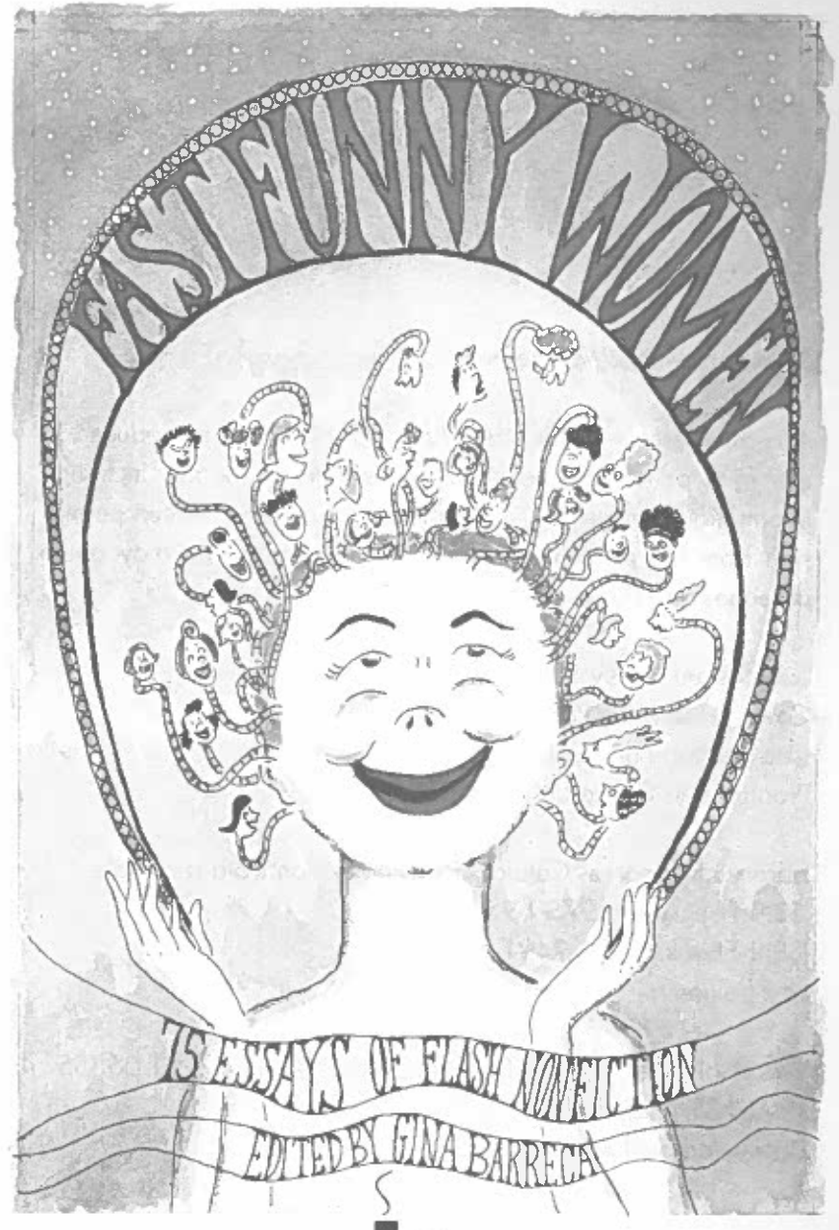
Fast Funny Women

75 Essays of Flash Nonfiction

Edited by Gina Barreca

This is a book of flash nonfiction. Each author has created a complete story in 750 or fewer words. Some pieces experiment with form, others take a more traditional approach, but all of them celebrate the precise and concise style of writing that inspired Shakespeare to call brevity the soul of wit.



woodhall press
NORWALK, CONNECTICUT

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Text design: Casey Shain
Cover artist: Mimi Pond
Copy editor: Paulette Baker
Proofreader: Grace O'Neil McGinley

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available
ISBN–Paperback: 978-1-949116-20-5
ISBN–EBook: 978-1-949116-21-2
First Edition

Woodhall Press, 81 Old Saugatuck Road, Norwalk, CT 06855
WoodhallPress.com
Distributed by INGRAM

To the #TribeofLoudSmartFunnyWomen and the

#MenWhoLaughWithUs

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Acknowledgments

Sometimes the muse is male. Without Dave LeGere of Woodhall Press, formerly of my Creative Writing Class in the English Department at the University of Connecticut, I wouldn't have been inspired to throw the party that became Fast Funny Women. He gets the first credit because he had the idea before I did, which is the whole idea of a muse—and the whole idea of making sure you keep in touch with your former students, for that matter. Patient, enthusiastic and proof that the #menwholaughwithus will prevail, Dave is responsible for almost everything that is best about the publication of this collection.

Responsible for everything else that's been best about the publication process is one of the contributors, Nicole Catarino, an English major at UCONN who has worked with me on every stage of the book. Nicole was indefatigable, spending long hours in the office, writing notes, proof-reading, double-checking, gathering bios and being an irreplaceable assistant. One day I hope to be thanked, albeit way down the page, in the acknowledgments of one of Nicole's books. She'll be writing them.

Abigail Rockefeller, who is my other assistant, is an Engineering major with a brilliant sense of humor; she kept us all on track, in line, on time and laughing. Thank you, Abby, for your hard work.

The women who said, "YES!" when I asked them if they'd be willing to be part of this collection were more than generous. I am in their debt. I owe them all dinner. I owe them all lasagna. They already have my admiration, my respect and my affection—not to mention my awe at their willingness to kick off their heels (or sneakers or cowboy boots) and make trouble.

Here's to having fun, making trouble, and changing the world—one genuine laugh at a time.

Gina Barreca

Her Gifts

BECK KREFTING

My mother sends me a big box of presents for my birthday every year. They are exquisitely wrapped in a colorful array of papers. There are ribbons curled in supplication to bows holding court in the middle of packages amazingly uncompromised by the strains of travel. I love opening the box and pulling out gift after gift after gift, like a deep dive into Mary Poppins's tote bag. I put them somewhere I can see them frequently—on the buffet if my wife allows it—and look at them for days. This is my favorite part of the ritual, because the packages are so much more alluring without knowing their contents. Gifts from my mom are all about presentation. After that, it's mostly head shaking and sighs.

A portion of the gifts will be things I previously owned, a childhood token that will catalyze the inevitable narration of my birth story over the phone. My mom is convinced I will be thrilled to see the leotard that a three-year-old version of myself wore. For me the least exciting and for my mother the most exciting part of this gift is the story that comes with the pewter cup, tap shoes, or puppet. As I thank her, she is eager to tell me about the small stained-glass window picturing a small German village with "Würzburg" inscribed in the top left-hand corner. Though she knows I haven't forgotten, she will tell me I was born there and how this object came into her possession. Soon after, the birth story follows.

About 30 percent of the gifts are things my mother sends me for safekeeping until she retires here at a time that is unknown but oft-threatened. In 2016 retirement was twelve months away; in 2019 it was eighteen months away. In that time, she has sent me framed photographs, record albums, and jewelry that I know to store. My mother never buys just one of anything. If I get a silicone mini-muffin baking pan, it doesn't require clairvoyance to know my three brothers got the same. And she has extra for friends, neighbors, and colleagues. She doesn't give everyone the same gift on every occasion, which often results in confusion because she can't remember if you were in

rotation for the headlamp or touchscreen gloves. Typically this leads to duplicates for some siblings and none at all for another.

Once, in Italy, I tried desperately to prevent my mom from purchasing a dozen cheap kitchen towels with cheesy Italian phrases. "Some people don't want a souvenir from a place they've never been," I explained. She bought the towels anyways, and I got two the next year—for Christmas and for my birthday. Both went into the pile of things to be reclaimed when my mom retires here.

Among the gifts there will be multiple clothing items, always with an identical version for my wife. I'm married to a woman, which to my mother means that I'm having an extended sleepover with my best friend until my husband arrives. Until that time, my mother delights in dressing us up to look exactly like her. Sometimes she wears the clothing to decide which four of the eight different colored Eddie Bauer safari jerseys look best on her. It's not surprising to find things in the pockets of the clothing she sends us, and because she works in the medical field, we commonly find the following items: Steri-Strips, alcohol pads, saline solution, latex gloves, tongue depressors, and once an unused portable catheter.

There will be at least one garment I will decry as far too tacky to try on but too functional to give away. That clothing item will sit in my drawer, and during periodic clothing purges I will unfold the item and wonder how this awful black thing with way too many pockets could look good on any human. This ritual will continue anywhere from eighteen months to five years—until one season, after I've gained some of the weight I lost in the season prior, I will try on the clothing item. The UV-protectant black shift is lightweight and slimming, and the pockets hide imperfections while also being ideal for the tissue, Chapstick, and dog treats I now carry. I congratulate *myself* for saving this polyester-blend gem and whisk it from this drawer of refugee garments to be incorporated into the part of my closet devoted to first-string clothing.

Her gifts are perfect. Sometimes it just takes me a while to figure it out. ◆