

Two broken chairs

Lindy West discusses being fat, internet trolls and cancer in this hilarious memoir

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If two people are sitting in broken chairs and they fall, who takes the blame? Is it the chair? Or the person?

Seattle author and former staff writer of *The Stranger* – sister paper of the *Portland Mercury* – Lindy West offered the analogy to her former boss Dan Savage at a restaurant in Seattle several years ago after a public debate the two had online about how Savage was talking about obesity.

Savage had taken on obesity as a public health crisis in his columns, many times over in his usual biting commentary. West argued that his rhetoric was harmful and shamed fat people in the same way she'd experienced her whole life. She responded on *The Stranger's* online blog, *The Slog*, in a post titled "Hello, I'm fat."

They debated on *The Slog*, they argued through emails and finally sat down together to discuss it in person when West explained the analogy: "Say both of our chairs are broken."

If the chair collapsed under Savage, West argued, people would assume it's because the chair was broken. If the chair collapsed under West, people would assume it's because she's fat.

West details this and many other stories of her life working in a world that views her weight and appearance as a moral failing in "Shrill," a book that comes across as a longer, equally enjoyable version of the online commentary that she's offered for years.

West will be speaking at Portland's upcoming Wordstock in November.

West writes passionately and with quotable humor, but this time she brings a swath of her experiences together in one narrative. Over the course of the book's 260 pages, West takes on fat hatred, abortion, bullying, internet trolls and the debate over whether rape is an appropriate topic for comedians.

The book strings together thoughts West

has shared on being fat over her career writing for *The Stranger*, *Jezebel* and *GQ*.

Her most poignant essays offered a glimpse into one piece of her story. In "Shrill," West offers a scope of her entire life, from a child trying to understand why her friends at a birthday party decided to sort everyone between girls who were more than 100 pounds and girls who were still under – "No one was quite sophisticated enough to make a value judgment based on size yet, but we knew it meant something" – to an adult with a clear understanding of the hatred fat people experience – "Being fat is like walking around with a sandwich board that says, 'HERE'S WHERE TO HURT ME!'"

While West calls people to task, she also calls them into dialogue. And when everyone is willing to sit down respectfully, beautiful things happen.

West has been the target of online hate campaigns, particularly on Twitter. She reached a point where she was "eating thirty rape jokes for breakfast" every day.

But then someone found a picture of her deceased father, created a fake Twitter account meant to look like it was his and started harrasing West with it. It hurt, and she wrote that on *Jezebel*.

Instead of igniting more vitriol, the troll stopped. The troll apologized. The troll even agreed to go on the air on "This American Life" to have a frank conversation with West about why he attacked her and a candid admission that he feels threatened by women who speak their minds.

"Women are being more forthright in their writing," he said in the public radio interview. "There isn't a sense of timidity to when they speak or when they write. They're saying it loud."

This insight matches West and the book, which is subtitled "Notes from a Loud Woman." As a writer, she embodies the values that she gained at *The Stranger* which she described as "editorial freedom, thoughtful



PHOTO BY JENNY JIMENEZ

provocation, and fearless transparency."

She does this throughout the book, explaining in detail and without regret the abortion she chose to have and the #ShoutYourAbortion hashtag campaign that she launched.

She challenges anonymous, hateful internet trolls and real-life, well-meaning progressives, such as Savage.

West writes strongly, sharply and hilariously, but "Shrill" also highlights the significant warmth in the way she approaches each issue and the people she encounters.

This stands out when she is sent to Vashon Island to cover a Red Tent gathering – an event inspired by "The Red Tent" novel where women gather for ritual and conversation about the cosmos, chocolate and whether angels and aliens are the same thing.

"I knew my job was to make fun of the menses tent, but I just didn't want to," she wrote.

West wasn't willing to take cheap shots at sincere people just for laughs.

In addition to her commentary, humor and compassion, West is a phenomenal writer, one who can speak plainly, conversationally and beautifully at the same time. West is all these things in a way that makes news writers like myself insanely jealous.

She's succinct, clear but she strikes at the heart, particularly at the end of the book when she described her father's experience with cancer and his death.

West summarized the experience of cancer directly and profoundly:

"Cancer doesn't hand you an itinerary. It's not like, up to a certain point, you have an OK amount of cancer, and then one day the doctor's like 'Uh-oh! Too much cancer!' and then all your loved ones rush to your bedside for some stoic, wise goodbyes. Cancer, at least in my dad's case, is a complex breaking down of multiple systems, both slow and sudden. You have six months and then you have six hours."

In those moments, West's work and talent shine brightest. Her career as a writer comes across as the result of hard work, certainly, but she also seems born to it.

She writes: "We live and then we stop living. We exist and then we stop existing. That means I only get one chance to do a good job. I want to do a good job."

She does.

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