

Creative Writing with Rosemary Jenkinson

In this session on memoir, let's look at femininity, appearance and stereotyping. It is based on an extract from my memoir below, detailing how I've been judged on my appearance.

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Task 1: Reading aloud

Read the extract at the end of this plan aloud to your group.

Task 2: Discussion

Possible questions for discussion:

Have you ever written a diary? What is the difference between memoir and autobiography?

Is there anything you dislike/admire about your body?

Have you ever been criticized or teased for your appearance?

What is femininity (external and internal qualities)?

Has anyone ever questioned your gender?

Have you ever felt you didn't get an opportunity as a woman that a man would have got?

Do you consider these to be feminine traits – gentleness, empathy, humility, sensitivity, passivity?

Is femininity biologically or socially influenced?

How important on a scale of 1-10 is your appearance?

What is a stereotype?

What are Northern Irish people stereotyped as?

What is a stereotypical man?

What is a stereotypical woman?

Additional Activity:

Ask each member of the group to talk about a memoir or autobiography they've read and say what they loved about it.

Task 3: Writing

Ask each individual to write their own short memoir extract on a part of their body whether it be hair, body shape, skin etc., describing an incident that drew attention to it in the past and how it made them feel.

Task 4: Reading aloud

Each person reads their memoir extract aloud. Ask the group to comment on the extracts and say if they identify.

Extract from the chapter *The Sacred Sex* by Rosemary Jenkinson.

I need to step back and explain how I felt about my body. Everyone in the world has physical hang-ups and I was no different. When I was about twenty, Mum asked me if I'd like breast implants. As she said herself, I'd easily qualify for free implants on the NHS if I mentioned having a psychological issue. Straightaway I said no. I didn't want to have surgery to conform to some sexual ideal. Sure, I felt self-conscious about my tiny breasts, but my body was natural, and even if I had implants, I reasoned, the rest of me might need readjusting just to live up to their perfection.

I was shocked by Mum's question as I hadn't prompted it. Of course, she had bought me some padded bras over the years and taken me to the doctor's when I was about fourteen, to check up on my lack of breast growth which was clearly a sign of her worry, but at that time I hadn't realised it was a reflection of her own body insecurities, as it was only later she admitted that while her breasts were more ample than mine she wished she had larger ones too. Looking back, I know it wasn't right of my mum to suggest surgery. She should have been affirming, not finding fault, but at the same time I understand she didn't want me to have the same lack of body confidence she had.

Breasts to me were proof that God was male. Why did we have to have such obvious appendages when men had a penis and testicles that could easily be packaged away and hidden from view? Why did I have to have such a visibly obvious shortcoming? What was worse, men seemed to think they could talk openly about them. When I worked as a receptionist in a holiday camp, a male manager pointed to my breasts and joked, 'You need a bicycle pump for those, love.' I just laughed because I'd had to do that my entire life.

There was another excruciating incident at a crowded bus stop when two drunk men discussed my gender. 'It's a woman,' one drunk insisted, looking me up and down. 'Can't be,' said the other, pulling out his jumper to mimic breasts. 'Women have *these*.'

And yet another uncomplimentary moment occurred when my Russian artist boyfriend in Prague asked if he could do a nude portrait of my housemate. I asked why he'd never wanted to paint me and he replied that it was because he only liked painting big-breasted women. It felt almost as though he was cheating on me and, besides, as an artist's daughter I already knew that real artists find beauty in every body.

I suppose the one good thing about having small breasts is that men are rarely tempted to try and fondle them. They're a deterrent to gropers. It seems to me that big breasts get touched, small breasts get mocked.

To be fair, it wasn't only my lack of breasts that blurred my gender identity. I wasn't curvaceous anywhere, I had slim hips, I was nearly five-foot-ten and, because my red hair often grew as thick as an Aberdeen Angus's, I kept it fairly short at times. It makes me cringe to admit I've been challenged more than once on entering the women's toilets.

The thing is, my body doesn't conform to the female stereotype, so my mind refuses to conform either. I just want to be natural, not feminine. I would honestly rather be seen as gender neutral or intersexual. I'm a mind primarily, and my body comes second. I don't want the slavery of living up to expectations of what a woman should be. I hate being forced to look at myself as I want to look outwards and observe. But practical and comfortable mean masculine in our world. I refuse to spend hours straightening my hair – I want to straighten my prose. I don't want to pluck my eyebrows - I want to prune my sentences. Why does a woman need to be painted? So, a man is naturally beautiful, but a woman is not? I don't want to be my own painting. I don't want to be my own artistic project as I already have my writing.