

Grip: A Memoir of Fierce Attractions

Nina Hamberg

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A teenage Nina Hamberg lies in her divorced parents' old bedroom, trying to reason with a man who has crept into bed with her and threatened her with a knife. When offering to go to the kitchen and make him a cup of coffee only amplifies his rage, she surprises herself by uttering faintly: "What would your mother say if she could see you now?"

The man slices her leg and flees.

After this encounter, Hamberg, enraged by her own helplessness and detecting feigned concern in her mother toward the incident, decides to take charge of her own life and present herself as a capable, independent woman. Neither hiding the effects of her assault nor hiding from them, she copes by showing the world she can handle the physical and emotional scars of a broken family and broken trust. She enrolls in a karate class, annoyed by the stereotype that women have no desire to defend themselves.

Hamberg recounts her experiences with extensive detail and candor, recognizing that such personal insight transforms her work from history to literature. From the silhouetted man lying next to her, who "gave off the heat of a dog's mouth," to the way her father sobbed "like a man in prayer" after cursing at her mother, she describes thoroughly each man in her life, clarifying the impression with which each encumbers her.

Structurally, *Grip* is a chronology of Hamberg's lovers, whom she characterizes meticulously via sensory imagery and private anecdotes. She recounts relationships with men who take advantage of her financially, threaten her physically, and cheat on her, but she depicts herself with a karate belt and a reflective eye. She reassures readers that even during these episodes, although she submits to the manipulation and allure of individual men, she remains conscious of maintaining personal integrity when at odds with the male sex collectively.

"All my life, I'd used reason to prevail but crowds had never parted for me before," she writes. "I could see how some people became addicted to their fury." Persistence becomes the weapon that helps release Hamberg from even the most masterful martial arts adversaries.

Hamberg provides provocative insight to demonstrate how she renewed her sense of security from within. Although emotional instability, ideals, and aggressive males influence her actions, weakening her at times, she asserts her own internal strength until she finally meets a man who she doesn't need to prove it to, and then she stops having to prove it to herself.

Once Hamberg can forgive and trust, there is no longer the need for compliance or defiance toward gender roles or a violent world. Those interested in women's issues will find *Grip* a refreshing alternative to moralizing feminist tropes, meanwhile appreciating Hamberg's honesty and accuracy in recollecting her own story.

LYDIA BELANGER (July 18, 2011)

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