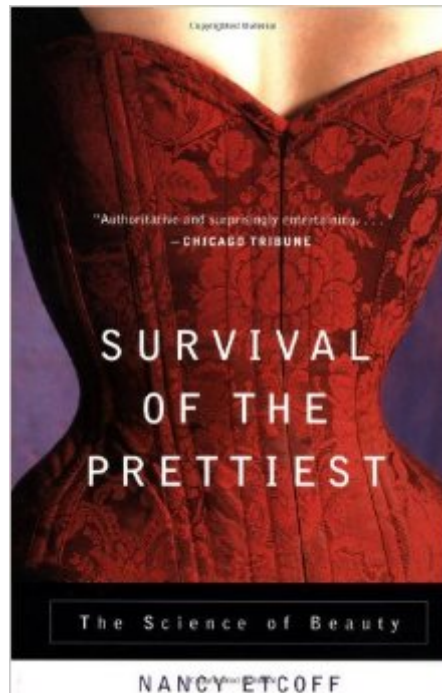


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Survival Of The Prettiest: The Science Of Beauty



Synopsis

In this provocative, witty, and thoroughly researched inquiry into what we find beautiful and why, Nancy Etcoff skewers one of our culture's most enduring myths, that the pursuit of beauty is a learned behavior. Etcoff, a faculty member at Harvard Medical School and a practicing psychologist at Massachusetts General Hospital, skewers the enduring myth that the pursuit of beauty is a learned behavior. Etcoff puts forth that beauty is neither a cultural construction, an invention of the fashion industry, nor a backlash against feminism, but instead is in our biology. It's an essential and ineradicable part of human nature that is revered and ferociously pursued in nearly every civilization--and for good reason. Those features to which we are most attracted are often signals of fertility and fecundity. When seen in the context of a Darwinian struggle for survival, our sometimes extreme attempts to attain beauty--both to become beautiful ourselves and to acquire an attractive partner--become understandable. Moreover, if we come to understand how the desire for beauty is innate, then we can begin to work in our interests, and not solely for the interests of our genetic tendencies.

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Customer Reviews

The Survival of the Prettiest is an eminently readable, wisdom-filled, witty and very well-documented report on the human concept and experience of beauty and its utility, especially human beauty, or the perceived lack thereof. It is an example of a way of looking at ourselves that is becoming increasingly of value, both in terms of the insights it affords, and in the way it frees us from the

muddled delusions of the past. This point of view is from the fledgling science of evolutionary psychology of which Professor Etcoff is a very persuasive spokesperson and practitioner. "Pretty is as pretty does" and "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, -that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" (Keats) are two widely differing attitudes toward beauty, but each in its way contains an essence of truth. However, rather than bring these or other presuppositions to what Etcoff has to say (as some readers have), I suggest we actually read what she has to say, and then draw our conclusions. What I predict will happen is that even the most ardent beauty-phobe will find something of value and enlightenment here. Unfortunately (and understandably) not all readers have been able to approach the subject with an open mind. I noticed that an anonymous "reader" brought anorexia and bulimia into the discussion and blamed the rise in their instance on "media images" of beauty. No doubt media images are partly to blame (if indeed these disorders have become more prevalent). But it is more likely that the apparent rise in anorexia and bulimia is the result of the fact that the counseling professions now recognize that these eating disorders exist. In the past the symptoms had no commonly agreed upon locus such as "anorexia" or "bulimia" to adhere to, so we really do not know how prevalent they were. But more important in terms of being a public health problem is the enormous increase in obesity in this country, now often identified as an eating disorder due to "carbohydrate intolerance." The numbers of obese Americans hugely overwhelms the number of anorexics and bulimics, and obesity can hardly be blamed on "media images." We can point to the "super-sizing" of fast food dispensers if we want to fix blame. However--and this is one of Etcoff's important points--it is not the media or advertizing that is primarily responsible for our perceptions of beauty (or our tendency to eat too much), but an inborn, predisposition that has proven adaptive in the past that makes us find some people pretty and some others not so pretty. Another "reader" claimed that Etcoff did not consider ideas of beauty in other cultures. That is incorrect, as anybody who has read the book knows. She devotes considerable ink to standards and ideals of beauty in cultures around the world and her observation is that ideals of beauty tend to be culture specific; that is, Ache tribesmen find their women and women of a neighboring tribe more attractive than European women. Indeed Etcoff reports that Asians typically find European and African noses not attractive because they are too large. Ache tribesmen actually made fun of the Caucasian anthropologists calling them "pyta puku, meaning longnose." (p. 139) Etcoff concluded that there were differences in standards of beauty, but that there were also similarities, and she goes into considerable depth detailing the studies. (See especially Chapter Five, "Feature Presentation.") Etcoff is also criticized for her many literary quotes, references and allusions. But to my discernment they are a strength of the book and not a weakness. A very important part of our

understanding of human nature comes not from the relatively new knowledge called science but from religion and literature. Etcoff is doubly wise to reference what great writers, statesmen and religions leaders have said about our ideas of beauty, first because what they say is worth knowing, and second because they express themselves so well. The anonymous reviewer who claimed to be a scientist perhaps ought to expand his or her reading to include wisdom from other sources, as has Etcoff. I just wish half of the writers writing today were one half as eloquent and readable as is Etcoff; and I'd settle for one-quarter as wise. One of the significant things that this book does is to show that evolutionary psychology, despite the beliefs of its critics (and even that of some of its practitioners), is not limited to using insights from biological evolution alone, but from cultural evolution as well. Etcoff's book is a splendid example of this wiser, broader, synergistically more powerful employment.--Dennis Littrell, author of "Understanding Evolution and Ourselves"

After reading "The Beauty Myth" by Naomi Wolf and writing for that book a nasty review I felt relieved by reading Nancy Etcoff's "Survival of The Prettiest". My original outrage in reading Wolf's book and my reaction to Etcoff's book weren't fortuitous as the following excerpt from "Survival of the Prettiest" shows:"The idea that beauty is unimportant or a cultural construct is the real beauty myth. We have to understand beauty, or we will always be enslaved by it.""Survival of the Prettiest" is not necessarily an original book. Most of what's on the book was previously published on Desmond Morris' "The Naked Ape" and "Intimate Behavior" and Richard Dawkins' "The Selfish Gene", among others. Etcoff's most original contribution is to put the more hardcore scientific views in a cultural context by extensively referencing from Plato to "Sleepless in Seattle". The book is short (maybe too short) and to the point. It includes the biological context of beauty with the idea of sexually selected handicaps such as the peacock's tail or the deer antlers (explained in much more detail in Dawkins' "The Selfish Gene"); the historical context of beauty from the Greek and Renaissance canons to high fashion; extremely short sections on the beauty of the human voice and the attractiveness of smells; and results from several studies showing how beauty is perceived and rewarded in our society. It's a very well written book by an author with exceptional credentials. Male and female attractiveness is discussed though with more emphasis on female beauty. I wish the small sub-sections on human voice and smell were entire chapters. There's even a short and funny dustjacket praise by no one less than Cindy Crawford herself!! It's worthwhile reading it but if you want a more comprehensive study you'll have to check the originals such as the ones mentioned above. Leonardo Alves - Houghton, Michigan - December 2002

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