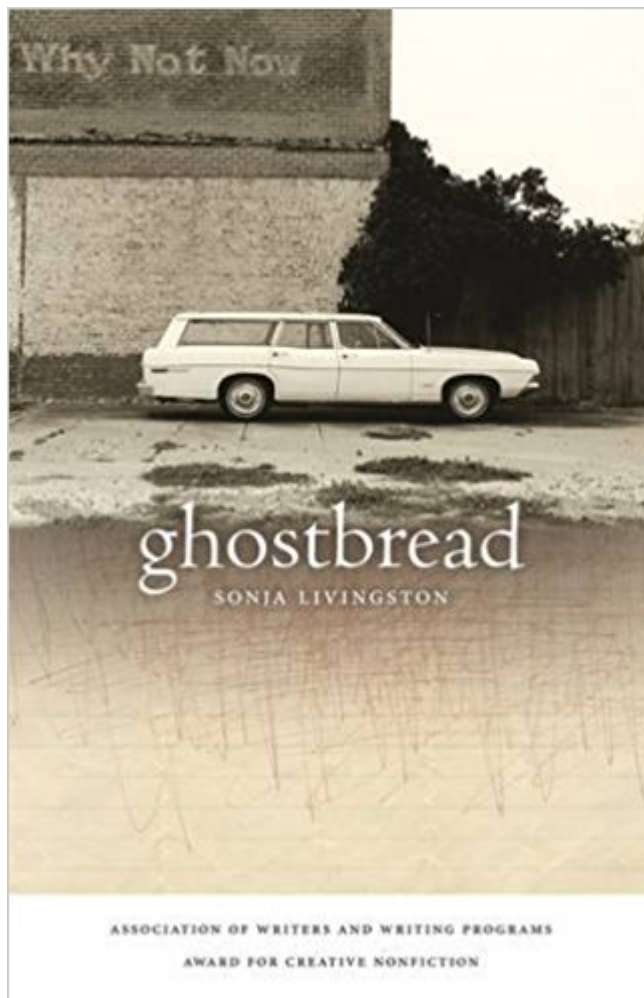


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# Ghostbread



## Synopsis

“When you eat soup every night, thoughts of bread get you through.” Ghostbread makes real for us the shifting homes and unending hunger that shape the life of a girl growing up in poverty during the 1970s. One of seven children brought up by a single mother, Sonja Livingston was raised in areas of western New York that remain relatively hidden from the rest of America. From an old farming town to an Indian reservation to a dead-end urban neighborhood, Livingston and her siblings follow their nonconformist mother from one ramshackle house to another on the perpetual search for something better. Along the way, the young Sonja observes the harsh realities her family encounters, as well as small moments of transcendent beauty that somehow keep them going. While struggling to make sense of her world, Livingston perceives the stresses and patterns that keep children—girls in particular—trapped in the cycle of poverty. Larger cultural experiences such as her love for Wonder Woman and Nancy Drew and her experiences with the Girl Scouts and Roman Catholicism inform this lyrical memoir. Livingston firmly eschews sentimentality, offering instead a meditation on what it means to hunger and showing that poverty can strengthen the spirit just as surely as it can grind it down.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Exquisite in its details and insights, Ghostbread shows us the invisible undersides of poverty. Sonja Livingston renders this so solidly that we come to understand the roots of despair, and the beauty that can be found in the midst of squalor. In an age when memoir exploits the seamier sides of life,

thrusting their authors into the limelight, this book holds back, quietly resisting shock value in favor of understanding. (Judith Kitchen author of *House on Eccles Road*) *Ghostbread* weaves together a child's experience of not belonging, the perilous ease of slipping into failure, and the deep love that can flow from even a highly troubled parent. This is rich, sensual storytelling. An amazing debut from a wonderful new writer. (Dinty W. Moore author of *Between Panic and Desire (American Lives)*) I know where I came from. With this declaration, the author of *Ghostbread* takes us on a journey through a childhood scarred by poverty and graced by love. Like an American version of Angela's Ashes, the book allows us to encounter and see, taste, and smell it through the eyes of a beleaguered and intelligent child. We are grateful to be reminded of the human reality at the heart of a world that is all too often hidden in governmental poverty indicators, and also glad that the author has survived to tell the tale. (Kathleen Norris author of *Acedia & Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life*) [A]n absolutely astonishing debut . . . harrowing and hilarious. (Caroline Leavitt author of *Girls in Trouble*) This moving and inspirational memoir deserves to find the same popularity as Jeannette Walls' *The Glass Castle*. Told in short vignettes, Sonja Livingston shares what it was like to grow up in poverty in the 1970s. Educators as well as high school students will find many insights about the strength of the individual spirit. (Judith Repman University Press Books) Livingston writes with an understated restraint and paints her past in careful detail. The result is captivating. *Ghostbread* is a heartrending encounter with an adept essayist. (ForeWord) Livingston reveals the daily challenges poverty-stricken young children face. Her thoughtful testimony sheds new light on a tragic predicament that now affects not only lower-income families, but the entire nation. (Booklist)

Sonja Livingston has earned a NYFA Fellowship, an Iowa Award, and Pushcart Prize nomination for her nonfiction writing. Her work has appeared in several textbooks on writing, as well as many journals, including the "Iowa Review," "Spoon River Poetry Review," "Alaska Quarterly Review," "AGNI," and others. She holds an M.S. Ed. from SUNY Brockport and an MFA from the University of New Orleans. Livingston teaches creative writing at the University of Memphis.

A child can teach us many things if we are willing to endure their sometimes-disjointed ramblings. Sonja Livingston's *Ghostbread* is fragmented into short chapters some a mere paragraph in length. The turnover of chapters is rapid with transitions that can become disruptive. Livingston's narration through the voice of a child becomes increasingly introspective and discerning as the work progresses. *Ghostbread* is a

coming of age story and an exploration of what perpetuates generational poverty in America. Ghostbread is unexpectedly rich and spurs a reassessment of American institutions such as religion, education, family and social welfare. Ghostbread is abundant in themes of fatherhood, race, bread and love. The voice of a child against these subjects is a contrast that works. Livingston uses well analogies, unexpected word combinations and a raw childlike honesty. Livingston arrives with first hand anecdotes that challenge our nation's entire systematic approach to poverty and arrives at this "A warm hand and words whispered into the ear are what we want. Paths that can be seen and followed and walked upon are what we most need" (239). Livingston, S. (2009). Ghostbread. Athens, GA. The University of Georgia Press.

Review for Sonja Livingston's book, Ghostbread Amuse-bouche: a French idiom that describes little portions of special food that the chef might send out on a whim or to clean the palate. Sonja Livingston's chapters, in her memoir, Ghostbread, all 122, all short and meaty, can be considered as sophisticated tidbits or even amuse-ame, short pieces to cleanse the soul. Livingston's writing exudes tragic circumstances without the tragedy of learned helplessness. Her narrator speaks with eloquent tolerance and understanding about growing up in unfortunate places in the 1970's. Her voice echoes a certain serenity about transition and loss, but tenacity and fortitude as well, not as garnish, but as deliberate choices for the narrator who gains insight into her own character with each sequential move as each course of her life unfolds, a life with myriad spices to be sure, but a life with no happy people as a foundation: no sustenance, no bread. Her sardonic tone is scrappy, and Livingston blends it into her prose like carefully measured teaspoons of cayenne. The reader laughs with her in her urgency to survive the scurrying predicaments in a dysfunctional family, but also feels the underlying pain of betrayal with every bite. If you received gift cards for the holidays, this book is a moveable feast. Every book club in the United States should consider Ghostbread as a selection to inspire heady group discussion. I will be teaching this book in my AP English Literature class for their summer reading. This memoir lends itself to many questions, but reading circles and classes might begin with these three: 1) Even though the narrator's voice reflects the New York area, what universal ideas does the author explore about growing up and adolescence? 2) What does Livingston's book offer in the understanding of poverty and children in modern America? 3) How do Livingston's short chapters compare and contrast with those of Barbara Kingsolver in The Poisonwood Bible?

I have never read a memoir before. This book is written in very short vignettes of chapters. It ought to be easy to put down, but the opposite is true. I couldn't wait to see what the next short section had in store for me. It is also an enlightening story for a person who has never known poverty or what it is like to grow up in such difficult circumstances.

Sonja Livingston's book *Ghostbread* is a work of prose poetry, lyrical and narrative as modern prose was first meant to be. Perhaps inspired by Baudelaire's *Little Poems in Prose*, Livingston's "Spleen of Western New York," offers a poet's eye view of poverty in American childhood. I was inspired by her little prose poem, "Miss Zucchini Blossom" (available at AGNI Online) to try the book as a nonfiction written by a poet. I want to encourage her and the readers to read little poems in prose as an accompaniment, to get a sense of what a poet can write as a book of literature. And *Ghostbread* reads like a book of short stories, in the tradition of Edgar Allan Poe, who wrote stories, poems, reviews and criticism equally well. Good Luck and enjoy! Allen Hagar

As an elementary school counselor, I found this book to be an eye opening memoir from Sonja Livingston. Sonja describes her life in poverty through the eyes of a child with great detail, emotion, and innocence. In reading this book, it allowed me, as well as many colleagues- teachers, administrators, and staff- to become more aware of the lives of so many children today who are faced with struggles at home including financial difficulties, alcohol and drug abuse, divorce, blended families, abuse, neglect, incarceration of a parent, and the list goes on. This book has given me an opportunity to discover what some children like Sonja are faced with on a daily basis and how resilient they can be with caring people and love in their lives. Sonja was fortunate to have a mother who loved her children deeply and believed in education; doing the best she could as a single mother living in poverty. As a school counselor, I believe that many educators become that person in a child's life who cares, nurtures, and is the "rock" who helps to build confidence in a child when parents are drowning in their personal struggles. I recommend this book to anyone who works with children, has children, or educates children. This book is an excellent tool for college course work (Freshman reading, Women's Studies, Child Psychology, Diversity, Counseling, Social Work, etc.). This book is sure to touch your heart.

I didn't think much of this book -- it's like a series of free-writing exercises. I have notebooks filled with such mini-essays. B/c of the format, it's hard to get much of a picture of the author -- mostly it's vignettes of a hard life. I'd have liked to know a lot more about, for example, the Indians Livingston's

fam lived with.

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Ghostbread

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