

"Made me cackle and nod in
terrified recognition." —Lena Dunham

BUNNY

A Novel by

MONA AWAD

Author of

13 WAYS OF LOOKING AT A FAT GIRL

Bunny

✕

Mona Awad

VIKING

VIKING
An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC
penguinrandomhouse.com

Copyright © 2019 by Mona Awad

Penguin supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin to continue to publish books for every reader.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Awad, Mona, author.

Title: Bunny / Mona Awad.

Description: New York, New York : Viking, an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, [2019] |

Identifiers: LCCN 2018045360 (print) | LCCN 2018048708 (ebook) | ISBN 9780525559740 (ebook) | ISBN 9780525559733 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781984878731 (export)

Classification: LCC PS3601.W35 (ebook) | LCC PS3601.W35 B86 2019 (print) | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018045360>

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Cover design by Jason Ramirez
Cover hand lettering by Grace Han

Version_1

For Jess

Contents

[Title Page](#)
[Copyright](#)
[Dedication](#)

[Part One](#)

[Part Two](#)

[Part Three](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)
[About the Author](#)

Part One

1.

We call them Bunnies because that is what they call each other. Seriously. Bunny.

Example:

Hi, Bunny!

Hi, Bunny!

What did you do last night, Bunny?

I hung out with you, Bunny. Remember, Bunny?

That's right, Bunny, you hung out with me and it was the best time I ever had.

Bunny, I love you.

I love you, Bunny.

And then they hug each other so hard I think their chests are going to implode. I would even secretly hope for it from where I sat, stood, leaned, in the opposite corner of the lecture hall, department lounge, auditorium, bearing witness to four grown women—my academic peers—cooingly strangle each other hello. Or good-bye. Or *just because you're so amazing, Bunny*. How fiercely they gripped each other's pink-and-white bodies, forming a hot little circle of such rib-crushing love and understanding it took my breath away. And then the nuzzling of ski-jump noses, peach fuzzy cheeks. Temples pressed against temples in a way that made me think of the labial rubbing of the bonobo or the telepathy of beautiful, murderous children in horror films. All eight of their eyes shut tight as if this collective asphyxiation were a kind of religious bliss. All four of their glossy mouths making squealing sounds of monstrous love that hurt my face.

I love you, Bunny.

I quietly prayed for the hug implosion all year last year. That their ardent squeezing might cause the flesh to ooze from the sleeves, neckholes, and A-line hems of their cupcake dresses like so much inane frosting. That they would get tangled in each

other's *Game of Thrones* hair, choked by the ornate braids they were forever braiding into each other's heart-shaped little heads. That they would choke on each other's blandly grassy perfume.

Never happened. Not once.

They always came apart from these embraces intact and unwounded despite the ill will that poured forth from my staring eyes like so much comic-book-villain venom. Smiling at one another. Swinging clasped hands. Skins aglow with affection and belonging as though they'd just been hydrated by the purest of mountain streams.

Bunny, I love you.

Completely immune to the disdain of their fellow graduate student. Me. Samantha Heather Mackey. Who is not a Bunny. Who will never be a Bunny.

I pour myself and Ava more free champagne in the far corner of the tented green, where I lean against a white Doric pillar bedecked with billowing tulle. September. Warren University. The Narrative Arts department's annual welcome back *Demitasse*, because this school is too Ivy and New England to call a party a party. Behold the tiger-lily-heavy centerpieces. Behold the Christmas-lit white gauze floating everywhere like so many ghosts. Behold the pewter trays of salmon pinwheels, duck-liver crostini topped with little sugared orchids. Behold the white people in black discussing grants they earned to translate poets no one reads from the French. Behold the lavish tent under which the overeducated mingle, well versed in every art but the one of conversation. Smilingly oblivious to the fact that they are in the mouth of hell. Or as Ava and I call it, the Lair of Cthulhu. Cthulhu is a giant squid monster invented by a horror writer who went insane and died here. And you know what, it makes sense. Because you can feel it when you're walking down the streets beyond the Warren Bubble that this town is a wrong town. Something not quite right about the houses, the trees, the light. Bring this up and most people just look at you. But not Ava. Ava says, *My god, yes. The town, the houses, the trees, the light—it's all fucked.*

I stand here, I sway here, full of tepid sparkling and animal livers and whatever hard alcohol Ava keeps pouring from her

Drink Me flask into my plastic cup. “What’s in this again?” I ask.

“Just drink it,” she says.

I observe from behind borrowed sunglasses as the women whom I must call my colleagues reunite after a summer spent apart in various trying locales such as remote tropical islands, the south of France, the Hamptons. I watch their fervent little bodies lunge for each other in something like rapture. Nails the color of natural poisons digging into each other’s forearms with the force of what I keep telling myself is feigned, surely feigned, affection. Shiny lips parting to call each other by their communal pet name.

“Jesus, are they for real?” Ava whispers in my ear now. She has never seen them up close. Didn’t believe me when I first told her about them last year. Said, *There is no way grown women act like that. You’re making this up, Smackie.* Over the summer, I started to think I had too. It is a relief in some ways to see them now, if only to confirm I am not insane.

“Yes,” I say. “Too real.”

I watch her survey them through her fishnet veil, her David Bowie eyes filled with horror and boredom, her mouth an unimpressed red line.

“Can we go now?”

“I can’t leave yet,” I say, my eyes still on them. They’ve pulled apart from one another at last, their twee dresses not even ruffled. Their shiny heads of hair not even disturbed. Their skins glowing with health insurance as they all crouch down in unison to collectively coo at a professor’s ever jumping shih tzu.

“*Why?*”

“I told you, I have to make an appearance.”

Ava looks at me, slipping drunkenly down the pillar. I have said hello to no one. Not the poets who are their own fresh, grunty hell. Not the new incoming fiction writers who are laughing awkwardly by the shrimp tower. Not even Benjamin, the friendly administrator to whom I usually cling at these sorts of functions, helping him dollop quivering offal onto dried bits of toast. Not my Workshop leader from last spring, Fosco, or any other member of the esteemed faculty. *And how was your summer, Sarah? And how’s the thesis coming, Sasha?* Asked with polite indifference. Getting my name wrong always. Whatever response I offer—an

earnest confession of my own imminent failure, a bald-faced lie that sets my face aflame—will elicit the same knowing nod, the same world-weary smile, a delivery of platitudes about the Process being elusive, the Work being a difficult mistress. *Trust, Sasha. Patience, Sarah. Sometimes you have to walk away, Serena. Sometimes, Stephanie, you have to seize the bull by the horns.* This will be followed by the recounting of a similar creative crisis/breakthrough they experienced while on a now-defunct residency in remote Greece, Brittany, Estonia. During which I will nod and dig my fingernails into my upper-arm flesh.

And obviously I haven't talked to the Lion. Even though he's here, of course. Somewhere. I saw him earlier out of the corner of my eye, more maned and tattooed than ever, pouring himself a glass of red wine at the open bar. Though he didn't look up, I felt him see me. And then I felt him see me see him see me and keep pouring. I haven't seen him since then so much as sensed him in my nape hair. When we first arrived, Ava felt he must be nearby *because look, the sky just darkened out of nowhere.*

This evening, all I have done in terms of socializing is half smile at the one the Bunnies call Psycho Jonah, my social equivalent among the poets, who is standing alone by the punch, smiling beatifically in his own antidepressant-fueled fever dream.

Ava sighs and lights a cigarette with one of the many tea lights that dot our table. She looks back at the Bunnies, who are now stroking each other's arms with their small, small hands. "I miss you, Bunny," they say to each other in their fake little girl voices, even though they are standing right fucking next to each other, and I can taste the hate in their hearts like iron on my tongue.

"I miss *you*, Bunny. This summer was so hard without you. I barely wrote a word, I was so, so sad. Let's never ever part again, please?"

Ava laughs out loud at this. Actually laughs. Throws her feathery head back. Doesn't bother to cover her mouth with her gloved hand. It's a delicious, raucous sound. Ringing in the air like the evening's missing music.

"*Shhhhh*," I hiss at her. But it's already done.

The laughter causes the one I call the Duchess to turn her head of long, silver faery-witch locks in our direction. She looks at us.

First at Ava. Then at me. Then at Ava again. She is surprised, perhaps, to see that for once I'm not alone, that I have a friend. Ava meets her look with wide-open eyes the way I do in my dream stares. Ava's gaze is formidable and European. She continues to smoke and sip my champagne without breaking eye contact. She once told me about a staring contest she had with a gypsy she met on a metro in Paris. The woman was staring at her, so Ava stared back—the two of them aiming their gazes at each other like guns—all the way across the City of Lights. Just looking at each other from opposite shores of the rattling train. Eventually Ava took off her earrings, still not taking her eyes off the woman. Why? Because her assumption at that point, of course, was that the two of them would fight to the death. But when the train pulled into the last stop on the line, the woman just stood to exit, and when she did so, she even held back the sliding doors politely, so Ava could go first.

What's the lesson here, Smackie?

Don't jump to conclusions?

Never lower your gaze first.

The Duchess, in turning toward us, causes a ripple effect of turning among the other Bunnies. First Cupcake looks over. Then Creepy Doll with her tiger eyes. Then Vignette with her lovely Victorian skull face, her stoner mouth wide open. They each look at Ava, then at me, in turn, scanning down from our heads to our feet, their eyes taking us in like little mouths sipping strange drinks. As they do, their noses twitch, their eight eyes do not blink, but stare and stare. Then they look back at the Duchess and lean in to each other, their lip-glossed mouths forming whispery words.

Ava squeezes my arm, hard.

The Duchess turns and arches an eyebrow at us. She raises a hand up. Is there an invisible gun in it? No. It's an empty, open hand. With which she then waves. At me. With something like a smile on her face. *Hi*, her mouth says.

My hand shoots up of its own accord before I can even stop myself. I'm waving and waving and waving. *Hi*, I'm saying with my mouth, even though no sound comes out.

Then the rest of the Bunnies hold up a hand and wave too.

We're all waving at one another from across the great shores of the tented green.

Except Ava. She continues to smoke and stare at them like they're a four-headed beast. When at last I lower my hand, I turn to her. She's looking at me like I'm something worse than a stranger.

2.

The next day, I find the invitation in my school mailbox, expertly folded into a white origami swan. One of them must have slipped it in between the experimental poetry journals and the postcard-size ads for faculty readings, a Romanian documentary, and a one-woman play about the town being The Body and The Body being the town. I came here early, in the off-hours, to see if my monthly stipend check had arrived. No check. I tip the rest of my mail into the recycling bin, then stare at the swan, upon which one of them has drawn a rudimentary face with magenta ink. Two bleeding dots for eyes—one on either side of its very sharp beak, which, with the help of some dimples and inky lipstick—appear to be smiling at me. On one of its wings, the words *Open Me* ☺

*Samantha Heather Mackey,
YOU are cordially invited to . . .*

SMUT SALON

*When: The Blue Hour ☺
Where: You know where ☺
Bring: Yourself, please ☺*

I stare at the loopy, shimmering font, the little hearts one of them (had to be Cupcake, or possibly Creepy Doll?) has drawn around my name. I feel myself start to sweat though it's freezing in this hallway. Mistake. Has to be. No way in hell they would ever invite me to Smut Salon. That was their own private Bunny thing, like Touching Tuesdays or binge-watching *The Bachelorette* or making little woodland creatures out of marzipan. Something

they'd talk about in low voices all last year, while we were waiting for Workshop to begin.

Smut Salon last night was SO crazy oh my god.

I drank WAY too much last night at Smut Salon.

I was thinking that for next Smut Salon we should . . .

And then they'd cup each other's ears and whisper the rest.

I scan the invitation again. Impossible that it's for me. But it has my name on it and everything. *Samantha Heather Mackey* flanked by bloated hearts. At the sight of my name rendered in those loops, I feel a weird and shameful swelling in my heart. I recall them waving last night. First the Duchess, then the other Bunnies. How I waved and waved back so adamantly.

It'll be just us five again in Workshop this semester. Which starts tomorrow. I'd been dreading it all summer. Just me and them in a room with no visible escape routes for two hours and twenty minutes. Every week for thirteen weeks. I imagined it would be much like last year. Me on one side of the table and them on the other, sitting in a huglike huddle, becoming one body with four heads the more I narrowed my eyes. The Duchess reading aloud from a diamond-etched pane of glass while the Bunnies closed their eyes as if hearing an actual aria. Holding hands while they praised each other's stories. *Can I have five thousand more pages of this, please? Can I just say I loved living in your lines and that's where I want to live now forever?* Petting each other absently while they discussed the weekly reading. Suddenly erupting with laughter at an inside joke, a laughter in which I never participated because I was never in on the joke, which they never explained because they were too busy laughing. *Sorry, Samantha,* they might say between gasps, *you weren't there.* No, I might agree, I wasn't. It could go on for several minutes, this laughter. They would shake with it, grow teary-eyed, grip each other's wrists and shoulders in the throes of it while I sat on the other side of the table, watching them or a nothing space between their heads. Meanwhile, Fosco observed us all, saying nothing. I started coming to class later and later. And by the end, I didn't come at all. *Where's Samantha?* I imagined Fosco asking. *We have no idea.* Shrugs of their sweated shoulders. Helpless smiles.

But maybe they're actually trying to include me this year? Maybe this invitation is a gesture of kindness? Or it might be a joke. Of course it's a joke. I picture a pair of small-fingered hands folding the swan at a grand oak desk that looks out onto a view of canopied trees. A balmy grin biting on itself with small white teeth.

"Bitches," I say very quietly in the hall.

"Hey, Sam."

I jump. Jonah. Standing beside me, leafing through his mailbox, smiling his *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* smile.

"Jonah, you scared me."

"Sorry, Sam." He really looks sorry. "Hey, who were you talking to just now?"

"No one. Just me. I talk to myself sometimes."

"Me too." He grins. "All the time." Soup-bowl haircut. An unzipped parka that he never takes off. Underneath he's wearing a T-shirt featuring a kitten playing keyboards in outer space. Jonah's a recovering addict who is so saturated with meds that he speaks as though his voice is tunneling through sludge. He's the best poet in the Program by far. Also the friendliest, the most generous with cigarettes. I don't quite know why he's so reviled by his fellow poets—apart from a couple of mixed-genre classes, poets and fiction writers tend to be siloed from one another both academically and socially. But I've seen Jonah trailing behind his cohort on the street, sitting in the far corner of class in Workshop, smilingly staring into space while they eviscerate him with their feedback. I know what this feels like, of course. The difference is, Jonah doesn't seem to care. He appears to be more or less content to remain adrift and immune in his poetry cloud.

"What are you up to, Sam?"

"Oh, just looking for my stipend check."

"Oh, hey, me too." He looks ecstatic. "I need it so much. I bought all these books and records and then I pretty much had to live on pasta for the rest of the month. Do you ever do that?"

"Yeah." I don't do that. I can't afford to. I stiffen a little.

"Hey, do you think you'll go to this?" He holds up the play postcard.

“No,” I snap. Then I feel bad. I add, “I sort of hate plays, Jonah.”

“Oh. Me too, mostly. Hey, I saw you at the party last night. I had an extra smoke waiting for you in the alley but you never showed.”

“Yeah. I left early.”

“Oh.” He nods in a dreamy, knowing way. I’ve basically gotten to know Jonah over shared cigarettes in the alleys, corners, and back porches of the various department parties and functions I’m trying to dodge. I’ll be sneaking out the door, desperate to escape, and I’ll find him out there in the dark cold, shivering and smoking by the dumpster. *Hey, Samantha.* That’s how I learned that, like me, he’s the only one in his cohort who didn’t come from a renowned undergraduate program. That he too applied to what we are continually told is one of the most exclusive, selective, hard-to-get-into MFA programs in the country on a lark, thinking No Way in Hell.

Isn’t it a trip to be here? he said to me on the back porch at one of the first parties.

Yeah, I slurred, my eyes on the Bunnies, already in the midst of one of their communal, eyes-shut-tight, boa-constricting embraces, even though they’d only just met.

It’s sort of like a dream, Jonah continued. *I keep thinking when will I wake up, you know? Like maybe I should ask someone to punch me.*

You mean pinch you?

A pinch wouldn’t wake me up from this. And if it did, I’d be back in Fairbanks, living in my dad’s basement. Where would you be if I punched you, Samantha?

Staring at the brick wall of my life from behind a cash register in the intermountain West, I thought. Writing myself elsewhere in the evenings.

Mordor, I told Jonah.

We better not punch each other then, I guess, he said, grinning at me.

“So how’s your writing going, Sam? Did you *take advantage of the summer?*” He smiles. He’s making fun of our Mixed-Genre Workshop leader last spring, Halstrom, who kept telling us we

must not let the summer pass us by. Because this year, the final year, in which we're all expected to produce a complete manuscript by April, would go by oh so quickly, we wouldn't believe it. Literally in the blink of an eye, all of this—he gestured with his manicured hand to the stale classroom air around us, the fake pillars, the unlit fireplace, the cavelike walls—would be gone. I watched the Bunnies shiver and give each other a group hug with only their eyes. The poets brace themselves for imminent, overeducated poverty.

“I pretty much wasted it,” Jonah says. “I mean, I wrote like two volumes of poems but they're terrible so I'm back to square one. I'll bet you wrote like crazy this summer, though.”

I think of the summer, my days spent gazing at dust motes from behind the Warren music library information kiosk, my nights on Ava's roof, drinking and tangoing ourselves into oblivion. Sometimes I'd stare at a blank page, a pencil held limply in my hand. Sometimes I'd draw eyes on the page. Scribble the words *what am I doing here? what am I doing here?* over and over. Mostly I just stared at the wall. The page and the wall were one and the same to me all summer.

“I don't know about *like crazy*. . . .”

“I still remember that piece you brought into Workshop last year. You know, the one everybody hated?”

“Yeah, Jonah, I remember.” The horrified faces. Heads slightly bowed.

“I still think about it. I mean, it was pretty hard to forget. It was so . . .”

“Mean?” I offer. “*Willfully twisted? Aggressively dark?* I know, I think that was pretty much the consensus.”

“No! I mean yes, it was mean and twisted and dark and it actually scared the living shit out of me for weeks. But I loved all that. I love how mean and twisted and dark it is.” He beams at me. “Who ever thought going to an aquarium could be so treacherous and horrifying, you know?”

“Yeah.”

“But if you really think about it, it kind of is.”

“Thanks, Jonah. I liked your piece that everyone hated too.”

“Really? I was going to scrap it but—”

“Don’t do that, that’s what they *want*.” I say this more intensely, more bitterly than I intend.

Jonah looks confused. “What?”

“Nothing. I should probably go. Late for class.” I’m not late for class. There is no class now. But I imagine Ava waiting for me outside by the bench, giving undergraduates her death stare. *Hurry the fuck up, Smackie.*

“Oh, okay. Hey, Sam, can I read more of your stuff sometime? I kind of dig it. I mean, I really dig it. I was actually kind of jonesing for it after I read it, you know?”

“Um—I guess so. Sure.”

“Cool. Maybe we could hang out sometime and . . .”

Down the corridor, behind Jonah, I hear the elevator ding and my stomach flips. Because I know before the doors even open who it will be. I know even before I see his tall, sleek frame exit the doors, whistling. Mane a carefully cultivated chaos. Arms inked with watchful crows. The Lion. Approaching us. Wearing his usual obscure noise band T-shirt. One of the bands we used to talk about back when we used to talk. He carries with him the scent of the green tea he used to brew for us in his office, which he would ceremoniously stir, then pour into mud-colored, handleless cups. *How’s the writing, Samantha?* he might ask in his deep Scottish lilt.

Now I see his leonine face fall slightly at the sight of students with whom he must fraternize. Ask about their summers. Their writing. Did they get their stipend checks okay? And then there’s the fact that I’m one of the students. Makes it much more difficult. But he smiles. Of course he does. It’s his job.

“Hello, Jonah. Samantha.” Definite voice drop when he said my name, though he tries to make it sound cool, even-keeled. Small, subtle nod of his maned head.

I watch him busy himself at his own cubby, which is full to exploding with letters and books. Humming a little. Taking his time.

“Samantha, are you okay?” Jonah says.

I should just walk over there like I’ve imagined doing how many times, tap him on the shoulder and say, *Look, can we just talk?* He’ll look surprised, perhaps. Caught off guard. *Talk?* he’ll