



## The Body: An Essay

*Jenny Bouly*

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Cultural Writing. Poetry. Essays. Comprised of footnotes to a non-existent text, THE BODY: AN ESSAY is a meditation on absence, loss and disappearance that offers a guarded "narrative" of what may or may not be a love letter, a dream, a spiritual autobiography, a memoir, a scholarly digression, a treatise on the relation of life to book. Christian Bok describes Boully's groundbreaking text as one that "may simply annotate a fantastic biography from another reality, referring only to itself as a kind of dream within a dream...The reader can only fantasize about the original contexts that might have made such information significant to its author, and ultimately, implies that the body of any text consists of nothing but a void-filled with the exegetical projection of our own imagination." First published in 2002 and excerpted in such anthologies as The Next American Essay and The Best American Poetry 2002, THE BODY: AN ESSAY continues to challenge conventional notions of plot and narrative, genre and form, theory and practice, unremittingly questioning the presumptive boundaries between reflection, imagination, and experience.

## **The Body: An Essay Details**

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Author : Jenny Boully

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### Tovah says

I've heard a lot about this book and was glad to finally get my hands on it. I'm interested in essay play and I was surprised to learn that pieces of this book had been published before as poetry. This is gratifying because I think the lines between poetry and essay can often become blurred, and for that matter between fiction and nonfiction as well. For any doubters of that massive, muddled gray zone, *The Body* is a great piece to test any hard and fast boundaries against. There's a lot of play with language and some playing with ideas. Is there truth to what happened in these pages? I'm not sure. There were wisps of a narrative, but I found those strands very hard to keep hold of. It did remind me of David Foster Wallace, who does a superb job of playing with essays via footnotes. Where DFW uses footnotes to explore alternatives ad infinitum, Boully focused more on absence. What does it mean to be present and what does it mean to miss something. Can you miss something that wasn't there? The text certainly could use another read through, but at this point I can say that yes, I do miss something that's not there. For my liking, there was just too little for me to hold onto and while I like the idea I was unable to really get into the text (or annotated lack of text).

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### M Casteel says

A modern classic in the new form of "lyrical essay" writing. She's a dream that you don't quite understand.

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### Kathline says

This essay challenges the very idea of text by writing notes on a nonexistent document. The notes are written to facilitate myriad ways to imagine the text that doesn't appear. The references span time and era, citing Sei Shonagon's *Pillow Book*, Lewis Carroll, Kafka and Pound; and they hint at a personal, more obscure tragedy.

This book bears multiple readings so I'm glad I bought a copy. I love the cryptic notes the last owner made in the book: "now here's your task, bleak holder of this text...value to sense of self." Very valuable, both in terms of experimental form and suggesting text by providing another, more technical, simulacrum.

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### Aaron says

I read this book for a non-fiction genre class this year. I would give it four stars for what it could be if I had spent more time with it. With books like this that I can't spend enough time with to understand, I read it for the little bits that I love. I found a lot of it really enjoyable to read, but I can't say I walked away from it understanding what she wanted to say. The language was all very beautiful and as poems, these footnotes are wonderful little fragments that can spark a lot of interesting thoughts and will inspire some of my own writing. I guess all I can say about it is that, you'll like this if you like this kind of book.

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### **Matt says**

Bouly's book is a fantastic formal narrative of footnotes with esoteric post-modern references and other MFA-worthy things.

Her writing exceeds what you might see online, so don't take Bouly's speaker as being interested in click-bait. The reader gets no evidence of the main character of this book except through the speaker in the footnotes.

The reader gets, essentially, the body, the outlines, of some person, but every section leaves much interpretation up to the reader, and her or his familiarity with the topics being discussed. It's wordy at times.

That being said, it's good for short reading sessions...and the physical book is fertile ground for literally drawing connections between narrative notes.

Writers should read this if they haven't already.

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### **Rachael Marks says**

Beautiful book, I love the idea that it is all written in footnotes, but it is a bit hard to get through because of this. There is a great sense of disconnect.

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### **Evan says**

One quality of a good artist, I think, is the ability to recognize the elements of his artform that he's weakest at and then construct his style so that he doesn't have to face them... or so that they become positive features of his style. Bouly's texts tend to be less plot-driven (though the footnotes certainly do produce a plot -- a change in a relationship and a character -- as the pages turn) and more interested in the accrual and juxtaposition of references, externalia, letters, dream images. These details' relationships grow and change, producing a plot more intricate and emotionally engaging than any actions performed by characters could, which is why she's wise for composing the book entirely of footnotes.

The character-focused moments often seem either expected (no question that a character like X would do Y, so no surprise) or soppy-sentimental in vocabulary and tone,\* so the absence of the novel's text is an excellent idea: it allows Bouly not only to write a novel without having to present and explore characters in the conventional way, but it also gives her the opportunity to leave only bits and pieces of them, which minimizes sentiment. Whatever my issue with the sentimentality of some of the footnotes, I'm so impressed by Bouly -- she makes a mean novel out of juxtaposition, addition and palimpsest, better than a lot of character-driven stuff I've read. This is not just a cute trick, a book made entirely out of footnotes; it's a rich and fun book made out of footnotes.

\* This could also be the result of the character being a young woman in love with a mentor, who may be more inclined toward that kind of blahblah, but it still doesn't make for a character I wanted to explore more

deeply or think about once the book was closed.

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### **Kyle says**

obligatory

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### **Kelly says**

Bouly's The Body is as much a work of language, as it is a commentary on the inadequacies of language.

It is at once beautiful and weblike, as it is disparate--quoting authors and well known works--and combining these with Bouly's first-hand experience and ideas.

Bouly explores the ideas of language as a tool for describing linear time, and the entrapment that's inherent in a linear projection, as well as the subtleties of experience that can never be captured.

While her content is, almost explicitly, about the search for meaning--and the groping, dreaming, and discovering that one does in attempts to make sense of the world around--her form exemplifies the bare bones minimum through which to convey these ideas, as it's composed entirely in footnotes.

Both a microcosm of word/language and a macrocosm of "novella," The Body suggests that there always are--and always will be--untold facets of any story, and that to rely solely upon language to create our reality--emotionally or intellectually--must be a fallacy.

I love this; it's a brilliant work.

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### **Sigrun Hodne says**

*The experience of time translates itself into language, and language translates itself into distance, which translates itself into longing, which is the realization of time. (...) how sad and strange that I, Jenny Bouly, should be the sign of a signifier or the signifier of a sign, moreover, the sign of a signifier searching for the signifieds.*

- Jenny Bouly: *The Body, an essay*

Sometimes texts just catch me, without me being able to explain why. But if I, in spite of my incapability, should try to find words for my enthusiasm for The Body I will choose sentences like:

I love how the narrator moves rapidly around in her own text  
I love the combination of literary high & low  
I like the way the narrator makes fun of herself  
I love the way she lays herself bare, the rawness of it  
I like the genre-breaking-quality; calling it an essay, when in fact it is poetry written down as footnotes – or isn't it!?

Share this:

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### **Sarah Stone says**

Eloquently tongue-tied, sly, sad, full of invitations half-issued and immediately withdrawn. It does have a narrativish thing going on, though it isn't where the interest comes from. (Why do these bad loves work so gorgeously in Anne Carson's books? [Glass, Irony, and God. The Autobiography of Red.:] Perhaps because Carson has characters rather than signifiers, and because the books have powerful threads of mortality and the outside world.) Bouilly seems to work through an interior tunneling; the chambered nautilus prevails. I like how she explores dreams and consciousness.

One of my favorite lines is from one of her entwined quotes:

The following excerpt from Robert Kelly's "Edmund Wilson on Alfred de Musset: The Dream" was pasted above the author's various beds in the various places she lived: "Dreams themselves are footnotes. But not footnotes to life. Some other transaction they are so busy annotating all night long."

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### **Nicole says**

*The Body: An Essay* by Jenny Bouilly is definitely an intriguing read, but a reading that left me with a feeling of lacking...lacking context, lacking understanding, but also with a feeling of wanting...wanting details, wanting clarity, wanting more. Her style of writing is poetic and in many cases, beautiful. I oftentimes had to stop reading and quickly write down the page number and footnote, as I was memorized by the words I had just read.

*Body* is a story told through only footnotes. Footnotes that are responding to a text that isn't there. Within the footnotes, there are repeating themes: a love story between the "great poet" and a lover that can't seem to come to terms with their love; the idea of a fire escape; a stage being described like a screenplay; stories where the author herself – Bouilly – comes into play, usually as a performer in a play; postcards and unanswered (or even unsent) letters; and the reoccurring idea of dreams and what they are meant to symbolize/mean. Together, they are like fragments of a larger story or musing that we've yet to make sense of. Written in the eloquent and often blunt style, these fragments were enough to captivate me and leaving me wanting the larger story – if such a story exists. I wanted to see how those things connected, the common thread. And maybe it was there the entire time, that thread. Maybe I didn't do enough work as a reader. This story is one that cannot be understood fully, I believe, with one reading alone.

Footnote 27, it says "...the theme of loss preoccupied her even in her sleep" (Bouilly, 11). Then, in footnote 30, it reads "The dream wants to inform me not to be fooled by pretty packages, that in matters of

correspondence, the body is tragically absent" (Bouly, 12). For me, this was the direct theme of the entire text. It is written, as I mentioned, through footnotes lacking the text in which those footnotes respond to. The "body" of the text was missing. The first footnote I mentioned above, footnote 27, reflects on the theme of loss, how it is haunting. As a reader, I felt that theme strongly, as I felt the loss of the main body missing from the text and found myself unsure how exactly to handle that loss. Then, in footnote 30, Bouly labels the idea "tragic," in terms of correspondence, if the body is missing. So if we were to view her own work here as a type of correspondence, is it tragic that the "body" text is missing? Is there some significance in the fact that the essay itself is called "The Body," calling attention to the very thing that is, indeed, missing? Or, is it a text that, after calling attention to this fact, forces you to move on and try and make sense without the body to guide you? I cannot answer these questions. I'm not even sure they are meant to have an answer.

*The Body: An Essay* is an intriguing piece of literature that leaves you questioning your foundations, your traditions, in terms of your role as a reader. And it also leaves you impressed at the skill and handle Bouly has over her words. And it leaves you feeling incomplete and wanting more, which isn't exactly a bad thing.

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### **Nicole Lynn says**

I'm completely in love with Jenny Bouly. I've read some of other works before, and I have to say that the line she walks between poetry and essay is nothing short of masterful.

I'm also a sucker for any work that's dually about language and the inadequacies of language at the same time. The idea of an entire essay expressed without the essay is something close to (if not) sheer brilliance, and it's also amazing to me just how much Bouly trusts the reader to then, in their own minds, replace the narrative that isn't blatantly written down. Because Bouly pushes thresholds on form and function so much, it's hard for me to nail down exactly what I would have imagined the essay having been, but there's a beauty in that kind of non-conformity, too. It could have been any number of things. The possibilities are only limited by the imagination of the reader.

What I found most appealing is the idea this essay suggests in the underneath of it all--that there will always be untold facets of a story, that language is an illusion.

I loved it.

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### **John LaPine says**

unique meditation on deletion, told exclusively through footnotes to a main body text which does not actually exist (and never did). wild exploration of love, relationships, mythology, and omission

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### **Elizabeth says**

Carl told me I'd love this, that it was the perfect time for me to read it. And I did, and it was, though I don't know that I fully understood or absorbed all of it.

