



# Teaching with WHAT HAPPENED WAS: GENDER STUDIES

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Here, you'll find several ways to incorporate *What Happened Was:* into your gender studies class.

## Class Visit

If you're teaching *What Happened Was:*, Anna Leahy will waive her fee for a virtual visit tailored to your class, schedule permitting. To arrange a class visit, contact her at [annaleahy@gmail.com](mailto:annaleahy@gmail.com).

## Lesson #1: #MeToo

At the end of 2017, *Time Magazine* named The Silence Breakers of the #MeToo movement Person of the Year. Activist Tarana Burke coined the #MeToo hashtag in 2006, and a decade later, the media was focused on high-profile women accusing high-profile men of sexual harassment and assault. In that context, *What Happened Was:* was instigated at a dinner with colleagues, when Anna Leahy posited that no woman could advance in her career without experiencing sexual harassment. Growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, she had considered the experiences she recounts in the poems as par for the course of her life. She had defined these situations—or they had been defined for her—as not that bad.

### Other reference points:

- The EEOC definition of “sexual harassment”

- Title IX, Office of Civil Rights, U.S. Department of Education
- The Violence Against Women Act
- “Person of the Year: The Silence Breakers,” *Time*, 18 December 2017
- the testimony of Anita Hill (1991) and Christine Blasey Ford (2020)

### Questions for discussion:

- Look up Title IX and your institution’s Title IX policy. How would you apply that context to events described in “What Happened Was: I was at a party at a fraternity house”?
- Look up the federal EEOC policy and Title VII. Would the events described in “What Happened Was: I had good news” be considered reportable under these workplace policies?
- Read a few news articles about the confirmation hearing testimony of Anita Hill in 1991 and Christine Blasey Ford in 2020. Why does “What Happened Was: cause & effect” quote these two women? How are their words similar and different?
- The last two poems in the title series suggest there’s more to say in this cultural story of #MeToo. What other stories from history, recent media coverage, or personal experience break the silence about gender bias, disparity, harassment, or assault in education and the workplace?

## ABOUT ANNA LEAHY

Anna Leahy’s poetry books include *What Happened Was:*, *Aperture*, and *Constituents of Matter*, as well as three chapbooks. She is the author of the nonfiction book *Tumor* and co-author of *Generation Space: A Love Story*, a blend of memoir and history of the space age. She edited the collection *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom*, which launched the New Writing Viewpoints series focused on teaching, and *What We Talk about When We Talk about Creative Writing*, which celebrated the series’ tenth anniversary. She directs the MFA in Creative Writing program at Chapman University and edits the international *Tab Journal*. Leahy holds a PhD in English with a certificate in Women’s Studies and an MFA in Creative Writing.



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## Lesson #2: “Solve for x”

The poem “Solve for x” insists on the accumulation of meanings of  $x$ , including but not limited to a sex chromosome. In this poem,  $x$  and  $y$  can be seen as variables—or ideas—constrained by the given gender formula where we find them. This poem also acknowledges that  $y$  comes with different expectations and privileges than  $x$ . It also questions the binary and challenges the cultural either/or of gender assumptions.

### Questions for discussion:

- For each mention of  $x$  in the poem, determine the literal meaning and what the phrase suggests about traditional gender roles and implicit bias. For instance, “ $x$  is the horizontal axis” refers literally to a mathematical graph but also might suggest a woman lying down.
- Consider the line “ $x$  is not that bad—.” It can be seen as a comment on “What Happened Was: I had good news,” and it’s repeated in “What Happened Was: not my story to tell.” In the introduction to the anthology called *Not That Bad*, Roxane Gay writes, “Allowing myself to believe that being gang-raped wasn’t ‘that bad’ allowed me to break down my trauma into something more manageable... But in the long run, diminishing my experience hurt me far more than it helped.” How are we encouraged to downplay trauma? How can society acknowledge that sexual harassment and assault is ‘that bad’?

**Exercise:** “Solve for x” focuses mostly on  $x$  and suggests that  $x$  stands in for those who identify as women. Write your own poem or list that is “Solve for y” or that focuses on nonbinary experiences.