

# PRETTY BITCHES



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ON BEING CALLED CRAZY, ANGRY, BOSSY,  
FRUMPY, FEISTY, AND ALL THE OTHER WORDS  
THAT ARE USED TO UNDERMINE WOMEN

EDITED BY LIZZIE SKURNICK  
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY REBECCA TRAISTER



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*For my teacher Lynne Vardaman,  
who told me to be louder*



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# PREFACE

LIZZIE SKURNICK

*A bitch is a female dog.*

That was the response you gave to “bitch” in my middle school. Though I never got to use it, because no one called me a bitch. They said things like, “Don’t argue with Liz!” or “She’s pretty, but . . .” or “You’re really intimidating.” They said, “It’s okay that my top is bigger, because your bottom is bigger,” or “I never think of you as black,” or “You have a Jewish nose,” or “Flab!” Teachers told me, “Let someone else answer,” and friends assured me, “You’ll get into Yale because you’re black.” People said, “I wish I were as thin as you,” or “You’re twice as big as she is.” They said, “Liz will be so pretty when she grows up, with her looks and her figure,” and “Liz is *ugly*.”

All of which is to say, they said—as we all did—numerous contradictory things, some compliments, some torments, many subject to opinion, many sheer sexism or racism. But none of it mattered because the world changed, we grew up, and we turned

out to agree, or disagree, or laugh about them in therapy, or never think of them at all.

Or did we?

When the term *mansplaining* was invented, I was confused. No one ever mansplained to me—did they? *Manspreading*, on the other hand, I understood. Every day on the subway, I smashed down between two men whose thighs were taking up three seats, terrified of being yelled at, doing it anyway. When #MeToo started, I wrote down all the times I had actually been sexually harassed. Two strangers had seriously attempted to rape me, I realized. Bosses had massaged my shoulders—and fired me when I told them to stop. I had moved after a Con Ed man exposed himself and masturbated in my living room, then claimed I had met him the night before at a club. I had physically hidden from men—men hitting on me, following me, even chasing me. Men had snidely said, “Oh, *girl’s* books” when I talked about my work in young adult literature. Not one but two boys routinely tackled me after I made a touchdown—in touch football. And yes, when my boss opined, “There are no real women writers,” that was mansplaining. I had just been tuning it out.

There was something so freeing about this new language, a language invented to describe women’s experiences we had never had words for. Jezebel’s brilliant construction: “Crap Emails from a Dude.” That was the term for those lengthy self-justifying, self-pitying, oddly formal emails you got after a breakup! #YesAllWomen—that was what you said when men said not all men were sexual predators! Those men commenting on my articles who said I needed to be taken out in a car and fucked—that wasn’t because I was a bad writer. That was called *toxic masculinity*. The colleague who repeatedly harassed and accosted me in

the halls after I declined coffee? I was not “unprofessional” for saying no. That was *workplace harassment*.

All this time, I had thought I was being a good feminist, pushing myself, not letting men take advantage of me or drag me down. But it was now clear I was staggering under a huge load of guilt, shame, and dread. All of these experiences: I had thought they were something I could have prevented or had brought on—that they were my fault. But now I had words for all of them.

And it *wasn't*.

When Hillary lost, buried in an avalanche of *flawed* and *shrill* and *ambitious*, I started to think back on those small words again.

How I was *loud*, or *argumentative*, or *bossy*, or *demanding*. How I was *tiny*, or *stocky*, or *confused*, or *sort of stupid*. How I was *too nice*, a *huge bitch*, kind of *nasty*. How I was *intense*. I was *psycho*. I was *irrational*. I was *lazy*. I was *dramatic*. I was so, so *smart*.

I had always felt words like *loud* or *crazy* were mere pinpricks, irritants you brushed off on your way to someplace bigger. But these small words, I was starting to realize, had had real consequences, in my life and in others'.

A single mom at forty, I found myself particularly outraged by the financial cost. I had lost a two-thirds 401(k) match when I was fired from the pervy boss. (“Lazy.”) It had cost me \$1,200 to move after the Con Ed masturbator. (“Slut.”) I had lost access to cheap health care from Mr. Unprofessional. (A million dollars.) This was just the short list. Those dollars were a down payment on a house, a gymnastics class for my son, taxes. Those people who had mansplained, shut me down, shut me up, had not only called me names. They had hit me in the wallet. Which took away my power.

And I was one of the lucky ones.

I began to realize these words weren't pinpricks. They weren't the punishment. They were the justification *for* the punishment: the jobs we lost, the promotions, the houses, the money, our respect, our bodies, our voices. Because, yes, it wasn't 1952. You could no longer outright say you weren't giving someone the position because she was a woman. But what if she was shrill? Ambitious? Difficult?

As women, our problem wasn't that we needed to be more forceful, more self-assured, to make our way in the herd of confident, self-assured men currently ruling the world. It was that when we spoke up, they told us to sit down. And shut the fuck up.

Our voices were hurting their ears.

The day I sold this book, a man called me a yappy bitch. He was not a stranger. He was a fellow dad, a member of the PTA, a man I'd done after-school programs with, whom I always waved to on the street.

I was at the park with this fellow dad and my friend, and he wanted to talk to us about race. It was actually a tedious argument, the one black people have to have about race with white people all the time. (Guess what: he didn't see it!) But my friend and I both had biracial kids. I was biracial myself. He was a fellow dad. He did a lot for the school. We could have the talk.

As we watched our children run up and down the slide—my friend's son and mine, kinky haired and many hued, and his daughter, like him, a redhead with milk-white skin—I braced myself.

"It's talking about race that causes racism," he began.

I was polite during the "I don't check race on the sheets!" part and even the "It's racist for you to call me a white man" section.

But when he said that the only difference between him and black people was that he burned more easily in the sun, I spoke up.

“Actually, black people have to be a lot more careful about the sun, because it’s not as visible when the burn is happening,” I said. My friend nodded.

His face clouded. “But black people have more melanin,” he explained to the two ladies with the mixed-race children.

“We’re all aware of that,” I said, because friends help friends stop mansplaining. “But black skin is actually quite a bit more sensitive than white skin. It can scar and keloid more easily. It was a big problem when dermatologists didn’t know. And they didn’t know because they didn’t care.” I paused. “Your not marking ‘white’ doesn’t really do anything about that.”

Fellow Dad had removed his iPhone from his case to clean it with his keys. As he scraped at the edges, his face reddened, and his hands began to shake.

“You’re quite a yapper, aren’t you?” he said.

My friend and I looked at each other and laughed. We had been containing ourselves, but it was enough. “You do know you’re not supposed to call women *yappy*, right?” I said.

“I mean, you’re kind of a bitch,” he said, scraping his keys across the case faster.

I knew he wouldn’t hit me, but suddenly I could feel how much he wanted to. I tried to think what I would do if he did. Duck? Call the police? Contact the PTA?

But before I needed to do any of that, he called his daughter. He stalked off the playground without saying goodbye. But I didn’t feel relief. I felt terror about seeing him at the next PTA meeting.

“I wasn’t sure what I was going to do if he hit you!” my friend said.

“I know!” I said. “And we were being *nice*.”

I did not, on the playground, use that opportunity to say, “A bitch is a female dog.” (Or “A dog is yappy,” for that matter.) But that day, I realized what the actual problem was. I *am* yappy, of course. I can (sometimes with joy!) be a bitch. But on that playground, I was being neither. I was trying to be polite. I was trying to be a friend. We were just having an argument.

But I was winning.

# INTRODUCTION

REBECCA TRAISTER

**Oh my god, my mom** was talking about fucking and I wanted to melt into the seat of the car, on an afternoon trip to the dentist during which my brother and I—probably then about ten and thirteen—had made the grave error of getting into an argument in which one of us had, experimentally, probably humorously, told the other “Fuck you” within her hearing.

My mother had not reacted with anger—there was a high tolerance for profanity in our home—but rather with something far, far worse: sadness. Our use of *fuck* as an expression of animus, even in jest, had led her down some sort of private rabbit hole, and she was meditating wistfully about the word’s origins.

“It means *sex*,” she was telling us as we suffered horribly, me in the front seat and Aaron in the back. “And you know, that should be a *good* thing, a *warm* thing; it can be a *loving* thing. In fact, fucking should be about people who like each other or want to be with each other, not about hating each other or expressing

a desire to hurt each other.” We both stared straight ahead, unmoving, waiting for it to end.

“It’s too bad, because I used to love the word *fuck*; it was a fun and intimate word,” she went on, and my barely teenaged brain may or may not have briefly clocked that my mother was saying that the word *fuck* had once been appealingly dirty, before seizing in horror and moving on. “But now I mostly hear it as an aggressive word, a mean word, a word that suggests that the act of fucking itself is mean and aggressive and often *particularly* aggressive toward women . . . It’s really a shame.”

It was a wretched car ride.

But three decades later, decades I spent as a woman who cares deeply about language and its uses and abuses, a woman who had been used and abused by some of the words she loves best, I now understand my mother’s dejection better. It’s not that I feel that way about *fuck*, a word with which I joyously oversalt my expressions of frustration and aggression, even as I also enjoy it as dirty and intimate.

But more broadly, I understand how she feels about the ease with which so many beautiful words, loamy with meaning and nuance—some sharp and specific, some pliable—have been ruined, made flaccid and lackluster by the simple, monotonous constancy of bias. Their negative implications have become ordinary, part of the daily landscape of racism, sexism, diminution, that undergird not only our politics and our popular culture but the world in which we live our lives, and in which the relentlessness of diminishment and insult can take fluid and descriptive elements of our lexicon and turn them mean and cramped.

Reading the essays that follow makes me think of all the words I mourn. Words I loved fiercely and had to abandon, and

those I never even managed to appreciate on their own before absorbing the ways they'd become tools of containment or degradation. Some that I have relied on as sturdy and useful, some gendered and some unsexed—*ambitious, mature, lucky, victim, disciplined, intimidating, exotic, loud, zaftig, nurturing, aloof, crazy*—I have come to understand as undermining. Here are the ordinaries, the ones I never thought twice about: *mom, funny, small, loud, effortless*. And then of course there were the pre-poisoned ones I knew never (or rarely) to touch: *princess, ugly, pretty, bossy, ambitious*.

In my case, and perhaps ironically, the words I am saddest about are the bad ones. The curse words. The slurs: *cunt, bitch, harpy, virago, termagant*.

Yes, I love *cunt*: crisp and vicious, acidic and eviscerating when used (oh so rarely, saved up for when it is truly earned) about a woman and more regularly about men, when describing a kind of tight meanness that gets its negativity from its association with denigrated female sexuality, yes, but which so very often applies to men who behave like, well, cunts. I try not to use it anymore about women—because it has become so violent and cheap, not sharp and damning—or about men, because its power seems to me increasingly to stem from the wearisome assertion that the worst thing you can say about a man is that he is, somehow, female.

And *harpy*! Oh, how I used to love the word *harpy*, evocative and mythical and old, such a useful way to describe a particular, specific kind of person, a malevolent bird of prey with a woman's face. Yes! There are people who are like that, very specifically like that, and how fine to have a word to say so.

I like these words in part because in a perfect world, deploying them would mean, necessarily, taking responsibility for

having used them, and I like taking the use of language seriously. I like thinking about words and treating them as powerful, direct conveyances of meaning, including when what you intend to convey is that a person—sometimes a woman—is bad. Or cruel. Or difficult. Because sometimes women, who are people, are bad and cruel and difficult.

But no, now it is simply a word to describe a woman who threatens you—by talking, or competing, or being ambitious, or existing when you would prefer she didn't. And it is boring and mean and sexist and watery and no longer fun and powerful and descriptive and pointed, not just for those of us who want to call people harpies, but for the harpies themselves!

Someone recently pointed out to me how remarkable it was that some words used to describe furious or threatening women assume their passion and aggression are forces so strong that they overtake them, transforming them into literal monsters—along with *harpy*, there are *virago*, *termagant*—rendering them inhuman. This is endlessly interesting, but now I think of how using words to dehumanize women isn't really that surprising or dramatic; it reflects only that it is Wednesday or Monday, in April or January, in Ashtabula or Shanghai.

I have a particular fondness, one that often has seemed at odds with the feminism that guides so much of my work and thinking, for words that are especially negative about femininity—not just the above, but *bitch* and *pussy* and *slag* and *whinge* and *hysteria* and *scold*—words that derived their nasty implications from their very associations with femininity. I find their origins fascinating, telling, and, every so often, useful.

Because of course it's not just the big bad words that derive from vaginas or patriarchal mythologies, but also the words that

are the ordinary conveyors of elucidating information about people, the words designed simply to differentiate human beings from each other, to flesh out personalities, quirks, talents, traits, and shortcomings: *big, small, ambitious, brainy, eager, talkative, competitive, professional, nice*.

So many of the stories in this volume wind up being about the crumpling up and ruination of these small words, the ones that should be meaningful or useful or just reliable guides to the people around us, but instead have been deployed against us, so steadily and exhaustingly, as part of an effort to define and diminish and distract us from life as we might be living it were we not saddled with having to prove our rights to participate equally in it.

So that *small* stands in for *Vietnamese* and *professional* for *white*, and *effortless* for the lie that women are not asked to spend their lives and energies conforming to standards set for them by men, and *shrill* is a way to point out that a woman is talking when she would ideally be silent.

Utterances that might otherwise be communicative tools become blunt and dull, pedestrian instruments used to chip away at the dignity of non-male, non-white existence. These words don't always deliver mere insult: they may also carry the weight of dishonesty, heightened expectations, double standards, celebrations of reduced power, and affirmations of other kinds of femininity to which we do not measure up (or down).

Perhaps the most heartbreaking of the pieces that you'll read in this volume is the first one, Adaora Udoji's meditation on the word *too* and how it has been used to censure and shame her since childhood. She points out, with a pain immediately recognizable to so many of us, that *too*, when in reference to

women's traits—from kindness to intelligence—is always a signal of opprobrium.

Her point is underscored again and again in the volume that follows her essay, as writer after writer points out how many of the ways in which the words they have come to rear back from have, in one way or another, been associated with having “too” much of some quality.

Afua Hirsch is told that her legs are “too muscular” for TV and that her Afro takes up “too much of the screen”; Amy Choi describes the quandary of having “too much eyebrow”; Dahlia Lithwick remembers that her first evaluations in high school debate included the observations that she spoke “too fast” and was “too nervous,” and Jillian Medoff remembers boys telling her that she was “too mature” and notes that in adulthood, the eventual implications of the word *mature* stand in for “too old,” “too slow” and “too twentieth century.” Julianna Baggott understands, in her meditation on ambition, that as soon as she begins winning awards and getting a reputation as a writer, she is seen as having “achieved too much” and as being “too prolific.” Tanzila Ahmed includes the classic warning, coming from an auntie, that the reason she is not married is because she is “too successful,” “too educated,” and “too intimidating” for men.

The grievous revelation of Udoji's piece, followed by so much evidence backing it up, weighed on me so much that I internally struggled to push back against it: considering that the very meaning of the word *too* is of course about an excess of some quality, surely when it's used about the most powerful—the white, the male—it's also critical, demeaning, diminishing. But the reality, I realized as I wrestled with this possibility, is that white men are rarely told they possess too much of anything. That all the things

women do *too* much of—talk, think, desire, aspire, smile, yell, take up space—we cannot get enough of in men.

The horror of Udoji's examination of this simple, three-letter adverb in daily use is simply gutting: that *too*—the description of overabundance used to deplete so many of us, so easily—telegraphs the grim reality of how so many women are deplored because we are understood to have, simply, an excess of humanity itself, so irritating when we insist on possessing it.

And that is how so many of these words that could be fun to use, useful to weave together to create meaning and increase understanding and make written connection more fluid and frank, have instead been turned into little stinging darts, a thousand pinches to our personhood. Because part of the pleasure of language is using it to describe and sort out people, and women aren't really supposed to be people.

As I have aged, been slowly boiled in this world, I have become ambivalent or antagonistic toward my former pleasures: the deployment of intentional and weighty insults, now mucked up by the understanding that most of them are heard as common diminutions. I no longer revel in the pungent intimacy of filthy oaths, because they are too often used as implements of boring disdain. I think twice and three times about using certain adjectives and adverbs that might otherwise bloom or bite but that have now simply ground us to tired dust.

Like my mom, I mourn the loss—my ability to easily and briskly use—words that were once beautiful and electric but that have been perverted by the very forces to which I'd like to use them to say: *Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you.*

Note this realization—that what I want to do is scream—is itself revealing of the imperative: to keep using these words, keep

screaming them, writing them, saying them aloud to each other and the world. Because when the tools of expression are turned against you—from the extraordinary *cunts* to the ordinary *toos*, the intimate *fucks* to the bruising *bitches*, the basic *nice* to the glorious *ambitious*—what becomes clear is that thing they want is for us to stop opening our mouths at all.

# TOO

ADAORA UDOJI

**Craig was a tad taller** than me. Let's say a quarter of an inch. Thin, with brown hair, a little too long in front. Brown eyes. He was funny. Smart. White. Slightly awkward—or, as I would learn later, extremely awkward.

It was first grade circa 1973, and we were a class of a dozen kids in a magnet school in Boston's Roxbury neighborhood—lab rats of a sort in a radical integration experiment. The class was roughly one-third white, one-third black, and one-third “Other.” Then, Roxbury was the heart of Boston's black community. I, half Nigerian and half Irish leprechaun, lived in the all-white neighborhood of Brighton many miles away. Ironically, I was bused to Roxbury when, all by myself, I could have integrated the school down the street.

I had a crush on Craig. Perhaps *crush* is too strong a word. But I liked him, and I wanted him to like me back. Craig asked interesting questions, like, How big is the ocean? Can you count

all the fish in the sea? If we got on a motorcycle and kept driving, could we make it around the world, and if so, how long would that take? He illustrated his name tag with endless loops of Nordic comic book characters.

I angled to sit next to Craig in art and assemblies. I asked his opinion on the world map I had made, on which I'd spent endless hours, marveling at the expanse of Earth. I listened closely to what he said and considered his opinions even when they ran afoul of my deeply held beliefs. For some unknown reasons, he liked the color yellow. Though it was not my favorite, I tried real hard to appreciate its finer points.

But not only did he not show interest in me, he apparently felt stalked. One unusually hot day in late spring, on the vast black concrete lot known as the Trotter Elementary playground, Craig's friend followed me as I followed Craig.

Craig's henchman was a verbose, ten-year-old, African American boy. He approached me like a person with a life-or-death mission and proceeded to curse at me like a grown-ass man. "You talk TOO much," he unloaded in a raspy adult voice. "Stay the fuck away from Craig."

It was the first time I had ever been stunned into silence. It took my brain a minute to catch up. Who talked to anyone that way, especially at ten years old? He could have slapped me and I would have been less surprised. I was sure my eyes bugged out of my face, cartoon style. My stomach dropped to the floor, and I felt a blast of light-headedness that is seared into my memory.

I can still see him, short and stubby, round. I don't remember his name. I do remember his head bobbing atop his round body like one of those Mickey Mouse toys you buy from sidewalk vendors at street fairs. I had clearly stepped over a line I didn't know existed—which, for the rule-following daughter of a former

Catholic nun, was excruciating. This was a world I knew nothing about and was unprepared for, like walking into a summer downpour to find it was really a tornado.

To make sure I'd heard him, he spoke again: "You talk too much, TOOOOOOO much. You are TOO loud. TOOOOOO loud. Do you understand? Stay the fuck away from Craig."

It never occurred to me I could yell, or curse back, or square my shoulders and tell him to mind his own business. I felt powerless, like he had it and I had none. I wanted to disappear so badly I felt the concrete transform into an ocean and swallow me up.

I turned on my heel, said nothing, and backed away.

I could not know then that it wasn't the harsh *fuck* but the *too* that would linger and loom large. I didn't yet know how easily that word could be weaponized against me as a woman, used against any woman, pulled from the ever-ready "stay in your place" toolbox. *Too* would follow me through my academic life and ensuing career, trailing with permanence, delivering daily doses of feeling like I'd done something wrong, that there was something in me that needed fixing. That word, more than any curse, would haunt me in ways I could not have imagined.

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According to Merriam-Webster, *too* has two primary applications. It modifies or qualifies a verb. Its benign use means *beside* or *also*, as in, "Sell the house and the furniture too." But it can also indicate judgment—negative judgment. *Too* can mean *excessive*, as in, "The house is too large for us." It can be a rebuttal: "I didn't do it!" "You did too!"

But when was the last time you heard *too* used as a compliment? Think about that for a second. When was the last time you heard someone say "too healthy," "too smart," or "too pretty"?