely holding. All the walls of this shitty rental, and the next one too, are swamped with mould (more inky stains). In two essays, 'Satellite' and

'Houses,' Savage riffs on her experience moving from one temporary apartment to another over a decade or so. Partly she moves because she has to, such are the 'indignities' of the long-term renter and gig-economy worker, a state of perpetual instability Fiona Wright has described in her essay 'Perhaps this one will be my last sharehouse'. More expansively – and Savage's motto might as well be *always expand* – she feels a rootlessness specific to those of us who can't quite call Australia home but who have nowhere else to go, those whose

roots have dug in deep like those of the serrated tussock, which is an introduced grass species that thrives everywhere by choking its competitors, that avoids detection by passing for a native species, and this laboured metaphor is trying to say something about colonial figures like me who'd really like to not make things worse than they are, but who by simply accepting the yellow blotted sun through the pane of glass, by accepting the home built atop spirits silent and angry, have roots that are caught in the seams of rotten foundations.

Reading this – well, I felt too seen, as they say on social media. Savage's long, just-balanced sentence, subordinate clause chased by subordinate clause, captures the combination of vague, generalised remorse and compliant inertia of the born-colonial: white people like me, the daughter of thieves, flaunting the family's crimes under the terrible blaze of the Australian sun.

Menu These are the best moments in *Blueberries*: when Savage's intensely critical gaze is turned to her own life and to those whose lives, like mine, are set in some of the same grooves. Yet there are other moments – sometimes in the very same essay or even paragraph – when she comes close to co-opting the lives of others, making them refer too quickly to her experience or minimising their differences in kind and scale. The passage about the 'rotten foundations' of Australian society ends in this way: 'I know this fantasy will be demolished someday and the stories trapped beneath it will finally go free, but by then there'll be no one there to listen, and this sadness is worse than anything.' I was taken aback by this line. Whose sadness is she referring to – her own? And is this sadness over a projected failure to recover Indigenous Australians' stories really 'worse than anything'? I don't doubt that Savage would answer an emphatic *no* to this last question. But I felt troubled by the implication, intentional or not, that the sadness of 'knowing' might be worse than the thing that is known, the violent histories that made these stories and interred them, as Savage says, under colonial Australia's subpar building projects.

I raise this because it speaks to a larger tension in these essays – a rather colonial one, it occurs to me now – between what Savage can lay claim to and what she cannot. In 'The Museum of Rape,' Savage describes the Islamic concept of God's unity, *tawhid*, before moving into a meditation of her own intimate connection to the world, material and immaterial (although ultimately she wants the religious idea without the religion). 'The worst thing in the world is when an Anglophone drags another people's language into their burgeoning awareness of the limits of ontology,' she admits. But when she first learned about *tawhid*, 'It

described everything I felt to be true...but which I never had a name for. And what has that got to do with a materially located method of worship’.

I shouldn't claim this but I'm claiming it anyway – and also, on second thought, I actually think I can claim it. Savage makes a similar set of moves in ‘Houses,’ when, passing by an overgrown Jewish cemetery in Warsaw, she’s inspired to make an outrageous connection between her experience of national and spiritual rootlessness and the generations-long travesty of Jewish exile and persecution: ‘[T]he trembling knowledge that this material world could never deliver a stable sense of real belonging,’ for Jewish people, ‘is true, it is material,’ she writes. ‘But its truth says something to me too.’ Savage wonders whether she, with her ‘inheritance’ of rationalist Western scepticism, is ‘allowed even imaginary access to this spirit world’. Nevertheless, she goes on to compare her own situation to that of the suffering Jews: ‘Unlike exiles of the recent past, who, without a home had at least a tradition, faith, a stable spiritual home to dwell in, I am instead destined to find home only in mortar and rootlessness.’ It’s hard to read this and not be reminded of Sylvia Plath’s declaration, ‘I think I may be a Jew,’ in the 1962 poem ‘Daddy’.

‘Houses’ ends with an appeal against Australian amnesia, resolving in Savage’s recognition that in fact she *does* have a history that must be honoured, ghosts whose whisperings must be heeded. ‘I don’t have to romanticise an ontology I have no access to (say, early Jewish spiritualism) in order to witness the nonmaterial world.’ She’s right; she doesn’t have to. Which makes it unclear to me why she chooses to do so, if only briefly and while wringing her hands. These oscillations, the structure of avowal–disavowal–avowal, seem to stand in for more critical thought, which might have interrogated the reasons why it’s easy for white people to take on others’ experiences or to miscalculate the gravity of their problems – even when they know the risks of doing so, as Savage certainly does.

‘Writing in the first person is writing that admits that experience is always truncated,’ Savage notes near the end of *Blueberries*. ‘That it is not possible, not honest, to pretend otherwise.’ Writing in the first person can admit the limits of perspective, sure, but it can also be prone to extreme dilations: the eye/I that takes in everyone, turning the world into a mirror-ball, a vast reflective surface.

I hesitate in charging *Blueberries* with solipsism, since I know how often personal essays – and women’s writing more generally – are dismissed in just this way. And there’s a deep thoughtfulness and insight contained in this volume; some beautiful writing, too. Yet I hear a serious undertone in Savage’s facetious references to herself, a couple of times in the book, as a ‘saint’. At the beginning of ‘Allen Ginsberg,’ Savage mentions that she once almost bought the poet’s *The Fall of America* (1972), a book that she imagines might help her to ‘learntowritepoetry’. Ginsberg’s book marks his refusal of what he calls the ‘old means of humanistic storytelling’ as he contemplates the state of the United States and the state of his own life; it also contains his ‘Indian Journals,’ in which he writes, ‘I wanted to be a saint. But suffer for what? Illusions?’ Ginsberg’s project sits with Savage’s in *Blueberries*, which toggles, with formal inventiveness, between the individual and the nation, the taste of the blueberries

and the force of wider social and political structures. And Savage wants to be a saint, maybe, or perhaps she wants to be a prophet, another kind of suffering servant, one through whose body things – epiphanies, but also experiences, feelings, systems – flow. But not everything can belong in one body; not everything can emerge from it.

Blueberries isn't exactly cheery. '[I]n general I am not a "happy" person,' Savage confesses on page 156, a revelation that will surprise no reader who's made it that far. Earlier, page 82: 'I am one of those people who is always baulking at injustice; I can't look at a rat without thinking about how sick humanity is.' There's an echo here from Anne Boyer's 2015 work of prose poetry, *Garments Against Women*, in which Boyer writes, 'I am the dog who can never be happy because I am imagining the unhappiness of other dogs.' Savage cites Boyer's work, and there are a number of resonances between *Blueberries* and *Garments Against Women*, especially when it comes to their shared commitment to articulating the lived conditions of women's creative labour, their writing and not writing, using language that is dexterous and witty in shape and diction, intimate and melancholy in tone.

In his 1810 *Theory of Colours*, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe observed,

As yellow is always accompanied with light, so it may be said that blue still brings a principle of darkness with it. ... As a hue it is powerful – but it is on the negative side, and in its highest purity is, as it were, a stimulating negation. ... [A]s we readily follow an agreeable object that flies from us, so we love to contemplate blue – not because it advances to us, but because it draws us after it.

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Gloomy like blue, *Blueberries* also has an uneasy energy that reminds me of Goethe's notion of the colour's stimulating negation, its negative pull. Savage's thought is always turning corners, or knotting about itself, or rushing forward as if she's racing us to the finish line – only to collapse, exhausted, like a runner who's peaked too soon. What I mean is that the writing draws us in and carries us along but then, over and again, possibilities are foreclosed, fatalism rules, as if all the momentum built up by its formal daring and stylish idiosyncrasy just...fails. 'The older I get, the less doomed I feel,' Savage writes in one of the bullet points that comprise 'Turning Thirty'. 'I'm pleased about that. Though this fix is a trick.' Fair enough: I can't argue with the cold fact of human mortality, and my thirties aren't advanced enough that I don't remember the jittery, sort-of-real-and-sort-of-silly fear that accompanied their dawn. And, after all, in a world where all the foundations are rotten, it's fitting that every sentence has a knife in its back.

At some points, however, *Blueberries* seemed to me overly invested in staging its own critical failure and, in the process, the droll knowingness of its author. Every fix is a trick, every door is a trap, and it's kind of tiring, much like the 'protracted arguments' between a couple that Savage describes in 'Holidays with Men,' arguments 'which are, perhaps, designed to bring the couple closer together by testing the limits of their love, but are in fact simply

exhausting'. Savage adopts a posture similar to that identified by Merve Emre in the work of personal essayists such as Durga Chew-Bose and Jia Tolentino, whereby the failures of language purport to ensure 'the author's success as a sensitive ethical thinker.' Reading Tolentino's much-hyped collection *Trick Mirror* last year, I was frustrated by her insistence on her shortcomings and on the endless revolutions of her claims. '[W]hatever conclusions I might reach about myself, my life and my environment,' Tolentino maintains, 'are just as likely to be diametrically wrong as they are to be right'. (This is one aspect of Tolentino's work criticized, ruthlessly, in Lauren Oyler's review of the book.) The subtitle to the UK edition of *Blueberries, Essays Concerning Understanding*, is itself a warped mirror of Tolentino's subtitle, *Reflections on Self-Delusion*. But in spite of Savage's apparent emphasis on understanding over delusion – knowing over not-knowing – she shares with Tolentino a tendency toward demonstrative equivocation and self-deprecation that sits awkwardly against the intelligence of the writing.

So much of the humour of *Blueberries* – and it is a funny book – is at Savage's expense. She's scornful of nothing and no one so much, perhaps, as her younger self. In the introductory essay, 'Yellow City,' Savage quotes an email she wrote as an eighteen-year-old to her brother, a careful if clumsy fiction composed in the wake of her sexual assault: 'Apart from all that, I'm fine and dandy'. The elder Savage offers a savage retort: 'I mean. Who speaks like that?' 'Yellow City' reflects Savage's disbelief at how she once minimised this traumatic experience; by incorporating many different, interjecting voices into the essay, she connects her own narrative act to the competitions over and refusals of women's testimony of sexual violence in public and private life. But her rhetorical question – 'Who speaks like that?' – underscores by repeating, brutally, this gesture of dismissal. Not only that, but she castigates her younger self specifically for how she wrote of her experience, the form of her testimony. This punch line, this self-inflicted gut punch – it leaves a bad taste in my mouth, tinny like blood.

The background drama of *Blueberries* is, indeed, Savage's agonised assumption of the writerly *I*. The masculine and middle-class figure of the Author (capital A) is at issue in 'Blueberries,' but it's also thematised in the use of the second person in other essays ('Yellow City,' 'Portrait of the Writer as Worker'). As in other recent memoirs such as Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House* and Kiese Laymon's *Heavy: An American Memoir* (as well as a number of new metafictional works recently discussed by Maggie Doherty in *The Yale Review*), the second person notates traumatic disassociation – the wrenching experience of what Savage calls a 'fragmented life,' a subjectivity split between trauma's before and after – while serving at once as a technique for making the reader feel with the writer, to step into her or his place. Often, though, the second person enables Savage to accuse herself from a vantage. *Sentimental. Desperate. Undisciplined. Unserious*. Her *you*s hail from an offstage, an elsewhere, which locates her uncertainty about her right to write, and specifically to write memoir.

If Savage's anxiety over her role as writer doesn't quite prevent her from subsuming, sometimes too hastily, other people's stories, it still holds her back. That this is an anxiety felt in special ways by young women is clear from 'Notes to Unlived Time,' in which Savage

remembers a time when she wanted to ‘impress’ a new boyfriend, ‘and the way to do that was by keeping my mouth shut’. When we reach the final essay in the collection, ‘Antimemoir, as in, Fuck You (as in, Fuck Me)’ – the title sums up the dynamic pretty well – she’s still asking herself and us, ‘But was my life a complete one, with a story to tell? Was I a serious enough person to call my work *autotheory*? (No.) Should anyone care about the small line of vision that I am entitled to narrate?’

These questions find their master in the text printed over the illustration of blueberries on the cover of the Australian edition: ‘What kind of body makes a memoir?’ By the time this question is posed within the book, as part of its concluding essay, it’s already been asked and answered. It’s like – this body does! Yours! You’re doing it now! Savage spends the entire collection telling us she’s playing at being an intellectual – that it’s a ruse, yet another trick – and all the while the book provides an object lesson in the many ways that’s simply not true. The *un*-small line of her vision, the intricacy of her argumentation, the richness of her sources, the cultivation of her contradictory style, pitched between brashness and eloquence, and the pleasures of her experimentation: *Blueberries* testifies against its author.

Which is to say that it testifies in her defense. When, in ‘Notes to Unlived Time,’ Savage finds herself prompted to make a claim for the value of creative writing during a seminar she’s teaching on its craft, she doesn’t ‘want to be the one to stand at the head of a classroom and argue that what the world needs right now is another book-object, made with seriousness and care, printed on dead trees and transported with fossil fuels.’ But, she realises, ‘every action contains an argument. My standing in the classroom is itself an argument.’ Likewise, *Blueberries* makes its own case.

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And then the harsh glare of self-recrimination gives way to another kind of light. ‘*Why write, when there is so much horror going on in the world?*’ Savage’s answer:

I think: what has horror got to do with writing or not writing? I think: there is sweetness in the world, too, and scatological humour. There is time in the day. Enough time, maybe, for everything. I think, my inner curmudgeon revealing herself: if there is time for binge drinking and spin class and pets, there is time enough for writing.

Sweetness like a berry, a bit acidic. Refreshing. A relief.

Blueberries ends, with ‘Antimemoir,’ in a metatextual act of return, as Savage describes herself beginning to write the proposal that will translate to the book-object in my hands. Still there’s self-denigration, as she judges herself on the fake-grinning confidence trick of the book prospectus (a horrible genre to write in, to be sure):

Hey, said the swinging, smiling, author me of the book proposal. You can bet on me to write a thought-provoking commercially successful essay collection!

– Inwardly, of course, my shame.

– Dickhead.

But the book closes by expanding outwards, projecting forward. Its evocative final line: ‘The she of what next: action.’ Here is the forward-orientation of the act of writing, its irrepressible bid for the future; and also its bid for contact, the more-or-less silent communion of reading, thinking together, working things through. *Action*: I think of the dark blue pen Robert McCloskey used to make his line drawings of little Sal and her beloved blueberries, all in one clever, consistent hue. I picture Ellena Savage’s fingers stained again: not with juice now but with ink, a leaky blue biro maybe. *The she of what next*: new fruits, more writing.

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