

Grief Slut

Evelyn Berry

Official Press Kit

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Two Line Bio:

Evelyn Berry is a trans, Southern writer, editor, and educator. She's the author of *Grief Slut* (Sundress Publications, 2023) and a recipient of a 2023 National Endowment for the Arts Poetry Fellowship.

Short Bio: (50 words)

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Medium Bio: (100 words)

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Sundress Announces the Release of Evelyn Berry's *Grief Slut*



Knoxville, TN—Sundress Publications announces the release of Evelyn Berry's debut poetry collection *Grief Slut*, an examination of the queer lineage of pleasure, grief, and resilience in the American South. Berry offers a portrait of a girl living through boyhood and grappling with the violence of nostalgia in poems that blend high art, archival slivers, and Taco Bell. This collection invites us into a landscape home to sloppy kissers, swamp suitors, scrappy “limbwrecked boys,” and drag queens drenched in glitter sweat, where “each day is trespass” and queer youth fight to “hear one another breathe just a little while longer.”

torrin a. greathouse, author of *Wound from the Mouth of a Wound*, calls *Grief Slut* “a feral, ode-mouthed debut, tawdry and raw as a picked scab. Each of Berry's poems is a small explosive mote of memory, steeped in the history and iconography of the rural queer South.”

Han VanderHart, author of *What Pecan Light*, describes *Grief Slut* as “a riotously beautiful collection of poems, a love song to flesh and the experience of too muchness that is oh-so-human, oh-so-queer, and oh-so-Southern.”

Pre-order your copy of *Grief Slut* on the Sundress website: <https://sundress-publications.square.site/product/grief-slut/183?cs=true&cst=custom>

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A 501(c)(3) non-profit literary press collective founded in 2000, Sundress Publications is an entirely volunteer-run press that publishes chapbooks and full-length collections in both print and digital formats, and hosts numerous literary journals, an online reading series, and the *Best of the Net* Anthology.

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Blurbs: Evelyn Berry's *Grief Slut*

“*Grief Slut* is a feral, ode-mouthed debut, tawdry and raw as a picked scab. Each of Berry's poems is a small explosive mote of memory, steeped in the history and iconography of the rural queer South. This collection elevates high and low culture alike to the position of the sublime, Taco Bell and Caravaggio are given equal weight in these poems' lyric exploration. And even as these poems grapple with historical and ongoing attacks against trans rights, and the places we call sanctuary, Berry refuses to present a tidy and palatable version of transness, instead illuminating the gut-punch gorgeous mess of our lives.”

—**torrin a. greathouse**, author of *Wound from the Mouth of a Wound*

"Unflinching in its sensuality and brutality, *Grief Slut* exposes the paradoxical nature of queer life in the South. Required reading in an age of trans discrimination, Berry's lines will serve as balm and bulwark. exposing the joyous heartbreak of rural queerness.”

—**Sim Kern**, author of *The Free People's Village* and *Seeds From the Swarm*

“Gorgeous and luxurious as couture the morning after the party, Evelyn Berry’s *Grief Slut* is a book-length aubade to the genderqueer self and body, to the South, to violence and desire and Baja Blast. *Grief Slut* is a riotously beautiful collection of poems, a love song to flesh and the experience of too muchness that is oh-so-human, oh-so-queer, and oh-so-Southern.”

—**Han VanderHart**, author of *What Pecan Light*

Summary: Evelyn Berry's *Grief Slut*

Evelyn Berry's debut poetry collection, *Grief Slut*, is an examination of the queer lineage of pleasure, grief, and resilience in the American South. Berry offers a portrait of a girl living through boyhood and grappling with the violence of nostalgia in poems that blend high art, archival slivers, and Taco Bell. This collection invites us into a landscape home to sloppy kissers, swamp suitors, scrappy "limbwrecked boys," and drag queens drenched in glitter sweat, where "each day is trespass" and queer youth fight to "hear one another breathe just a little while longer."

Interview Excerpt: Evelyn Berry's *Grief Slut*

Izzy Astuto: How did you choose the specific moments, particularly cultural events, that you touch on in *Grief Slut*?

Evelyn Berry: My favorite literary works hold simultaneous conversation with both high and low art, composed in both the immediate moment and within the echo of history. In *Grief Slut*, I bounce from ekphrastic considerations of famous artworks to poems about spiked Mountain Dew Baja Blast. I'm a kitchen-sink writer: you'll find Dolly Parton, Saint Sebastian, Mothman, the Konami Code, Burger King, ocean biology, archival theory, Pokémon, coding languages, Boy Scout knots, and a whole lot more. I also engage with moments in both recent queer history, including cruising, queer bar arson, and instances of homophobic violence.

I didn't have a plan when I set out to write *Grief Slut* or have a sense of what references to include or not, since it's a book that cannibalizes the dozens of drafts of manuscripts that faltered before it and blends them, but I think the result is a book that lends equal weight to the present as the past, even when pointing back at the past in order to better understand the future.

IA: In the context of the collection, do you think it is important for queer people to find a way to reclaim the religion they were raised in?

EB: I can only speak on behalf of the Southern Baptist Church, but... no, not really.

I'm an atheist so entrenched in Christian culture and the vestiges of Christian shame, I find it difficult to leave behind the mythos, imagery, and ethos of that religion. I spent most of my life convinced I was going to burn in Hell for eternity, and it's hard to let go of that kind of fear.

I am happy for queer adults who navigate their way back into religious practice and find meaning in religious communities, but I also think it's valid for queer people to reject religious belief entirely. I'll take the ritual, aesthetic, and good works and leave behind the whole cadre of folks who think trans people are harbingers of Satan's Second Coming. That being said, my partner and I have been discussing returning to a church community and figuring out where we might fit in, so who knows who I'll feel in five years' time? It's hard not to carry a grudge, though.

Half the time, I feel like my work thumbs its nose at biblical stories. In my eyes, Jesus is a polyamorous gay, trans man who roleplays betrayal with Judas, Eve is a woman looking for something better to put her mouth on than boring Adam, and David's a twink exploring impact play with Goliath. Once I get my gay, grubby hands on a Bible character, they're gonna look pretty queer.

IA: Tell me more about your use of language to depict queer pleasure in *Grief Slut*.

EB: When I first started writing about queer pleasure, I'd only had sex with one person of the same sex, which was something I kept secret from everyone except my housemates. The work I wrote during that period, much of which appears in *Grief Slut*, is steeped in shame, embarrassment, and yearning. Looking back at it now, my femme-ness and queerness is clear,

but at the time, the poems knew more than I did. I was just trying, desperately, to live the life of the person I seemed in my poems. Pleasure was, for me, inextricably entwined with fear, guilt, and implications of death.

On the other hand, you'll find poems in the manuscript that are just plain dirty. You'll notice I use the words "spit" and "sweat" a lot. The way I talk about queer sex isn't idyllic, but I think it's real. I want the poems to sound like sex, so there's a concentration of sibilance, assonance, alliteration, and near-rhyme.

Of course, there's pleasure in queer sex but also in queer friendship, queer kinship, queer history, queer resilience, queer art, queer families, and queer life.

IA: How did you choose Saint Sebastian to represent the cycle of queer suffering in the two poems he makes an appearance in?

EB: I sometimes create challenges for myself, during which I write ten to thirty new poems based on a single theme. A few years ago, I wrote a series of ekphrastic poems in response to religious artwork. At first, I started writing about Saint Sebastian because of his suggestive poses, especially in the paintings of Guido Reni. Imbued in images of suffering were flashes of desire.

I started learning about the history of the saint as well as his figure in queer art. Saint Sebastian has long been the favorite subject of queer artists, writers, and filmmakers. Saint Sebastian wasn't necessarily even the main character of that poem series, but those are the poems that made it into the book while others about Judas, Jesus, Satan, and Isaac didn't make the cut.

IA: What does each part of the collection represent for you?

EB: During the editing process, we split the book into four parts. In Part 1, I share poems about boyhood and burgeoning queerness. In Part 2, I share what I jokingly call the "slut" portion of the book, poems about hookups, ex-boyfriends, and adolescent desire. In Part 3, I've grouped the poems about grief because I think they tell a coherent story together. Those were the hardest poems to write and share. In the final part of the book, I write most directly about gender transition, survival, and resilience. This is a book deeply interested in the past, but by the end of the book, I was hoping to turn toward the future.

IA: How did you decide to create many of the compound words in here (i.e., bruiseumb, pixeldumb)?

EB: I often write poems that begin in sound rather than sense. I delight in poems that find new ways to imagine how we use language. Often, two words sound so good together, you want to put a dash between them, even if it doesn't belong there. Sometimes, the words fit so perfectly together you can't stand to keep them apart with a dash (like a nun separating a couple at the Valentine's slow dance); the words want to make out, so who am I to stop them?

IA: There's a lot of Mothman in this chapbook, and cryptids tend to be very popular in queer spaces. Talk to me about why you think that is.

EB: Spend five minutes on the queer side of the Internet, and you'll encounter a tidal wave of Mothman memes, you're right. Queer folks find kin in monsters because we too have been made to feel monstrous, made to feel like we don't belong. Cryptids like Mothman or Sasquatch, monsters like vampires and werewolves, they're transgressive beings outside the bounds of normality. While some may see in those creatures horror, we see potential and possibility.

I wrote a series of poems about hooking up with monsters, only two of which made it into the book. It was during a time when I was still grappling with a massive amount of internalized homophobia, and so the only way I could stand to write about my first gay experiences was through the lens of monstrous desire.

If you're interested in reading writers talking about the relationship of horror and queerness, I suggest picking up *It Came From the Closet*, an essay collection published by Feminist Press.

IA: How did you use form to shape your poems, specifically through page alignment?

EB: I'm inspired by poets who play with shape or introduce innovative form, including Victoria Chang (her obit poems, especially), Justin Phillip Reed, torrin a. greathouse, Danez Smith, Douglas Kearney, Franny Choi, Terrance Hayes, Jericho Brown, and a million others I'm still reading and studying.

Form is not just a container for a poem but often also the propulsive engine of the work, a system of restraints that forces the writer to compose words they would have never used in an order they might have otherwise not dreamed.

Sometimes, of course, there is no deep underlying meaning wherein form marries content: my choices regarding alignment and spacing are purely vibe-based.

IA: If you could say one thing to the little boy in Part 1 of *Grief Slut*, what would it be?

EB: The best days of your life are still ahead. Keep going.