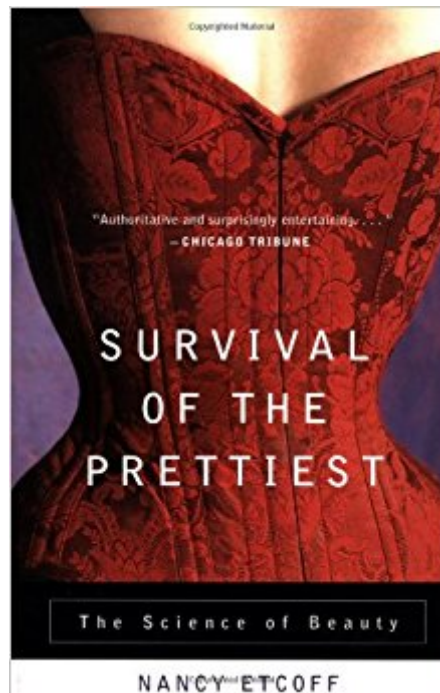




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# Survival Of The Prettiest: The Science Of Beauty



## Synopsis

A provocative and thoroughly researched inquiry into what we find beautiful and why, skewering the myth that the pursuit of beauty is a learned behavior. In *Survival of the Prettiest*, Nancy Etcoff, a faculty member at Harvard Medical School and a practicing psychologist at Massachusetts General Hospital, argues that beauty is neither a cultural construction, an invention of the fashion industry, nor a backlash against feminism—it's in our biology. Beauty, she explains, is 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—suddenly become much more understandable. Moreover, if we understand how the desire for beauty is innate, then we can begin to work in our own interests, and not just the interests of our genetic tendencies.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In the latter part of the 20th century, the adage "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder" has evolved far beyond its original intent as an admonition against false vanity to become a cultural manifesto used to explain phenomena as diverse as the art of Andy Warhol and the rise of a multi-billion-dollar cosmetics industry. But is there something more to human reaction to beauty than a conditioned response to social cues? Yes, says Harvard Medical School psychologist Nancy Etcoff. *Survival of the Prettiest* argues persuasively that looking good has survival value, and that sensitivity to beauty

is a biological adaptation governed by brain circuits shaped by natural selection. Etcoff synthesizes a fascinating array of scientific research and cultural analysis in support of her thesis. Psychologists find that babies stare significantly longer at the faces adults find appealing, while the mothers of "attractive" babies display more intense bonding behaviors. The symmetrical face of average proportions may have become the optimal design because of evolutionary pressures operating against population extremes. Gentlemen may prefer blondes not so much for their hair color as for the fairness of their skin--which makes it easier to detect the flush of sexual excitement. And high heels accentuate a woman's breasts and buttocks, signaling fertility. Is beauty programmed into our brain circuits as a proxy for health and youth? In marked contrast to other writers like Naomi Wolf (*The Beauty Myth*), Etcoff argues that it is, noting, "Rather than denigrate one source of women's power, it would seem far more useful for feminists to attempt to elevate all sources of women's power." --Patrizia DiLucchio --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

In riveting style, Etcoff, a psychologist at Harvard Medical School, demolishes the belief that beauty is a cultural construct, arguing instead "that beauty is a universal part of human experience, and that it provokes pleasure, rivets attention, and impels actions that help ensure the survival of our genes." By drawing widely from anthropological, psychological, biological and archeological literature, Etcoff discerns surprising similarities in the ways humans have perceived and responded to beauty across diverse cultures throughout the millennia. For example, cross-cultural research comparing two isolated Indian tribes in Venezuela and Paraguay to people in three Western cultures demonstrated a remarkable similarity in what is considered beautiful. And evidence that red pigments were used as lipstick as long ago as 5000 B.C. suggests that media images are not the sole reason that "in the United States more money is spent on beauty than on education or social services." The most important message in this book is that we cannot ignore our evolutionary past when attempting to understand our current behavior, even as we should recognize that we need not be slaves to our genes. Topics as wide-ranging as penis- or breast-enlargement surgery and the basics of haute couture are treated with wit and insight. Etcoff's arguments are certain to initiate a great deal of discussion. Photos and illustrations. Author tour. Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I love this book. I read it when it first came out as a library book, and it helped me with little beauty hacks that doubled my tips as a cocktail waitress. A great starter read for those who want to learn the system. ;)Beyond that, it boasts some interesting studies and science-backed tricks, though it's

NOT an instruction manual. Use it to guide your research further (disclaimer: I'm SUPER into biological anthropology. A very fun read that digests quickly. I heartily recommend it to any woman (though men would benefit from reading it too).

Nancy Etcoff's "Survival of the Prettiest" argues that beauty is not a social construct but that human beings are hardwired to recognize people and things as beautiful. You could imagine it like this. There's a definite set of beauty principles we all carry around in our noggins that interact with the environment in all sorts of ways, and these principles allow for varying ranges as to what would appear to be beautiful to us. We might not be able to state in words why it is we find some people and some things beautiful. But there's compelling cross-cultural evidence that there are certain features that we all find beautiful. Etcoff does make an effort to distinguish beauty from fashion. Fashion by its very nature is something that is of the moment. It sometimes either exploits some of the knowledge we carry around about what we find beautiful but other times is very much a matter of social construction. Sometimes we find certain styles and things fashionable because of some authority that tells us that that style of thing (clothing item, accessory, makeup, etc.) is fashionable. Etcoff doesn't talk so much about art, but you could sort of apply this kind of thinking to art and the artworld. So nobody would definitely say that the function of art is that it ought to be beautiful, but everybody agrees that people in general like beautiful art. If so, then how to account for so much ugly art that people seem to like? Fashion and authority. Status indicators. Display of conspicuous consumption. It's not a pretty answer but very likely true. Or perhaps less cynically, sometimes it's just that a work of art can be ugly, maybe only a little ugly, but it serves another positive function: like maybe it expresses something important about human nature.

Contrary to what many people think there are certain features of the human body and face that have always been considered attractive, in all cultures. That is, beauty is not an invention of the media any more than cuteness is an invention of Disney (Bambi, the movie, exploited our instinctive judgements of what is cute). Neither is beauty merely in the eye of the beholder. Yet, having said that, both the media and the perceiver matters, just not as much as people tend to think. In this book Nancy Etcoff from Harvard University provides a fast paced, thoroughly researched, rich and enjoyable account of attractiveness. She provides answers to all the main questions that usually come up when attractiveness is discussed. Here is a non exhaustive list, which the basic answerQ: What is attractive?A: Averageness, symmetry, Big eyes (women), large cheekbones (men)Q: When did people start to care so much about their appearance?A: Since the dawn of timeQ: Are we nicer

to more attractive individualsA: YesQ: Why are certain traits considered attractive?A: Because they are indicators of underlying qualities, such as health or fertilityThese are rough answers, and there are many important and interesting details which cannot be covered in a short review such as this. Thankfully, Etcoff goes into full detail, and even though I am sort of a minor expert on attractiveness (have published a couple of studies on memory biases associated with attractiveness), I learned many things from this book. Etcoff's style of writing is reminiscent of Steven Pinker. Both are masters when it comes to referencing a ton of literature from very divergent sources (books, TV-shows, published articles, archeological findings, poetry etc), in a short amount of text, without affecting the flow of that text. In fact Etcoff made such an impression on me that I am almost certain to buy her next book (if she writes one), independent of what that book is about.

Love this book. It's very interesting, well written, well researched, and fun to read. I frequently find myself citing info I have learned from reading it and find it applicable in daily life. I would definitely recommend this book!

Some interesting info. I bought this book to have a 'light read' while traveling. It's been on my book list for awhile. I heard about it on a podcast, I don't remember which one.It covered some correlations between the animal world and the human animal world as well as covering fashion and beauty trends of both men and women. Overall a pretty good book.

Here's the skinny on it:- It's not similar to Naomi Wolf's Beauty Myth. So, if you read that one and didn't like it, don't apply analogy;- it takes an evolutionary approach (which to me, is the only one worth discussing), but with the necessary consideration for cultural influences;- her style is highly enjoyable. It's like a walk in the park;- it doesn't try to either justify or deny the importance of beauty for everyday affairs. Doesn't really try to coerce you into taking sides on the issue, just to explain the facts;- it does make a clear point: we may appreciate beauty. We do not have to be overwhelmed by it.All in all, I strongly recommend this book.

Surprisingly engaging. Used this for a class and really made me think long and hard outside of the classroom.

Informative book of depth and dimension. Good price. Mint condition.

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