

Feminist force: Rebecca Solnit revisits her formative past in new memoir

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During the 1950s, tourists would sometimes make their way to downtown Las Vegas to watch the bloom of an atomic mushroom cloud 75 miles away. Casinos held early-morning viewing parties for and named cocktails after the nuclear bomb that had, by some estimates, ended the lives of 150,000 people in two blinding instants just 10 years prior. One hundred atomic bombs were set off in the atmosphere above the Nevada Test Site that decade; the wind would carry the fallout east, into St. George, Utah, where cancer rates spiked. Eventually, atmospheric tests ceased, but another 921 detonations occurred underground in the decades that followed.

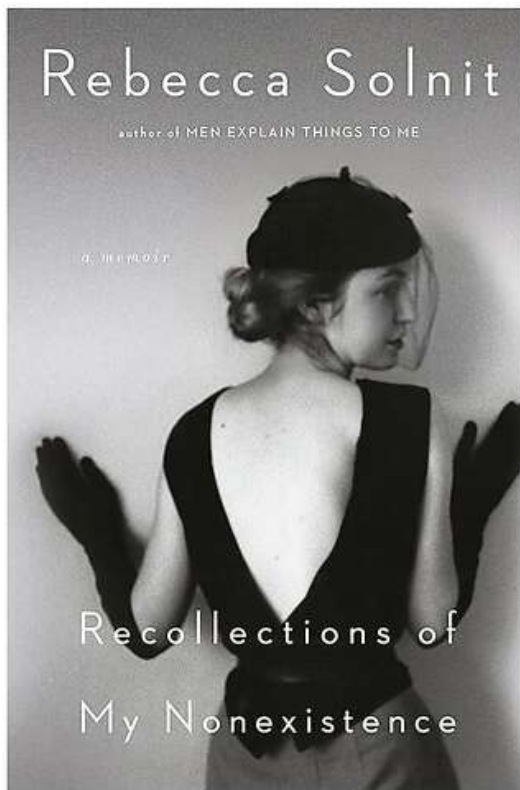
By the mid '80s, the tests began to attract a different audience. Thousands of protesters made their way to Nevada, calling on the government to abandon nuclear weapons and embrace peace. The largest of these actions came in spring 1988, when thousands of

people attempted to “reclaim” the site, among them, the San Francisco writer, historian and activist Rebecca Solnit.

It was here, in this place of “convergence,” that many threads came together for Solnit. She often says, “The Nevada Test Site taught me to write.”

In the years since, Solnit has written a great many things: a long list of books (about western landscapes, the art of wandering and the violence women face), “genre-refuting” memoirs, numerous essayistic newspaper articles, cutting and astute commentary. She has been called, in various headlines, a “philosopher queen” and “the voice of the resistance” (a term she does not claim for herself). There are awards and fellowships, too — a Guggenheim and another from the National Endowment for the Arts — just to name two.

And now she’s written something else, a memoir called “Recollections of My Nonexistence,” on sale Tuesday. The book is, ostensibly, about Solnit’s formative years in San Francisco, about her first light-filled apartment in Western Addition and the life she made there. But, as with most of her writing, Solnit starts there and wanders (with purpose) in dozens of directions, one of which is, briefly, the Nuclear Test Site.



San Francisco writer Rebecca Solnit has published a new memoir, "Recollections of My Nonexistence." Portrait on the right by Trent Davis Bailey

On a recent winter evening, Solnit poured black tea from a white kettle into two white cups resting on her white table. She'd insisted on making "proper tea" if it was to be black tea. She did not want to "just teabag it." Solnit's San Francisco home is full of light and full of white. It is also full of books, organized by color. She says it's been some time since she's let a stranger, a journalist, into her home. She likes to keep it private.

Solnit is direct and self-assured. Her eyes — the color of blue ice, the oldest sort of ice, the kind found in glaciers — are hard to look away from and they seem to look deep into you. Her hair, once blond through and through — a point of tension, she's written, with her mother — has taken on some gray. She speaks quickly but calmly and with a perceptible rhythm.

"The Nevada Test Site was just such a rich complex experience," she said. "It felt like a place of convergence. You had Buddhist monks from Japan, nuclear physicists and atomic veterans and down-winder Mormons. You had the Western Shoshone whose land it was. You had all these extraordinary communities coming together. You know, you're in a very specific, concrete, profoundly tangible place of the deep, dry desert, but a place that was about global geopolitics and the fate of the world."

The problem was, how do you capture something like that in writing? Solnit had graduated from journalism school at UC Berkeley, where she learned to "commit journalism." She'd also had practice in art criticism and essay writing. The trick, she realized, was to merge the three — the research tools of journalism, the "interpretative capacity" of criticism and her own lyrical voice — just as the nuclear site had brought so many disparate narratives together in one great and dusty expanse. "These three separate things are only separate according to some rules I can forget about for the rest of my life."



An archival photo of Rebecca Solnit. She has written a new memoir, "Recollections of My Nonexistence." Jon Winet

Rebecca Solnit weaves as much as she writes. Her writing is steeped in patterns and connections. Virginia Woolf, the Zapatista uprising, Nelson Mandela will all unite to offer lessons on hope. Maybe the best example, though, are the "Invisible City" atlases she creates (one for San Francisco, one for New Orleans and one for New York), which pair maps and essays. In these books, her mind is mapped out visually. On one image of San Francisco, a collection of queer public spaces is shown alongside Monarch butterfly habitats. On another, the city's lost industries of the 1960s along with the still surviving 6 a.m. bars.

Often, reading Solnit's work can feel like floating down a river with no map. There are detours and oxbows, points of confluence, broad deltas that lead in many directions, sometimes over waterfalls, and then to the ocean.

"I'm the kid in — do you remember the movie 'The Sixth Sense'?" she asks. "Do you remember he's like, 'I see dead people'? I always felt like 'I see patterns.'"

The threads for these patterns come partly from an unfathomably wide set of interests, but they also derive from the simple act of living. "There is a way that if you write nonfiction, your entire life is a research expedition and everything is potentially material," Solnit says. "Not in the sense of exploiting people when they confide in you, but of constantly discovering and discovering patterns and meanings and connections and possibilities and finding unexpected subjects."

In this sense, Solnit is almost always writing, she says. Some days, that's a footnote. Some days it's revision and subtraction. "That's writing. Thinking is writing. I actually lay in bed for a while and thought about the book I'm working on now before I got up. So there's, you know, there are so many things that are writing."

Sometimes, she says, not writing is its own sort of writing. "You let the well recharge. You let the fields lie fallow. Sometimes you go away, because you get stuck at a certain point or you just kind of burn out in a small way. Going and doing something completely different is also an important part of writing."



Rebecca Solnit at the site of a research trip to Utah's Great Salt Lake Spiral Jetty. The photograph was taken by Mark Klett. Solnit offered to cook for one of his research trips in exchange for picking his brain about a topic she was working on. He says the exchange wasn't a fair one. (He knew very little about the subject at hand, but she was a terrific chef.)Mark Klett

The plan, Solnit wrote in an email, was to meet “at the monument at the eastern tip of the Panhandle” around 5 p.m., “dusk-ish.” She’d agreed to lead an informal tour around the neighborhood that was, in 1980, her introduction to the city, the one she thanks in “Recollections of My Nonexistence” for “an education in urbanism.”

Solnit points out the ghosts of Laundromats and corner stores that often get called liquor stores, but are a lot more than that to the neighborhoods they serve. She waves at the Patty Hearst kidnap house and at what was once an AIDS hospice.

Would she consider herself a nostalgic person?

She thinks for a moment. “I’m deeply attached to the past.” But nostalgia is sometimes too naive. “I think nostalgia is often a really simplified everything-was-better-MAGA (Make America Great Again) kinda thing.”

She trails off, lost for moment. “Sorry, looking at my apartment for the first time in a while. Do you see the brown thing across the street? ... They painted the building again. That’s the best paint job that place has had since 1980. First it was peach, then it was gray with red and blue trim, a palette that reminded me of men’s pajamas. And then it was a color I called ‘seasick green.’”

It’s a very simple paint job and not a particularly lovely one — gray on the bottom floor and a washed-out brown for the top two. But it was never about the paint job, it was about the “luminous home” that came thanks to James V. Young, the building manager whom she always just called Mr. Young. He let her apply for the spot under her mother’s name, took a chance and gave her — a “young, ignorant, poor and almost friendless” woman — a home. “That’s the garage Mr. Young hung out in. The one with the ‘No parking’...”

But back to nostalgia. “I do think some things were generally much better. I’m nostalgic for a quality of time and presence.” (Later she’ll add this: “I’m nostalgic for people who know where the hell they are.”)

There’s evidence that Solnit has sought to live a determinedly interesting life, one full of adventures to all parts of the globe and some deeply remote places, one that is open to most any experience as it greets her.

Geography always comes up when talking about Solnit, road trips here and there and back again. Catherine Harris, one longtime friend Solnit writes about meeting in “Recollections of My Nonexistence,” remembers a trip from San Francisco to Santa Fe. It was part research, part fun. (The film “Thelma and Louise” had just come out.) At one point they found themselves at the Grand Canyon. They had hoped to make it down to the base, but it wasn’t possible so instead they went for a shorter hike. “I remember popping up out of this canyon and being kind of farther than we should have been from the road,” Harris says. “We didn’t have water, and we had to keep going, and I had this sensation in me of, ‘Wow. I wish we were were better prepared.’ There was just such a calm acceptance from Rebecca of like ‘Oh well, we’ll be fine.’”

“She just knows how to make a way through this world and how to make sense of it and how to make it beautiful. Because then, you know, in the retelling of it, it becomes these adventures.”

These moments come up a lot. Stella Lochman, another friend and the research assistant for Solnit’s series of atlases, remembers a time when Solnit seemed to still everything around them. She and Solnit and a couple others had driven to Sacramento right after the 2016 election, a last-ditch protest against the impending presidency of Donald Trump. “That was the last — what, at the moment, seemed like the last bit of hope.” On the way back, Solnit

had them stop the car to take a walk in a delta. “We jsut looked at the birds and were just with each other and had this moment that was outside of time and space that I think is perfectly Rebecca.”

(It’s also worth noting that Solnit, many years ago, gave Lochman a sort of permission to remain in San Francisco. She didn’t have to move to New York to be somebody. “She really changed my life. ... No one had ever told me that before. No one had ever told me San Francisco was enough.”)

Other friends remember gifts of kumquats and having known her for just a short time before they were already in a car with her, off on some research trip — maybe to the desert or to Detroit or to New Orleans, post-Katrina.



Archival images of the writer Rebecca Solnit. The image on the right was taken by her friend Catherine Harris. Harris remembers a road tripping from San Francisco to Santa Fe with Solnit. "She knows how to make a way through this world. Photograph on the right by Catherine Harris /

Solnit has given away much of herself in her writing. She’s written about a cruel father and cold mother, whom she would later take care of as Alzheimer’s erased all the stories her mother held.

In "Recollections of My Nonexistence," she writes about her escape from that life and her search for a new one, made up of punks and queers in San Francisco and beyond. "The gay men and lesbians around me encouraged me to imagine that gender is whatever you want it to be, and that the rules were breakable" she writes, "and that the price to pay for breaking them was generally worth it and then some."

Femnism and the violence and erasure women endure have often been central to Solnit's writing. A great many people probably know her as the author of "Men Explain Things to Me." She continues on that path in this new memoir. She includes a frontispiece, an image of a small desk, "a dainty Victorian piece of furniture," as she describes it, upon which she's written millions of words. (It still exists in her home, and it, too, is white.) The desk, with "dowled legs," "knobby ornaments" and "drawer pulls like tassels or teardrops" once belonged to a friend who was almost stabbed to death by an ex-boyfriend a year before gifting it to Solnit. "Someone tried to silence her," she writes. "Then she gave me a platform for my voice."

To this and other stories, she adds her own experiences of being followed at night, or getting mugged and being disbelieved. But even as she writes about her life, there's a sense that she's not writing about herself so much as in service of a greater story. "I am a person who's probably luckier than — I know I'm luckier than a lot of people. I got published. I didn't get raped. I didn't get murdered," she says. But, then, if this is lucky, there is no such thing. "Even my extremely mild version of it allows me to bear witness to the forces that want to exterminate (women)," she says. As she writes in her book, "It gets you even if it doesn't get you."

It's a shattering truth, and yet, somehow, Solnit has not abandoned her politics of hope.

During the second Bush administration, a little more than a month after the United States went to war with Iraq, Solnit wrote a treatise, of sorts, on hope. Her point was that not knowing the future gives us cause for hope. She quotes from Virginia Woolf's journal: "The future is dark, which is on the whole, the best thing the future could be."

"Dark," Solnit clarified, means inscrutable, not terrible.

The second Bush administration seems like a faraway place now. "At the time," Solnit says, "he seemed like the worst president ever, and now he seems like an incredibly law-abiding, disciplined, articulate person, none of which he was, but, you know, we're grading on a curve." Still, in many things, but especially the state of the world, Solnit tries to take a very, very long view. "What data do you take in?" she asks. "Feminism is so much more dynamic and exciting than it was my entire adult life until 2013. And there's been so much progress in actually addressing racism, transphobia, homophobia, misogyny, etc."

"It's that bizarre experience of looking at these things that are extraordinarily horrible with a certain amount of elation because we're finally naming them and doing something about them."



An archival photo of Rebecca Solnit. She has written a new memoir, "Recollections of My Nonexistence." Jon Winet

In "Recollections of My Nonexistence" Solnit writes briefly about a church not two blocks from her old home in Western Addition. The New Strangers Home Baptist church, "a three-story Victorian building with two cross-topped turrets like grain silos on either side of the building." She writes about wondering what a "new stranger might be" whenever she'd pass by.

The church is still there, and on the evening of our walk, she came to be in front of it once again. There was music coming from inside, and so, without any hesitation, she walked up the steps. The man at the door nodded. "Welcome. Welcome."

"Thank you. Thank you. God bless you," Solnit said. "We just wanted to look for a second."

The group inside, mostly young people, sang in Spanish to a sort of soft-rock backing track.

"I used to live here for a long, long time," Solnit told the man as she left.

Back on the sidewalk, walking again. “That is not something I expected,” Solnit said. “It’s still the New Strangers Home.”

For a moment, in the quiet, there was a very clear sense that perhaps she’d found another connection, another thread to follow somewhere far away.

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