

FICTION

IN THIS WEEK'S BOOKLET

GROWING OUT OF THE GROUND

BY ALLISON AMEND



EVE ENSLER

Behind
the curtain

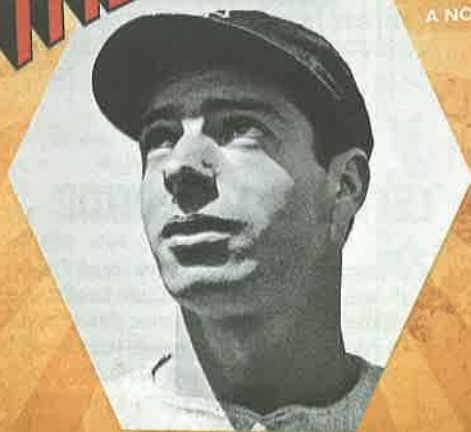
THE JOURNAL

PRINTERS

REAT WRITERS' DAILY RITUALS

THE POWERS

A NOVEL



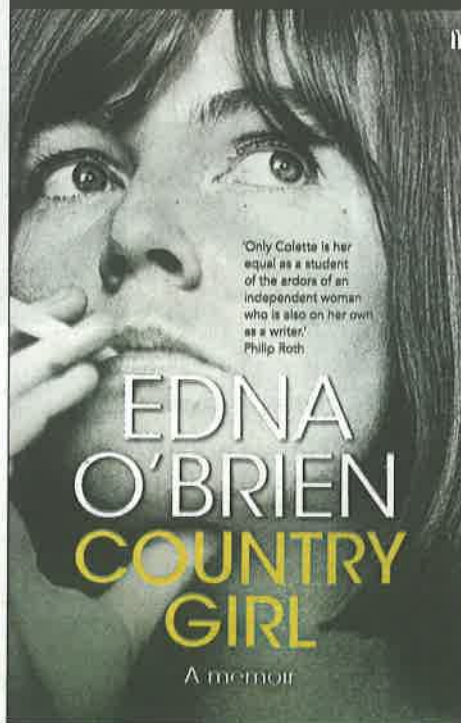
Valerie Sayers

FORGET 'GATSBY' ZELDA'S ALL THE RAGE

ROW

Chicago Tribune

MAY 5,
2013



EDNA O'BRIEN COUNTRY GIRL

A memoir

'Only Colette is her
equal as a student
of the ardors of an
independent woman
who is also on her own
as a writer.'
Philip Roth



STRANGE REBELS

1979 AND THE BIRTH OF THE 21ST CENTURY

CHRISTIAN CARYL

every BODY'S business

Eve Ensler asserts that humanity has dishonored women's bodies in the same way that it has dishonored the planet

BY DONNA SEAMAN

Eve Ensler has inspired and empowered women all around the world to speak out about their bodies and to protest women-targeted violence. Artistic, courageous, generous and funny, Ensler is a galvanizing playwright, internationally best-selling author, resounding activist and exuberant performer. Her Obie-winning and world-altering play, "The Vagina Monologues," has been published in nearly 50 languages and performed in more than 140 countries. Ensler's books include "Insecure At Last: A Political Memoir" and "I Am an Emotional Creature: The Secret Life of Girls

Around the World," and she is also a passionate and illuminating commentator and journalist.

On the activism front, Ensler founded V-Day, a remarkably effective global movement to end violence against women and girls that supports thousands of programs and safe houses. V-Day in February celebrated its 15th anniversary with One Billion Rising, a global day of action on which people in 207 countries rose up and danced for the freedom, safety and equality of women. Ensler has also worked with women in Bukavu, Congo, to establish City of

Joy, a center for survivors of gender violence.

The recipient of many awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship and the Isabelle Stevenson Tony Award, Ensler has been named one of Newsweek's 150 "Women Who Changed the World." Ensler's new book is "In the Body of the World," a stunning memoir about trauma, cancer and how we treat our bodies and the earth. When Printers Row Journal spoke with Ensler, the force of her spirit, intelligence and love of life poured through the phone like spring water, like light. This is an edited transcript of our conversation.

Q: When did reading and writing become part of your life?

A: At a very young age. As soon as I could write, I started to find ways to express what was going on deep inside me in words, writing in journals. It was a way of surviving and keeping my sanity.

Q: Did you read a lot, too? Did you have favorite books or writers?

A: I read two books over and over in my childhood, and they're very strange books. One was "Death Be Not Proud" by John Gunther. It's the story of his son, Johnny Gunther, who had a brain tumor and was gallantly and nobly dying as the brain tumor exploded through his skull. I just reread it recently for another project and I just can't even believe I was reading that book when I was a child. It's so deeply disturbing on every level. The other book I was obsessed with was John Hersey's "Hiroshima." I also read it over and over. I think there was something even then about mastering the most horrific as a way of dealing with how traumatized I felt. I think what most terrifies me is what I don't know, what I can't see, what's behind the curtain.

Q: The phrase "behind the curtain" leads to the question: What inspired you to write plays?

A: Curtains are a big part of that, actually. I remember the first shows I saw on Broadway where the curtains would open and there was something so fabulous about the magic behind the curtains, the world behind the curtains, the fact that there were all these people back there doing this thing that was going to be revealed. There's something about the idea that onstage there's a mirror of the world, and there you can take it; you can handle it; you can listen to it; you can go into it, which you often can't do in real life. I think everything about the theater is so brilliant. The fact that we're gathered in the dark with strangers. The fact that it's community; the fact that the audience makes the play with the actors and the writers. It feels like such a revolutionary act, the theater. And it's so in the present, so in the moment.



Q: In your work you continually cross the divide between the private and the public. What was it like to move between these realms when you were writing about having cancer?

A: "In the Body of the World" came from such a different part of me. It really feels like it came from my body. Like my body wrote it. I don't even know what that means. But that's what it feels like. It was such a physical experience. So there was no way to separate the private from the public. It was all one.

Q: That is dramatically manifest when you write about the shock of seeing a CAT scan of a raging post-surgery infection, which you describe as "a huge pool of blackness in the center of me," on the very day we all began watching

televised footage of the Gulf oil disaster, a sea of dark poison.

A: It was unbelievable. This whole journey has been so unbelievable. I think what it's taught me is that what we call synchronicity is really the fact that there is connectedness. What cancer did was throw me smack into the center of my body so that during the Gulf oil spill, there were moments when I felt that there was oil in me. I couldn't distinguish between the two.

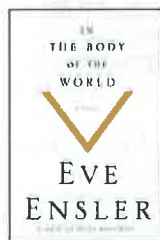
Q: This experience leads you to write about our habit of denial when it comes to our bodies and to the damage we do to nature.

A: One of the things that became clear to me is how our disrespect for the body, the way women's bodies have been dishonored and disrupted

and invaded and raped, is just so similar to what we've done to the earth. It's almost embarrassingly obvious. Yet when you make this point people get really upset with you. They think it's too literal.

Q: At each stage of your work, you've examined our perception of the mind-body divide.

A: I think this mind-body split, with the body being considered lower and not to be trusted, is being changed by all that's being discovered about emotional intelligence and body intelligence. The intelligence in the body has been undervalued in the same way the earth has been. They're things we rely on -- they get us where we need to go and they give us what we need -- but we don't value them. We just use them. And I



In the Body of the World

By Eve Ensler, Metropolitan Books, 221 pages, \$25



Brian Harkin/Photo for the Tribune

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think when you start to value them you realize the brilliance of the body. The genius of the body. My body figured out how to live without seven organs. It found a way to heal itself and rearrange itself and recapitulate itself to keep me living. That's what the body knows how to do.

One of the things I saw this year with One Billion Rising, when a billion women rose up and danced around the planet, was the intensity with which women flung their bodies into the world, into the open. That is really how we would be living had patriarchy not come to reduce us, or make us feel bad about our sexuality and our power. What cancer did was put me back into my body in a way that I suddenly felt the magnitude of the body, whether it was my body or the body of the world.

Q: What is the dynamic, for you, between activism and art?

A: For me this split between activism and art was really torturous and difficult for a long time because they're really different impulses. Artistically, you want to create characters who are ambiguous and full of contradictions and aren't necessarily holding your point of view and fighting your fight. But as an activist you have a point of view and there are things you're fighting for. So art and activism are often at odds with each other. I envy people who don't have that activist thing sometimes, because they just write. Their characters do what they do and they don't have an agenda. With this book, I didn't feel that I was writing with an agenda. I was just writing what was there. That felt really good. It came from a part of me that I never would have had access to if I had not had cancer.

Q: Is art a catalyst for social change?

A: I think what art has the potential to do that nothing else can do is to change your cultural DNA. And one of the things I've learned is that when things change in your body, your soul and your spirit, something very deep changes that doesn't necessarily change through ideas or data. And that is very profound. Art transports you. It enables you to believe what you know, it reaffirms what you know. It says, Go here! Be more daring! Be more ambiguous! Be more brave! Be more willing to live in contradictions!

Q: Throughout the ordeals you chronicle in "In the Body of the World," you manage to continue to work on the City of Joy, a refuge for women in the Congo. You have now fully recovered. Is the City of Joy thriving, too?

A: The City of Joy is thriving. I can't tell you what an extraordinary place it is. To see 90 women there every six months who arrive broken, infected, missing body parts, with their vaginas ripped asunder, and having nightmares, and then to see them be loved and be held and be healed, lifted and taught so that when they leave they are beautiful and brilliant and alive and joyful and dancing. The place completely mirrors them. There's now thick bougainvillea and roses taller than I am. All the goats have given birth and we have many bunnies and everything is fertile and growing and alive and singing. Here's this place in the middle of a war zone, in the middle of the most insane poverty and deprivation and madness, and you drive through our little gates and there's a lotus growing straight up out of the mud. It is possible. You can plant your lotus anywhere and attempt to transform what is there. It's such a lesson.

Q: With all your work for V-Day, including an initiative to work with boys and men, and with plans for an even bigger global action in the mode of One Billion Rising, are you writing?

A: Yes, things are now beginning to cook again and I have a new play churning in me. I'm excited.

Donna Seaman is a senior editor for Booklist. Her author interviews are collected in "Writers on the Air."