Words on Plays

Insight into the play, the playwright, and the production

Eve Ensler’s
The Good Body

Directed by Peter Askin
Geary Theater
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**SYNOPSIS OF **THE GOOD BODY


**VOICEOVER/SPOTLIGHT ON EVE.** Eve Ensler talks about her childhood desire to grow up to be a “good” girl. During the 1950s, being “good” meant being popular, pretty, and straitlaced. Today, being “good” means joining the army, toeing the corporate line, and, most importantly, being thin. Eve believes she can never be “good” and has become obsessed with her “not-so-flat post-40s stomach,” believing that it is evidence of her failure to become a “good” girl. She wonders how a veteran radical feminist like herself could spend so much time thinking about her stomach.

**ENTRY 1.** Eve prays for thinness. She pledges to sacrifice her favorite treats, to exercise, and to embrace her emptiness and starve.

**ENTRY 2.** Eve realizes that “bread is Satan,” and vows to stop eating it. A friend tells her that her stomach has nothing to do with diet, but is caused by the “change of life” and lack of testosterone. Eve wonders what she would be like if deprived of bread and shot up with testosterone. “Serial killer comes to mind.”

**ENTRY 3.** Eve allows herself to eat only dried bread: breadsticks and pretzels. But she can’t stop thinking about “real” bread.

**ENTRY 4.** Eve eats M&Ms while watching infomercials advertising “ab roller” exercise machines. Inspired, she hires a despotic trainer named Vernon, who has her lifting heavy weights. The good news: now she’s too sore to turn her head, so she can’t see her stomach.

**ENTRY 5.** Eve sees a skinny, pointy-breasted blonde on the cover of Cosmopolitan magazine and confesses that she herself yearns for the Barbie-esque, if anatomically impossible, figure promulgated as the American woman’s dream by the publishing industry. Overcome with shame for her flabby stomach, she decides to hunt down the woman responsible for this nightmare.

HELEN GURLEY BROWN: AUTHOR AND PIONEERING EDITOR OF COSMOPOLITAN MAGAZINE. Helen is doing sit-ups. She’s almost 80 years old, weighs 90 pounds, and does 100 sit-ups twice a day. She says she will never feel beautiful, no matter how many sit-ups she does or face lifts she has. As a teenager she had severe acne and was forced to endure treatments that burned the skin off her face. Her mother told her that, because she wasn’t pretty, she would have to have brains. Helen shares her views on plastic surgery (don’t bother), motherhood (she decided against it), and sex (she’s always been very good at it). Her husband thinks she is beautiful, but his compliments don’t count because he loves her.
ENTRY 6. Eve chastises Helen Gurley Brown for torturing women everywhere with her invention of the “perfect” Cosmo Girl. A friend, upon seeing Eve’s stomach, congratulates Eve on her apparent pregnancy. Eve goes straight to the gym and begins to exercise obsessively. She realizes, however, that she doesn’t have the drive to keep up the grueling effort necessary to “take care” of her body. She decides to go to a health retreat and let somebody else do it instead.

BERNICE: AFRICAN-AMERICAN TEENAGE CAMPER. A young woman welcomes Eve to “Fat Camp.” She calls Eve a “Skinny Bitch” and complains that women like Eve have no right to complain about their weight around women who are so much bigger. People don’t call Skinny Bitches names like “fatso” or “lazy,” and fat girls have to work a lot harder to make friends and keep men. People hate fat girls because they believe they do it to themselves. Skinny Bitches don’t deserve to be skinny.

The night before, Bernice and some of the other fat girls stripped and went “chunky dunking” in the pool. They felt liberated and beautiful in the moonlight, but in the morning they had to face the Skinny Bitches again, with their measly little breakfasts.

Bernice comes from a family of big women who enjoy food, and for whom being big is beautiful and good. Maybe her mother sent her to fat camp because she herself was diagnosed with diabetes. Bernice would rather have her Ho Hos and Twinkies; fat girls are good people, after all, and deserve to be Skinny Bitches.

ENTRY 7. Eve leaves fat camp, feeling good about being a Skinny Bitch without having to diet. When she gets home and gets into the bath, however, she sees that her stomach is still there. She realizes that size, and goodness, are relative and wonders how fat someone else has to be in order for her to feel skinny. Eve always felt dark and ugly next to her beautiful blonde mother, who tried to make Eve good by sending her to ballroom dancing lessons and giving her enemas and perms.

ENTRY 8. Eve mentions her mother at her Weight Watchers meeting. Skinny Bitch Carmen, who is usually quiet and still, suddenly speaks up.

CARMEN: PUERTO RICAN WOMAN FROM BROOKLYN. Carmen believes that other “people can take up residency in your body parts.” In Puerto Rico, big butts are admired, but “the spread” is not. The spread is “like a lower butt, a second pair of thighs.” Men see age, neediness, and their mothers when they see a woman with the spread. Carmen’s Latina Cosmo Girl mother did not get the spread, even after giving birth to eight children. She told Carmen, who was not so lucky, that her fat made her ugly, and that no man would ever have sex with her. When Carmen did lose her virginity, she tried to hide her spread by tucking it under her body.
Carmen’s mother was stricken with AIDS, and as she grew sicker and meaner, Carmen grew fatter and fatter. After her mother died, however, Carmen was so overcome with grief that she stopped dieting and wearing makeup and started exercising. Her spread mysteriously melted away as her mother left her body.

**ENTRY 9.** Eve doesn’t want to kill her mother; she just wants to get rid of her fat. She decides to explore plastic surgery and watches a liposuction procedure.

** TIFFANY: 35-YEAR-OLD MODEL.** Eve meets Tiffany, who has just received liposuction on her thighs for the fourth time. She tells Eve how plastic surgery has transformed her body over six years of procedures. Originally, she went to Ham, her surgeon, to fix a botched breast implant. He told her that with a combination of surgery, diet, and exercise, they could work together to give her a perfect body. Since then, she’s undergone repeated liposuction, received new breast implants and new lips, and had many other operations. She began dating Ham after he gave her her second breast implants, and they are now married. She has won beauty contests and modeling contracts with her new body, “our small business,” but Tiffany worries that Ham will lose interest in her when her body is finally perfect. Just in case, she secretly continues to eat ice cream.

**ENTRY 10.** Eve doesn’t like ice cream, particularly because her father was president of Popsicle Industries. Eve was sexually abused by her father. As a result, she says, “I moved away from my body in order to move away from my father. I was bad. Very bad.” She’s still bad. She decides to celebrate and flaunt her badness.

**DANA: EARLY TWENTIES BODY ARTIST.** Eve goes to Dana to have her belly button pierced. Dana has pierced nipples, which, she says, represent her uniqueness, her sexuality, and her lesbian identity. Growing up, she thought that femininity was bad, because it prevented a woman, particularly a lesbian, from being taken seriously. She tells Eve that getting pierced is an erotic experience, and that her newly pierced stomach will either excite or disgust people, but either way, it will make them take her stomach seriously.

**ENTRY 11.** Eve flees before Dana can pierce her stomach. She doesn’t want people to take her stomach seriously. She just wants someone to take it away.

**ENTRY 12.** Eve travels to Hollywood, the good-body capital of the world, in search of a plastic surgeon with a fat-frying laser. Instead, she finds herself by mistake in a vulva support group at the Vaginal Laser Rejuvenation Center, where women go to have their aging vaginas tightened. There she meets Carol.

**CAROL: A 40-PLUS JEWISH WOMAN FROM LOS ANGELES.** Carol is recovering from vaginal rejuvenation surgery. She’s been married for 20-plus years to Harry, who was always difficult to arouse. Since Carol had her vagina tightened, however, Harry is like a teenage boy again, selfish with his pleasure, but insatiable with desire for her newly virginal vagina.
She’s willing to put up with the pain of intercourse and hopes he’ll take some time for her later, after the novelty of his new toy wears off.

**ENTRY 13.** Eve hates it when her partner rubs her stomach. He loves its soft, supple femininity, and she wonders why she didn’t choose a man with higher standards.

**ENTRY 14.** Eve struggles during her workout, trying to get flat. She covets the tall, thin body of her friend Nina.

**NINA: A LATE-30S ITALIAN WOMAN.** Nina was once a very thin, strong, fast, and flat-chested girl. When her breasts developed, however, they grew huge and cumbersome, and she couldn’t run or play as she used to. Then along came her mother’s rich, handsome lover, Carlo. When her mother went to the hospital to give birth to Carlo’s son, Carlo stayed behind and seduced 14-year-old Nina. She discovered that her breasts could give her intense pleasure.

Nina felt guilty about the affair, guilty that Carlo loved her breasts, and guilty that she loved it when he touched them. On her 16th birthday, her mother gave her the gift of breast reduction surgery. It took away the feeling in her nipples, and Nina hoped that her newly flat chest would make Carlo lose interest, but their affair continued for 20 years. One night Carlo arrived at Nina’s apartment with a young, skinny girl with gigantic breasts, hoping to add a “new ingredient” to their lovemaking. As Carlo began to bite Nina’s breasts, she suddenly had feeling in them again. She fought him off in a rage.

**ENTRY 15.** Eve wonders why women are so afraid to say no to their own pain.

**ISABELLA ROSELLINI: ACTOR, FORMER LANCÔME SPOKESPERSON, AND MODEL.** Isabella Rossellini was fired by Lancôme when she turned 40, after 14 years as the face of the giant cosmetics company. She believes they fired her because she “knew how to express assertiveness” and became stronger and more beautiful with age, until she upstaged the Lancôme product she was supposed to be selling. Lancôme told her not to make a fuss, that speaking out would destroy her career. She did as she was told. Now she is talking.

**EVERYWOMAN.** Eve warns men about the new army of smooth-faced, expressionless Botox-injected women who now populate the globe, hiding behind a pleasant mask of relaxed politeness while plotting to unleash their rage and power upon the world. “Watch your dick. Watch your back.”

**ENTRY 16.** Eve notes that the process of trying to be “good” is never ending and all consuming.

**MARY: 12-YEAR-OLD MAASAI GIRL IN NAIROBI, KENYA.** An anorexic young African girl lies in a hospital bed with a tube in her arm, angry at her mother for robbing her of
the American Dream. She believes she will achieve fame, wealth, and popularity by starv-
ing herself down to the “90210” size she sees on television.

**LEAH: MARY’S MOTHER.** Leah pleads with her daughter to let go of her American tele-
vision fantasy and love her God-given body. The Maasai people are tall and strong, like trees—
each different, but all beautiful and worthy of love. “Love your body, child. Love your tree.”

**ENTRY 17.** Eve wonders, “How do you love your tree when everyone around you is
worshiping bamboo shoots?” While visiting India, she feels lost and empty, and she
gorges on naan bread for comfort. In a panic, she races to the gym, where she
exercises obsessively on the treadmill, surrounded by women in saris and Nikes.

**PRIYA: A MIDDLE-AGED INDIAN WOMAN.** Eve gets kicked off the treadmill by Priya,
a woman who is proud that she is voluptuously **jadhi**, or fat, and walks the treadmill to feel
strong. Priya observes that young Indian women have become obsessed with being skinny
since Miss India first won the Miss Universe beauty pageant (in 1994). Traditionally, she
says, Indian women were admired for their curves; skinniness was a sign of poverty. Priya
says there is no such thing as an ideal body, and no joy in perfection; she then corrects her-
self: “I am perfect. Perfectly jadhi.”

**ENTRY 18.** Eve’s prayers have been answered: she has contracted a parasite nicknamed
“Delhi belly.” Priya calls in a healer, Lakshmi. Eve hopes that her stomach will melt away,
now that she is too sick to eat. Lakshmi explains that her stomach is powerful and
connects her to her mother, “belly to belly button.” In trying to fix herself and chase after
physical perfection, Lakshmi tells her, Eve is missing out on the rest of the world.

**ENTRY 19.** Eve visits women who are barely surviving under the rule of the Taliban in
Afghanistan. She can’t stop thinking about a story she heard about two young women who
were beaten for eating ice cream. She has brought it up so often that her host, Sunita,
decides to take her to the “secret place” where women still eat ice cream, despite the threat
of flogging or even execution. As the Taliban circles the bazaar in pickup trucks, the
women huddle in the back room of a former restaurant, relishing their bowls of vanilla ice
cream, risking their lives for pleasure. Eve suddenly realizes that being thin isn’t nearly as
important as being free. She eats ice cream for all the women who have been abused,
abused themselves, and celebrated their bodies. She eats for herself and the pure pleasure
of filling her belly. She decides that being a “good” girl is not about erasing her flaws, but
about embracing her own unique body as her home, her emblem of a full life, and her
power as a woman. Her body is a good body. Our bodies are all good bodies.
BODY LANGUAGE
An Interview with Eve Ensler

BY JESSICA WERNER

“I wanted to be great.
It’s much more interesting than being good.”

“Fat is relative. Size is relative. Good is relative.
Who decides? Where does it begin?”

—Eve Ensler, The Good Body

Eve Ensler’s conversation style is not unlike her performance style: boldly frank, compassionate, persuasive, free-ranging, and, perhaps most remarkably, radically optimistic that the world can and will become more peaceful—one body at a time. Even while discussing the serious subjects she explores in The Good Body—namely, our culture’s insidious preoccupation with an unhealthy feminine ideal and the tyranny of women’s “deep, deep programming to be good”—Ensler radiates the genuine belief in personal, and global, transformation that has infused all of her work since she first started writing plays more than 25 years ago.

Inspired by the phenomenal popularity of The Vagina Monologues (her boundary-breaking play about women’s sexual triumphs and traumas which ran off Broadway from 1999 to 2003 and has since been staged by women in more than 1,500 cities worldwide), Ensler spoke with women in more than 40 countries about their complex feelings about their bodies as she traveled on behalf of V-Day, the international movement launched by Ensler to eradicate violence against women and girls. Framing these crosscultural conversations within her own personal journey to come to terms with her “less-than-flat, post-40s stomach,” Ensler has transformed her globetrotting exploration of the female form into The Good Body, which she calls her most personal—and challenging—work to date. Among the play’s most salient messages is the notion that ever-present self-criticism and physical obsession have effectively distracted many women from engaging with the world in significant and tangible ways. “Can you imagine the energy that would be unleashed if women stopped obsessing about their bodies?” says Ensler.

The Good Body was workshopped at Seattle Repertory Theatre in April and is scheduled to open on Broadway in September. Ensler spoke with us in June as she prepared for the play’s world premiere at A.C.T.
JESSICA WERNER: I WANTED TO START BY ASKING YOU ABOUT THE TITLE OF THIS PLAY, ABOUT WHAT IT HAS MEANT FOR WOMEN TO STRIVE TO BE “GOOD,” AS WELL AS THE CORRELATIVE THAT IF YOU’RE NOT GOOD ENOUGH, IF YOU FALL SHORT OF THE IDEAL, THEN YOU MUST BE BAD. I WONDER HOW THAT CONCEPT OF “BEING GOOD” HAS PLAYED OUT IN YOUR LIFE AND IF IT’S CHANGED AT ALL AS YOU’VE WORKED ON THE GOOD BODY.

Eve Ensler: I think there is an underlying force that affects all of us, men and women, that has to do with the nature of pure authority and controls all of us to some degree, gets us to behave and to be good in general. But I do think it’s different for women. I think that from the time we’re born this underlying theme—this ongoing brainwashing, really—to be good is powerfully present. I mean, we say, “She’s a good baby” if she doesn’t cry. I hear people say this all the time: “She’s good,” meaning she’s quiet and she doesn’t make any noise. You have to ask, What’s good about that? That’s quiet. That’s not noisy. But why is that good? So you begin there, and then you start working on all the many ways this culture trains women to be quiet, to be polite, and to be thin—being thin is a huge piece of it, because I believe it’s really about making women disappear, becoming lesser and lesser versions of themselves.

Ultimately, it is all about control. A pattern is set up dictating the way your body is supposed to look, the way you’re supposed to walk, the way you’re supposed to talk, and you’re never supposed to speak up too much.

EACH WOMAN YOU PORTRAY IN THE GOOD BODY SEEMS TO DEFINE A FACET OF WHAT THE IDEAL OF BEING “GOOD” CURRENTLY MEANS: THIN. WITHHOLDING. QUIET. CONTROLLED.

Yes. It also means not messy. And absolutely not living in ambiguity. There can be no mess, no darkness, no acceptance of the shadow side. Good doesn’t allow much leeway. It means either this or that, right or wrong, perfect or not perfect. And capitalism plays quite a role. I don’t know which is the chicken and which is the egg, as far as capitalism [and body issues], but in order to be good we have to consume more. In order to be perfect, we have to buy certain products.

WHAT DO YOU SAY TO PEOPLE WHO POINT OUT THAT, WHILE THIS SITUATION MAY HAVE BEEN FOSTERED BY PATRIARCHY AND CONSUMERISM, WOMEN ARE COMPLICIT IN THE PROCESS? WE’RE BUYING THE MAGAZINES . . .

We are absolutely complicit in it.
YOU’VE DESCRIBED *THE GOOD BODY* AS YOUR MOST PERSONAL PIECE TO DATE. DO YOU THINK THE OVERWHELMINGLY POSITIVE RESPONSE YOU RECEIVED TO *THE V AGINA MONOLOGUES* GAVE YOU THE CONFIDENCE TO EXPLORE THESE ISSUES NOW?

Definitely. In a way I think doing *The Vagina Monologues* gave me courage, and I felt like after doing all the work on that play I had scratched the surface of this. But, what was fascinating is that after having done that show for a while, I thought, ok, I’ve got this. I’m home free. I like my vagina, I feel good about myself. And then of course it just traveled up. One day I looked down and it had all just moved up to my stomach. And I realized, Oh no, this is a virus. This is deeper than I knew. In some ways, this really is the hardest thing I have ever reckoned with. It is so scary how deep this programming is. People can say whatever they want about this issue, but it is the deepest propaganda, the deepest conditioning, it is so much more insidious than anything I have ever reckoned with in my entire life. I have been in war-torn countries. I have seen so much, and there is just nothing that has had me like this fundamental self-hatred for not being good and for not measuring up. And it is so amplified in the West.

WAS IT DURING *THE V AGINA MONOLOGUES* THAT YOU STARTED KEEPING THE JOURNAL THAT BECAME A [300-PLUS PAGE] DIALOGUE WITH YOUR STOMACH?

I started keeping the journal nearing the end of *The Vagina Monologues*, but it really got clear to me shortly after I stopped performing that piece that I had become aware of my stomach. I was in my 40s, and I suddenly had this belly. I had always had a flat stomach, and suddenly I had this thing. And I believe every single woman has her thing. And I was just spending hours thinking about it. And I thought, Can this really be you? You are doing this? I mean, come on, you know better!

There is a huge amount of shame around this stuff. When I started working on this I thought, Eve, you can’t write a piece about this. And then, you know what? I thought, You have to! Because this is the truth. It doesn’t matter who you are, your age or political orientation, it just gets you. It’s funny, sometimes women say to me, “Oh, I don’t have body issues.” And I say, “Really? You don’t? You really like your body?” And they say, “Well, I like everything . . . but my face.” [laugh] Oh, ok.

I was so encouraged by [the recent workshops of *The Good Body* in] Seattle. Nearly every single woman identified. There were a few women who said, “There are many women who love our bodies, and why aren’t you focusing on them?” And I just said, “Because I haven’t met them!” [laugh] “Please introduce me, I’d love to meet them.”
SO HOW DID YOUR INTERVIEWS AND CONVERSATIONS WITH WOMEN FOLLOWING THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES EVOLVE INTO THE MONOLOGUES IN THE GOOD BODY?

I spoke to women as I traveled all over the world and heard so many stories, and in many cases the monologues are composites of things I’ve heard from different women. There are a couple of real interviews, with [actress/model] Isabella Rosselini, and with [Cosmopolitan magazine editor] Helen Gurley Brown, but it was really that I had started this dialogue with my stomach. That became the leaping-off point, because I would think, How can I really feel this way? What do other women think? And then I’d start talking to women.

WERE YOU SURPRISED TO FIND JUST HOW PERVERSIVE AND COMMON THESE ISSUES ARE CROSSCULTURALLY?

Yes. I was surprised by how that Cosmo image has traveled this planet. Look, every culture has its own mishigas, there’s no doubt about it. But there is something so potent about this Western ideal. I asked people all over the world, “Who do you think is beautiful?” And I cannot tell you how many people said [model] “Claudia Schiffer, she’s perfect.” Instead of The Good Body, I was going to call this Claudia Schiffer, Because She’s Perfect. Because it didn’t matter if I was in South Africa or India. That was the answer: “Claudia Schiffer, because she’s perfect.”

IN THE FACE OF SOMETHING THAT POWERFUL, HOW DO YOU REMAIN HOPEFUL? YOU ONCE SAID IN AN INTERVIEW THAT WE ARE DOING A GREAT JOB OF “EXPORTING BODY HATRED,” AND I DON’T SEE OUR MEDIA, OUR LARGEST COMMODITY, CHANGING ANYTIME SOON.

Well, I think part of it is that women have to demand that it changes, and part of that is changing ourselves. I think that if we start feeling differently about our bodies, then we will stop buying into this. And I do think it’s possible. I really do. We just have to be vigilant about it. It’s kind of like giving up alcohol. It’s withdrawing from some fundamental addiction to self-hatred.

THAT’S AN APT METAPHOR, BECAUSE IT IS REALLY SEDUCTIVE SOMEHOW, ISN’T IT?

So seductive, and familiar, and even comforting. You know, in the U.S. we consume 60% of the world’s resources. The numbers are frightening. One-third of all Americans are now obese, and yet we export the fantasy of anorexia. That, to me, is just mind-blowing.
IT’S A HORRIBLE PARADOX, THAT AS WE ARE LITERALLY OVERCONSUMING OURSELVES TO DEATH, ANOTHER SEGMENT OF THE POPULATION IS STARVING ITSELF INTO OBLIVION.
Yes. Well, because everything, at the bottom of it, is self-hatred.

THE GLOBAL POPULARITY OF PUBLICATIONS LIKE COSMOPOLITAN (WHICH NOW HAS 52 EDITIONS WORLDWIDE) IS BAFFLING, SINCE I THINK A LOT OF WOMEN HAVE A LOVE/HATE RELATIONSHIP WITH WOMEN’S MAGAZINES. IT CAN FEEL LIKE SELF-FLAGELLATION TO READ THEM, BUT THEN YOU CAN’T GO THROUGH AN AIRPORT AND NOT PICK ONE UP.
I think it’s great when you don’t. I know the areas where I’m addicted to the self-flagellation, and those things that just don’t make me feel good. You don’t learn from them, you don’t grow from them, you just feel like shit when you’re done. So why don’t we read what makes us feel good?

YOU STARTED THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES FROM A VERY PERSONAL PLACE, BY TALKING TO WOMEN ABOUT THEIR SHARED SEXUALITY AND ACKNOWLEDGING THEIR DESIRES, AND IT GREW INTO A GLOBAL MOVEMENT TO ERADICATE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN. THE GOOD BODY ALSO STARTS FROM A PERSONAL PLACE; DO YOU ALSO SEE IT LEADING TO A GREATER POLITICAL AGENDA?
I really see it as a continuation. I see the next wave of V-Day moving toward women really loving and owning their bodies, and feeling good in whatever bodies they have so they can literally not be distracted anymore and start running the world. I hope the next stage of V-Day is that women choose to be great instead of good. That would mean living with ambiguity, living with not being approved of, living with your voice, living with your originality, living with the mess, and living with your power.

I DON’T THINK MOST PEOPLE MAKE THAT CONNECTION, WHICH YOU DO IN THE PLAY, THAT IT’S NOT JUST DAMAGING TO WOMEN’S PERSONAL WELL-BEING TO OBSESS ABOUT THEIR BODIES, BUT THAT IT’S LITERALLY STUNTING OUR GROWTH POLITICALLY AND ECONOMICALLY AND SOCIALLY. IF WE COULD JUST FREE UP ALL THE MENTAL SPACE WE USE DESPISING OURSELVES . . .
I know, it’s just so consuming. I say in the play, women are busy “piercing, perming, waxing, lightening, covering, cutting, lifting, tightening, flattening, starving . . .” when we could be running the world. We need to look at what happens to us when we don’t play by
the rules. Let me tell you something: If you can stand up and say, “I love my body,” you can do anything. I really mean it. If you can walk in whatever body you own in the world and feel good, you can stand up to anyone. I think that when we truly end the internalized self-violence, when women actually live in their bodies, actually love their bodies as they are, feel safe and empowered in them, then the world will change.

TO TALK MORE SPECIFICALLY ABOUT THEATER, DO YOU SEE YOUR WORK AS A THEATER ARTIST AS AN OFFSHOOT OF YOUR WORK AS AN ACTIVIST, OR DID THEY SORT OF DEVELOP IN TANDEM?
That’s one of those questions I don’t really know the answer to anymore. I think that I have always been a writer and considered myself a writer, but I have been an activist my entire life. For me, to be an artist means that you feel the intensity of the world in the marrow of your bones. You are receptive and responsive to what is around you, so if [poet] Adrienne Rich’s theory is right—that “the moment a feeling enters the body is political”—then all of us artists are political. It’s just a question of what your politics are. I’ve never separated them, politics and art.

I actually began writing poetry, and I had no desire to act. I didn’t really perform until The Vagina Monologues. But things have always come to me in very dramatic terms, and those are the things we call “drama.” I think the world lives in a very teeny tiny way, and that we are scared of the bigness of our feelings and the depth of our passions and the hugeness of our hearts. So I think we have created “Drah-ma” as this place where we get to express what we really feel. But I’m not convinced that if we were really living in our authentic, actualized, full selves we would have drama anymore.

YOU THINK WE MIGHT EVOLVE OUT OF THE NEED FOR THEATER?
I think we would just call it “life.” Who knows?

JOANNE WOODWARD WAS AN EARLY MENTOR FOR YOU IN THE THEATER. WHO ELSE HAS INFLUENCED YOU?
I was very influenced by Beckett. His interior monologues had a huge impact on me.

THAT’S INTERESTING, SINCE PEOPLE OFTEN THINK OF BECKETT AS TERRIBLY CEREBRAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL, YET HIS WORK RESIDES IN THE BODY, TOO, AND IT’S VERY PHYSICAL.
Very physical. And I would say that Brecht had an enormous impact on me, Mother Courage for example. And I was very influenced by rock ’n’ roll people, like Tina Turner
and Grace Slick, women who found their way and their voice through their bodies. And in terms of writers, the stream-of-consciousness monologues of Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison, and Pinter. The Greeks also had a huge impact on me.

**SINCE THERE’S SO MUCH OF YOUR OWN STORY IN THIS PLAY, DO YOU SEE IT EVOLVING INTO A PIECE LIKE THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES THAT’S PERFORMED BY OTHER ACTRESSES?**

Yes, I do. I think someone will be able to play the Me part, as well as the others. I’m just a character like everybody else.

**IT’S GOING TO BE INTERESTING TO SEE WHERE THE GOOD BODY LEADS.**

Because the content is more global—since it’s [set in] India, Afghanistan, Italy, Kenya—I think it will have a more global reach and people everywhere will own it more. But first, I’m just so excited about opening in San Francisco. I love San Francisco, and I really wanted to premiere it there because of the city’s incredible support and reception of *The Vagina Monologues*. I feel safe there, and I feel emboldened to take risks because of the people there.

**HOW IMPORTANT IS HUMOR IN YOUR WORK, FINDING A BALANCE BETWEEN THE VERY SERIOUS AND THE COMIC? I IMAGINE YOU REALIZED DOING THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES THAT IF THEY WERE ALL VAGINA HORROR STORIES NO ONE WOULD WANT TO KEEP LISTENING.**

Exactly. I remember when I first worked with Joanne Woodward she said to me, “I don’t care what you do, it has to be funny.” I was at the time writing a play about nuclear war, and I said, “It is not funny.” And she said, “Yes, it is, you’ll make it funny.” I thought, *Funny? Nuclear war?* All I want to be now is funny, because I know when people are laughing some part of them opens. Humor is the key. It lets people hear things they can’t hear otherwise.

**THERE’S CERTAINLY PLENTY TO LAUGH AT IN OUR BODY OBSESSIONS.**

Oh yes, it is just absolutely insane what we do to our bodies, what we think, and what we’re doing inside ourselves. It’s hysterical! And it’s completely embarrassing.

**YOU’VE SAID THAT YOU THINK BEING A TEENAGE GIRL IN AMERICA HAS TO BE ONE OF THE HARDEST THINGS IN THE WORLD.**

I do, it’s just hell.
WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO SAY TO ANY TEENS AND THEIR PARENTS ATTENDING _THE GOOD BODY_?

That’s always a hard one for me because I don’t want to shock anyone, but a part of me thinks these kids know more than we do. Why are we pretending they don’t? Don’t we want girls to be aware that people molest girls, so they are protected? Don’t we want girls to see what other women do to themselves so they _don’t_ do it? Don’t we want them to get this consciousness early on so they can protect themselves?

I am actually working on a new series of monologues based on interviews with teenage girls, titled _I Am an Emotional Creature: The Secret Life of Girls around the World._

DO YOU EVER JUST PINCH YOURSELF IN DISBELIEF ABOUT EVERYTHING THAT’S HAPPENED WITH _THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES_ AND WHAT YOU’VE CREATED?

I am absolutely in awe. I just can’t believe what is happening with the movement. We had 2,300 [V-Day] events last year, in places as varied as Nairobi and a Methodist church in Idaho. It’s just incredible! Unbelievable. I sometimes think the kindness I have been shown by women around the world is so overwhelming that one day if I ever let it all in I would just throw myself on the ground and wail. Because people are so kind, in spite of everything.

WELL, YOU’RE GIVING SO MUCH BACK, TOO.

I see it as a privilege.
TODAY THE ANATOMY, TOMORROW THE WORLD

BY DINITIA SMITH

I f you’d never seen Eve Ensler’s one-woman show The Vagina Monologues and if you knew she had also written plays about Bosnian refugees, women in prison, and nuclear war, you might expect her to be humorless, single-minded, even didactic. But to step into Ms. Ensler’s apartment in Chelsea is to confront a positively bubbly figure, wearing bright red lipstick, her dark hair cut in a bob.

Ms. Ensler’s good humor masks a serious purpose and a troubled personal history that gave rise to The Vagina Monologues. The monologues are part of Ms. Ensler’s crusade to wipe out the shame and embarrassment that many women still associate with their bodies or their sexuality. On the other hand, she has good reason to smile. Ms. Ensler’s career is on a roll.

[I]t all began with The Vagina Monologues. But the monologues are now only one part of her busy professional life.

The idea of “victimhood” comes up frequently in Ms. Ensler’s conversation. The foundation for The Vagina Monologues, Ms. Ensler said, lies in her childhood experience as a victim of sexual and physical abuse. The monologues have been an effort to redeem the experience with humor, to enable others to confront painful truths that have been repressed through fear and shame. “When you’re dealing with issues that are complicated and sad, the best way people can hear things is through humor.”

She doesn’t like talking about her childhood abuse, she said, out of fear of seeming conquered and destroyed by it. “Do me one favor,” said Ms. Ensler. “If you talk about my past, don’t make it seem like I feel sorry for myself or that it’s in control of my life.”

Ms. Ensler grew up in Scarsdale in a prosperous family. Her father, who died ten years ago, was a food company executive, her mother a homemaker. “I was deeply abused both sexually and physically by my father from an early age,” Ms. Ensler said. “He hit me with belts, beat me, threw me. He invaded me in ways completely and totally inappropriately.” The sexual abuse stopped when she was ten, she said, though the punishments continued. “That’s the reason why I’ve devoted my life to stopping violence towards women,” she said.

At 24 . . . Ms. Ensler began writing for the theater. A play about abolishing nuclear energy was performed in churches and at rallies. She worked for Chelsea Against Nuclear Destruction United, an organization that helped her learn grass-roots organizing.
She married Richard McDermott, owner of the West Fourth Street Saloon, and legally adopted his son, Dylan, whose mother had died when he was five. Dylan is now the star of the hit television series “The Practice.” At the time of the adoption, he was 19 and Ms. Ensler 26. “I always wanted him to know he had a mother,” she said, though she never wanted to give birth. She and the elder Mr. McDermott divorced, but she remains close to Dylan and to his daughter, Coco, three. “Loving Dylan,” she said, “was central to me learning how to be a loving human being.”

It was Dylan who introduced Ms. Ensler to Joanne Woodward, his acting teacher at the Neighborhood Playhouse in Manhattan. Dylan showed Ms. Woodward Ms. Ensler’s play *Coming from Nothing*, about a girl trying to remember her childhood, and Ms. Woodward directed a reading with her students. Then, “in a huge moment of chutzpah,” Ms. Ensler recalled, “I said, ‘I really want to write you a show.’” The result was *The Depot*, a one-woman play about nuclear disarmament, which Ms. Woodward directed, with Shirley Knight as the star. The play toured for two years and was performed at a nuclear test site in Nevada.

“She and Shirley were my mentors,” Ms. Ensler said of Ms. Woodward and Ms. Knight. “My life forever changed as a result of this,” she said. “It was the first time I ever found a way to bring my politics and my art self together.” . . .

After *Depot* Ms. Ensler wrote *Scooncat*; it was produced at the Samuel Beckett Theater with Dylan McDermott playing a man ruled by technology. Then the Music Theater Group asked her to write *Cinderella/Cendrillon*, an adaptation of Massenet’s opera about Cinderella, which was performed at St. Clement’s Church. Bernard Holland praised its “inventive approach to reconciling musical time with the ‘real’ time of characters on stage.”

The Music Theater Group in association with the Women’s Project and Productions also commissioned *Ladies*, about homeless women. Directed by Paul Walker, it was based on Ms. Ensler’s interviews as a shelter volunteer. Mel Gussow praised the production at St. Clement’s but criticized it for being “schematic, with monologues failing to merge into a moving dramatic portrait.”

In 1988, Ms. Ensler met Ariel Jordan, an Israeli psychotherapist. “I was absolutely terrified, just separated,” she said. “I was into the throes of dealing with my childhood. He is an incredibly kind, generous, brilliant person.” They began living together, though they have no plans to marry. “I feel I’m a gender-fluid person. I’m attracted to both men and women,” said Ms. Ensler. “I don’t believe in having people.”

It was with *Extraordinary Measures*, written and directed by Ms. Ensler and inspired by the death from AIDS of her friend Paul Walker, that Ms. Ensler became known to a wider audience. “It is hard to imagine a more fitting requiem for an acting teacher,” Ben Brantley
wrote in the *New York Times*. After that play came *Floating Rhoda and the Glue Man*, about a woman having a hard time loving a good man, also with Mr. McDermott, and produced at Here.

*The Vagina Monologues* began with a conversation with a friend about menopause. “She started talking about her vagina with such contempt and hatred,” said Ms. Ensler. “I was appalled.”

She began interviewing women from all walks of life about their bodies. “In the beginning,” she said, “they were tentative, nervous,” but then they were “dying to reveal this other aspect of the self.”

Ms. Ensler used humor to break down her audience’s natural reserve. To simply read *The Vagina Monologues* on paper, Anita Gates, a critic for the *Times*, wrote when she reviewed the V-Day benefit in New York, “you might roll your eyes, put the book back on the shelf and remind yourself not to go on any more New Age get-in-touch-with-your-inner-goddess weekends. But when Ms. Ensler speaks the words on a stool in front of a microphone, wearing a spaghetti-strap black dress trimmed in red, a mischievous smile beneath her dark Louise Brooks bangs, she’s very funny.”

Ms. Woodward took her husband, Paul Newman, and the actress Marisa Tomei to a performance of the monologues at Here. Mr. Newman at first seemed taken aback by its frankness. “I glanced to the left at my husband sitting stony faced and bemused,” she said. “Marisa was sitting there sobbing.” . . .

At the moment, Ms. Ensler is writing a screenplay for Glenn Close about women prisoners. As with other prominent women, Ms. Close’s praise for Ms. Ensler is on the extravagant side. “I love her so much,” she said. “Her coming into my life. I feel my life has changed.”

“You don’t just hook up with Eve,” Ms. Close added. “You become part of her crusade. There’s a core of us who are Eve’s army.”
EVE ENSLER WANTS TO SAVE THE WORLD

BY SUSAN DOMINUS

For 25 years, Ensler was a fairly obscure downtown playwright, ambitious but thwarted, anguished by bad reviews and tortured by injustices personal and global. Most of that changed [in 1999], with the breakaway success of *The Vagina Monologues*, a series of bawdy, straight-talking narratives about women's sexual triumphs and traumas. Since then, the play has been produced on every continent and in countless communities; it is as pervasive as *Our Town*, as political as *Take Back the Night*. Under Ensler's leadership, it has become the center of a reviving feminist movement, a cultural campaign that is less dogmatic, and more lively, than any in decades. Through that network and her own prodigious fundraising, Ensler has built an endowment that last year gave more money to women's groups around the world than established charities like the Ms. Foundation did. And after September 11, Ensler organized New Yorkers Say No to War, a group of artists and performers who staged the country's most visible antiwar protests.

Ensler's geopolitical reach became apparent a few weeks later, when she spearheaded a conference in Brussels for 40 prominent Afghan women. Its program was reported around the world, and its representatives went on to meet with Secretary of State Colin Powell and Secretary General Kofi Annan of the United Nations. Tonight's crowd [at a Washington gala benefit for Ensler's V-Day antiviolence project] includes four members of Congress, all of whom have come to Ensler in search of alliances. With an international following and a newly visible platform, Ensler seems keenly aware that politicians need her and her constituency as much as she needs them—in some cases, probably more.

Her newfound clout does not, however, seem to make her any less tortured. She remains emotionally raw—unusually so for someone in such a public position. In the middle of tonight's benefit performance of *The Vagina Monologues*, after a harrowing story about a Bosnian rape victim, Ensler tried to continue and couldn't. The show stood still for close to a minute while she wiped her eyes and tried to regain her composure. “I'm sorry I'm so emotional tonight,” she choked out. “I'm just so happy all of these women are here in the audience tonight as a community.” The audience watched, riveted, as the moment dragged on, terrified that she would start sobbing inconsolably, half hoping she would. Finally, someone called out an encouraging crack. Ensler laughed, sniffed, tossed her hair back, and continued on, wobbly at first. For moments of pure drama, nothing in the performance topped that impromptu pause.
That’s how it is with Ensler; it’s not enough that her theater alone provides the drama; in order to advance the cause, she casts herself as part of the spectacle. The way the AIDS activist and playwright Larry Kramer compulsively elicited anger, she compulsively elicits compassion. Her convictions are no doubt sincere. But when you see someone break from script and openly weep beneath a spotlight, you can’t help thinking: Is this for real? Or is this the play within the play?

In some ways, Ensler is a familiar type, the girl from drama club who was electric but also exhausting. She seduced you with the intensity of her feelings but unnerved you with the instant intimacy she offered, the righteous outrage you couldn’t possibly match. Some of those girls self-destruct; some eventually calm down. Ensler did neither; instead, she channeled all that energy into her shows and her activism.

V-Day, her antiviolence charity, now requires a staff of ten to oversee its sprawling agenda. (Ensler herself takes no salary.) And this February [2002] marks an unusual confluence of Ensler extravaganzas. HBO is showing a filmed version of The Vagina Monologues. She will embark on a two-month worldwide tour of cities staging benefit productions of the show. In her spare time, she is trying to organize a meeting in Kabul for the Afghan women who attended the Brussels meeting. But for Ensler, who considers herself a writer before an activist, the personal stakes are particularly high in the opening of Necessary Targets, her first major New York production since The Vagina Monologues.

Necessary Targets . . . is less personal and less poetic than Monologues, but its basic theme—the oppression of women—is the same. Among its characters: Melissa, a young American journalist who hints at abuse in her past; J.S., an Upper East Side psychiatrist whose father crushed her artistic ambitions; and the brutalized Bosnian women these two Americans encounter at a refugee camp.

J.S., whose expertise is in eating disorders, not the ravages of war, is there to help. “Trauma is trauma,” she explains. “Kinda,” replies the journalist with a mincing smile that indicates how dumb she finds the psychiatrist’s homebound naïveté. But the remainder of the show goes on to explore that proposition, locating the various characters on a continuum of suffering.

The underlying belief that men are to blame for the world’s ills and that only women, united in global sisterhood, can cure them informs much of [Ensler’s] activism. V-Day has undertaken a new antiviolence campaign with the similarly sweeping slogan “Afghanistan Is Everywhere,” and Ensler herself frequently draws parallels between women terrorized by the Taliban and American housewives beaten to death in their own homes.

The slogan, the new play, the Kabul summit, and the 800 productions of The Vagina Monologues scheduled around the world over the next few months are all part of her grand
plan—make that her very grand plan: to end violence against women by the year 2005. Not to change a few laws or to open a few shelters: Ensler says she intends to end it, everywhere, in the span of a few years. . . .

The scope of that goal—its fearlessly grand vision, its vague methodology, its potential to inspire skepticism in even sympathetic observers—is typical of the Ensler program. New Yorkers Say No to War, for example, won an impressive following without ever articulating a plan of action. Against war, o.k., but in favor of what?

But if Ensler were all quixotic grandstanding, she would never have achieved the success she has so far, including a fundraising campaign based on franchised productions of Monologues that is so effective Harvard Business School has inquired about using it as a case study. She may spend much of the day imagining the big picture in IMAX splendor, but she can also zero in on the smallest of details. She notices your new shoes, remembers friends of friends, checks to make sure you’ve eaten. She is glamorous onstage, funny and self-deprecating in person. And her combination of emotional intensity and girlish camaraderie has proved irresistible to almost anyone she has sought out as an ally. She now counts among her close friends Carole Black, president of Lifetime Television; Cathleen Black, chief executive of Hearst Magazines; and Pat Mitchell, president of PBS—three of the most powerful women in media.

Ensler has made the most of these connections. Not long after she and Carole Black struck up their friendship, for instance, Lifetime, long associated with the fight against breast cancer, announced a new permanent campaign to end violence against women. . . .

Ensler seems to thrive on this blend of theatricality and righteous outrage. She’s a drama addict, as she is happy to confess, and acting out her righteous indignation, during high-powered meetings or casual social encounters, is the way she revs herself up to take on global challenges. “I do feel things that large,” she tells me on another day. “It’s why I’ve always loved the theater. It was the first place where people didn’t tell me, ‘You’re too dramatic.’”

ABOUT V-DAY

V-day is a global movement to end violence against women and girls. V-Day is a catalyst that promotes creative events to increase awareness, raise money, and revitalize the spirit of existing antiviolence organizations. V-Day generates broader attention for the fight to stop worldwide violence against women and girls, including rape, battery, incest, female genital mutilation (FGM), and sexual slavery.

During V-Day's 2003 season, over 1,000 V-Day benefit events were presented by volunteers around the world, educating millions of people about the reality of violence against women and girls, raising $4 million and benefiting over 1,000 organizations. V-Day 2003 events took place in cities as far reaching as Ukiah, CA; Islamabad, Pakistan; Sarajevo, Bosnia, and Herzegovina; Lubumbashi, Congo; and Nairobi, Kenya, where the proceeds went to the reopening of a women's shelter that had closed its doors due to lack of funding.

V-Day stages large-scale benefits and produces innovative gatherings, films, and programs to educate and change social attitudes towards violence against women. These include the 2004 documentary Until the Violence Stops; community briefings with Amnesty International on the missing and murdered women of Juarez, Mexico; the December 2002 V-Day delegation trip to Israel, Palestine, Egypt, and Jordan; the Afghan Women's Summit; the Stop Rape Contest; and the Indian Country Project.

V-Day recently launched “V Is for Vote,” a grassroots voting campaign created with and by thousands of local V-Day activists and individuals in the United States. V-Day activists will mobilize registration and get-out-the-vote efforts anchored around their V-Day 2004 events and activities. V-Day is reaching out to the presidential candidates, urging them to make violence against women a central issue of their campaign platforms, not a sideline or “women’s” issue. Ultimately, V-Day will mobilize its activism into political power through “V Is for Vote” as V-Day supporters “Vote to End Violence.” (V-Day is a nonpartisan 501(c)(3) organization and does not align itself with any particular political party or candidates.)

The V-Day movement is growing at a rapid pace throughout the world. V-Day, a nonprofit corporation, distributes funds to grassroots, national, and international organizations and programs that work to end violence against women and girls. In its first year of incorporation (2001), V-Day was named one of Worth magazine’s “100 Best Charities.” In its first six years, the V-Day movement has raised more than $20 million.

The “V” in V-Day stands for Victory, Valentine, and Vagina.

Excerpted from www.v-day.org.
BODY NUMBERS
Statistics on Body Image, Diet, Eating Disorders, and Health

THE AVERAGE AMERICAN WOMAN VERSUS THE BARBIE DOLL

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<td>Hips</td>
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BODY IMAGE AND DIETING

80% of American women are unhappy with their appearance.

25% of American men and 45% of American women are currently dieting.

26% of Americans exercise at least three times a week.

Americans spend more than $40 billion on dieting and diet-related products each year.

11% of parents would abort a fetus that was genetically coded to be obese, according to a Newsweek poll in 1990.

46% of 9-11 year-olds say that they diet; 82% of their families diet regularly.

In a study of almost 500 schoolgirls, 81% of 10-year-olds reported that they had dieted at least once. Another study found that negative body image is associated with suicide risk for girls, but not for boys. The number-one wish for girls ages 11-17 is to be thinner.

51% of 9- and 10-year-old girls feel better about themselves if they are on a diet.

Between elementary and high school, the percentage of girls in the U.S. who are “happy with the way I am” drops from 60% to 29%.

More than 50% of teenage girls diet, or think they should. (A girl naturally gains 40 pounds between the ages of 8 and 14.) Approximately 3% of these teens will develop an eating disorder.

34% of high school girls and 22% of boys believe they are overweight, according to the 1995 Youth Risk Behavior Survey.
Half of girls aged 11–19 were getting less than two-thirds of the nutrients needed for normal growth and good mental performance according to a 1995 government survey.

91% of women recently surveyed on a college campus had attempted to control their weight through dieting; 22% dieted “often” or “always.”

More than 50% of women 18–25 would prefer to be run over by a truck than to be fat, and two-thirds would choose to be mean or stupid, rather than fat.

24% of women polled by *Maclean’s* magazine said that they would give three years of their life to achieve their weight goals.

The average American woman is 5'4" tall and weighs 140 pounds. The average American model is 5'11" tall and weighs 117 pounds.

If the average male model had the same proportions as the average female model, he would be 6'5" and 160 pounds.

Most fashion models are thinner than 98% of American women.

40%–50% of women smokers smoke because they see it as a primary means to control their weight. Of these women, 25% will die of a disease caused by smoking. For the first time in history, the smoking rate of girls now surpasses that of boys, with the compelling motivation of weight control.

About 90% of U.S. dieters are “yo-yo” dieters. They lose weight, then gain it back time after time. Yo-yo dieters have up to twice the risk for Type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease as overweight people.

95% of all dieters will gain back their lost weight within five years.

35% of “normal dieters” become pathological dieters; 20%–25% of them will develop eating disorders.

**THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA**

69% of girls said that magazine models influence their idea of what the perfect body is supposed to look like.

According to *Teen People* magazine, 27% of girls surveyed felt that the media pressures them to have a perfect body.

In a Stanford survey, 68% of female graduate and undergraduate students felt worse about their own bodies after looking through women’s magazines.
After World War II, popular magazines began to promote the weight-loss fad by printing an unprecedented variety of diets.

The average woman sees 400 to 600 advertisements per day, and by the time she is 17, she has received more than 250,000 commercial messages.

A study examined more than 4,000 TV ads. On the average, 1 out of every 3.8 ads had an “attractive-based” message. These results were used to estimate that we are exposed to over 5,000 of these ads a year, and each one adds to women’s body dissatisfaction and the desire to be thin and “beautiful.”

THE AMERICAN DIET

Benjamin Franklin said overeating was a sign of moral weakness. He advised people to “eat for Necessity, not Pleasure.”

In 1830, Sylvester Graham, one of America’s first diet “gurus,” advised eating bland foods without meat to control “immoral” sexual appetites.

In 19th-century America, a healthy appetite was believed to be linked to sexual lust. So “proper” ladies ate small portions in private.

The idea of counting calories to lose weight began in the early 1900s with American chemist Russell Chittenden. He connected the concepts of measuring foods in calories and burning calories through exercise.

Jack LaLanne was the first exercise and diet celebrity. He reached 8 million people a day with his 1964 TV show.


The Cambridge Diet, a low-calorie liquid diet popular in the 1970s, was advertised as “the perfect food.” It caused 30 deaths before the FDA outlawed it.

The Beverly Hills Diet of the early 1980s was basically a “binge and purge” diet. It used large amounts of tropical fruits as natural laxatives.

Phenylpropanolamine (PPA) is a stimulant and appetite suppressant found in many over-the-counter diet aids. In 1993, the FDA decided to continue to allow it despite many reports of adverse reactions and deaths.
The National Cancer Institute spent $400,000 in 1992 on a campaign to get Americans to eat more fruits and vegetables. The same year, Kellogg’s spent $32 million to advertise Sugar Frosted Flakes.

The average American eats the equivalent of a stick of butter a day, eight times the recommended daily allowance of fat.

60% of calories the average American consumes come from sugar and nonessential fats. This leaves only 40% of calories to provide all the essential nutrients.

Americans get 22% of their daily calories from snacks.

Americans eat more vegetables than 25 years ago. But 25% of those vegetables are French-fried potatoes.

Even moderate food restriction (for example, 1,500 calories a day) can lead to bingeing, preoccupation with food, irritability, depression, decreased sex drive, and being less social.

EATING DISORDERS

Approximately 10 million girls and women struggle with eating disorders. About 1 million boys and men struggle with eating disorders.

At least 90% of people with eating disorders are female, though the percentage of men with eating disorders has increased in recent years.

86% of people with eating disorders report the onset of the illness by the time they reach the age of 20.

6% of serious cases of eating disorders die from the illness.

Anorexia Nervosa: Anorexia Nervosa is a disorder characterized by (a) the refusal to maintain body weight of at least 85% of normal expected weight; (b) intense fear of weight gain; (c) distorted body perception; and (d) amenorrhea (absence of menstrual cycle). Another key feature of anorexia nervosa is denial of having an illness.

An estimated 0.5–3.7% of American females will suffer from anorexia nervosa at some point during their lifetimes. One percent of adolescent females have anorexia nervosa. Therefore, 1 out of every 100 young women between the ages of 10 and 20 are starving themselves. The consequences of severe anorexia nervosa include heart muscle shrinkage, slow and irregular heart beats, heart failure, amenorrhea (absence of menstruation), kidney stones and kidney failure, lanugo (growth of a thick, fine coat of body hair on the face, arms, and legs), muscle atrophy, constipation, bowel irritation, osteoporosis, cognitive
impairment (i.e., clouded or distorted perception or thinking, difficulty concentrating, difficulty comprehending), and death.

**Bulimia Nervosa**: Bulimia Nervosa is defined as (a) recurrent episodes of binge eating experienced as out of control; (b) regular purging, fasting, or excessive exercise to prevent weight gain; (c) at least two episodes of binging and purging per week for at least three months; and (d) persistent over-concern with weight and shape.

An estimated 1.1%–4.2% of females will have bulimia nervosa during their lifetimes (4% of college-age women suffer from bulimia nervosa); 10% of diagnosed bulimia patients are men. They will binge excessively on food and then purge by vomiting or the use of laxatives, diuretics, fasting, or extreme exercise. The results of severe bulimia include electrolyte imbalance; heart arrhythmia; heart failure; teeth erosion; irritation, tears, and scarring of the throat, esophagus, and stomach; laxative dependence; emetic toxicity (from the abuse of emetics such as ipecac syrup), and death. About 50% of people who have anorexia develop bulimia.

Teenagers and young adults in their 20s are more susceptible to anorexia and bulimia, but both eating disorders have been reported in children as young as six and adults as old as 76. Up to 20% of people with a serious, untreated eating disorder will die. Sixty percent of treated anorexics and bulimics recover to maintain a healthy weight. The remaining 40% do not improve, or make only partial recoveries.

**Binge Eating Disorder** is a compulsion to eat large amounts of food over a short period of time when one is not hungry, or the inability to stop eating when one is full. This disorder affects many people who are obese.

**Body Dismorphic Disorder (bDD)** sufferers are excessively concerned about their appearance, in particular perceived flaws of face, hair, and skin, as well as body shape, size, and weight. They are convinced these flaws exist in spite of reassurances from friends and family members who usually can see nothing to justify such intense worry and anxiety. bDD is thought to be a subtype of obsessive-compulsive disorder. It is not a variant of anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa.

The person with an eating disorder says, “I am so fat.” The person with bDD says, “I am so ugly.” bDD often includes social phobias.

bDD sufferers are shy and withdrawn in new situations and with unfamiliar people and are at elevated risk for despair and suicide. In some cases they undergo multiple, unnecessary plastic surgeries.
BDD affects 2% of Americans, most in their teens, and affects men and women equally. Seventy percent of cases appear before age 18. BDD is treatable; treatments thus far found to be effective include medication (especially meds that adjust serotonin levels in the brain) and cognitive-behavioral therapy.

**Exercise Bulimia** (also known as anorexia athletica) is characterized by excessive exercising, usually attached to feelings of guilt about eating. A relatively new eating disorder, exercise bulimia is not a formal diagnosis. The behaviors are usually a part of anorexia nervosa, bulimia, or obsessive-compulsive disorder. An exercise bulimic works out to “purge” what s/he has eaten in much the same way a bulimic vomits after eating, repeatedly exercising beyond the requirements for good health. S/he typically (a) steals time to exercise from work, school, and relationships; (b) defines self-worth in terms of performance; (c) is rarely or never satisfied with athletic achievement; (d) does not savor victory, but pushes on to the next challenge immediately; and (e) justifies excessive behavior by defining him- or herself as a “special” elite athlete.

Because it is virtually impossible to detect, no one knows precisely how many people suffer from the disease.

**OVERWEIGHT AND OBESITY**

Two-thirds of Americans are officially overweight; half of those are obese, meaning that they are 20% or more above a healthy weight.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, 31% of American adults (59 million individuals) were clinically obese in 2000. Many of these people have binge eating disorder.

31% of American teenage girls and 28% of boys are overweight. (About 15% of those are obese.)

The medical tab for illnesses related to obesity amounts to $117 billion a year.

The prevalence of overweight and obesity is commonly assessed by using body mass index (BMI), defined as the weight in kilograms divided by the square of the height in meters (kg/m²). A BMI over 25 kg/m² is defined as overweight, and a BMI of over 30 kg/m² as obese. These markers provide common benchmarks for assessment, but the risks of disease in all populations can increase progressively from lower BMI levels.

Adult mean BMI levels of 22–23 kg/m² are found in Africa and Asia, while levels of 25–27 kg/m² are prevalent across North America, Europe, and in some Latin American, North
African, and Pacific Island countries. BMI increases amongst middle-aged elderly people, who are at the greatest risk of health complications. In countries undergoing nutrition transition, overnutrition often co-exists with undernutrition. People with a BMI below 18.5 kg/m² tend to be underweight.

Currently more than one billion adults are overweight—and at least 300 million of them are clinically obese. Current obesity levels range from below 5% in China, Japan, and certain African nations, to over 75% in urban Samoa. But even in relatively low prevalence countries like China, rates are almost 20% in some cities.

Childhood obesity is already epidemic in some areas and on the rise in others. An estimated 17.6 million children under five are estimated to be overweight worldwide. According to the U.S. Surgeon General, in the U.S.A. the number of overweight children has doubled and the number of overweight adolescents has trebled since 1980. The prevalence of obese children aged six to eleven years has more than doubled since the 1960s. Obesity prevalence in youths aged twelve to seventeen has increased dramatically from 5% to 13% in boys and from 5% to 9% in girls between 1966 and 1970 and 1988 and 1991 in the U.S.A. The problem is global and increasingly extends into the developing world; for example, in Thailand the prevalence of obesity in five- to twelve-year-old children rose from 12.2% to 15.6% in just two years.

Obesity accounts for 2–6% of total health care costs in several developed countries; some estimates put the figure as high as 7%. The true costs are undoubtedly much greater as not all obesity-related conditions are included in the calculations.

How does excess body fat impact health? Overweight and obesity lead to adverse metabolic effects on blood pressure, cholesterol, triglycerides, and insulin resistance. Some confusion of the consequences of obesity arise because researchers have used different BMI cut-offs, and because the presence of many medical conditions involved in the development of obesity may confuse the effects of obesity itself.

The nonfatal, but debilitating health problems associated with obesity include respiratory difficulties, chronic musculoskeletal problems, skin problems, and infertility. The more life-threatening problems fall into four main areas: cardiovascular disease problems; conditions associated with insulin resistance, such as Type 2 diabetes; certain types of cancers, especially the hormonally related and large-bowel cancers; and gallbladder disease.

The likelihood of developing Type 2 diabetes and hypertension rises steeply with increasing body fatness. Confined to older adults for most of the 20th century, this disease now affects obese children even before puberty. Approximately 85% of people with diabetes are Type 2, and of these, 90% are obese or overweight. And this is increasingly becoming a developing world problem. In 1995, the emerging market economies had the highest
number of diabetics. If current trends continue, India and the Middle Eastern crescent will have taken over by 2025. Large increases would also be observed in China, Latin America, and the Caribbean, and the rest of Asia.

Raised BMI also increases the risks of cancer of the breast, colon, prostrate, endometrium, kidney, and gallbladder. Chronic overweight and obesity contribute significantly to osteoarthritis, a major cause of disability in adults. Although obesity should be considered a disease in its own right, it is also one of the key risk factors for other chronic diseases together with smoking, high blood pressure, and high blood cholesterol. In the analyses carried out for World Health Report 2002, approximately 58% of diabetes and 21% of ischaemic heart disease and 8–42% of certain cancers globally were attributable to a BMI above 21 kg/m². (Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health: Obesity and Overweight, World Health Organization, www.who.int/dietphysicalactivity/publications/facts/obesity/en/)

COSMETIC PLASTIC SURGERY

More than 8.7 million cosmetic plastic surgery procedures were performed in the United States in 2003—up 33% over 2002.

The overall top five surgical cosmetic plastic surgeries in 2003 were nose reshaping (356,554), liposuction (320,022), breast augmentation (254,140), eyelid surgery (246,633), and face-lifting (128,667).

Botox injection was the overall most popular cosmetic surgery procedure in 2003, with 2.8 million performed. This figure is up 157% since 2002.

82% of cosmetic plastic surgery patients are women. Liposuction was most popular with women in 2003, while men chose rhinoplasty (nose jobs) most often.

45% of American cosmetic plastic surgery patients are 35–50 years old. Hispanics make up 6%, African Americans 5%, and Asians 3% of all cosmetic plastic surgery patients.


45% of patients in 2003 had already received cosmetic surgery. This is up 62% from 2002.

32% of patients in 2003 had more than one procedure during a single session.

Between 2002 and 2003, buttock lifts increased 74%, lip augmentation surgeries increased 21%, tummy tucks 18%, breast lifts 17%, liposuction 13%, and breast augmentation 7%.

More than 52,000 postbariatric plastic surgeries were performed in 2003 to contour the body after tremendous weight loss.
**THE BEAUTY MYTH**

**BY NAOMI WOLF**

*Naomi Wolf’s now-classic 1991 book The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women became an international bestseller when it was first published, launching a new wave of feminism and causing a tremendous stir for its frank indictment of the unrealistic, impossible standards of female beauty created and promoted by the media, as well as the cosmetics, diet, pornography, and cosmetic-surgery industries. Dismissed by some critics for focusing on victimization, and extolled by others as a feminist handbook for the ’90s, Wolf’s provocative work influenced a tremendous number of American women, and the New York Times called *The Beauty Myth* one of the most important books of the 20th century. In 2002, HarperCollins published a 10th anniversary edition, with a new introduction by Wolf (excerpted below) in which she revisits the “beauty myth”—the “obsession with physical perfection that traps modern women in an endless spiral of hope, self-consciousness, and self-hatred as she tries to fulfill society’s impossible definition of ‘the flawless beauty.’”*

Some ten years later, what has changed? Where is the beauty myth today? It has mutated a bit and, thus, it bears looking at with fresh eyes.

Well, most satisfyingly, today you would be hard-pressed to find a 12-year-old girl who is not all too familiar with the idea that “ideals” are too tough on girls, that they are unnatural, and that following them too slavishly is neither healthy nor cool. . . . I would say that when what started as an outsider’s argument becomes the conventional wisdom of a Girl Scout troop, it is a sign of an evolution in consciousness. The time was right; girls and women were ready to say no to something they found oppressive. This is progress. . . .

Yet while *The Beauty Myth* has definitely empowered many girls and women easily to critique mass culture’s ideals, there are many ways in which that one step forward has been tempered by various steps back. . . .

When this book first came out, general public opinion considered anorexia and bulimia to be anomalous marginal behavior, and the cause was not assumed to be society’s responsibility—insofar as it created ideals and exerted pressure to conform to them—but rather personal crises, perfectionism, poor parenting, and other forms of individual psychological maladjustment. In reality, however, these diseases were widely suffered by many ordinary young women from unremarkable backgrounds, women and girls who were simply trying to maintain an unnatural “ideal” body shape and weight. I knew from looking around me in high school and at college that eating disorders were widespread among
otherwise perfectly well-balanced young women, and that the simple, basic social pressure


to be thin was a major factor in the development of these diseases. The National Eating

Disorders Association confirms National Institutes of Health statistics in pointing out that

1 to 2 percent of American women are anorexic—between 1.5 and 3 million women—and

that, of these, sufferers typically become anorexic in adolescence. NIH also notes that the
deaht rate for anorexia, .56 percent per decade, is about twelve times higher than the annual
death rate due to all causes of death among females ages 15 to 24. Anorexia is the biggest
killer of American teenage girls. I knew, from personal experience and from looking at
women all around me, that eating disorders were a vicious cycle: Starving or vomiting
became addictive behaviors once you started. I knew that the social expectation to be so
thin as to be unlikely to menstruate was a sick ideal, and that you often had to become sick
to conform to it. Disordered eating, which was undertaken to fit a disordered ideal, was
one of the causes of the disease, and not necessarily, as popular opinion of the day held, a
manifestation of an underlying neurosis.

Now, of course, education about the dangers of obsessive dieting or exercise is wide-
spread, and information about eating disorders, their addictive nature, and how to treat
them is available in every bookstore, as well as in middle schools, doctors’ offices, gyms,
high schools, and sororities. This, now, is progress.

Yet, on the down side, those very disorders are now so widespread—and, in fact, almost
destigmatized by such intense publicity—that they have become virtually normal. Not only
do whole sororities take for granted that bulimia is mainstream behavior, but models now
openly talk to Glamour magazine about their starvation regimes. . . . And “pro-an” Web
sites have appeared on the Internet, indicating a subculture of girls who are “pro-anorexia,”
who find the anorexic look appealing and validate it. This is definitely not progress.

When the beauty myth was analyzed in the early nineties, the ideal was, as I have noted,
quite rigid. Older women’s faces were almost never portrayed in magazines, and if they
were, they had to be airbrushed to look younger. Women of color were seldom shown as
role models unless they had . . . virtually Caucasian features. Now, there is much more
pluralism in the myth; it is now, one can almost say, many beauty myths. . . .

So has beauty-myth pluralism taken the day? Not by a long shot. The beauty myth, like
many ideologies of femininity, mutates to meet new circumstances and checkmates
women’s attempts to increase their power. . . .

Nor does the beauty-myth mutation stop with women, although with men, it is driven
less by cultural backlash and more by simple market opportunity. As I predicted it would,
a male beauty myth has established itself in the last decade, moving from inside the gay
male subculture to the newsstands of the nation, and hitting suburban dads with a brand-
new anxiety about their previously comfortable midsections. Today, Minoxidil has joined
the toothpaste in the suburban guy’s bathroom cabinet. Parallel to the increase in women’s
economic and social power, the power gap between the sexes has continued to close, dis-
lodging men from their ages-old position as arbiters, rather than providers, of sexual
attractiveness and beauty. Inevitably, a vast market for Viagra opened up. Male fashion,
health, and grooming magazines have taken off. Male cosmetic surgery use has hit record
highs. Men are now a third of the market for surgical procedures, and 10 percent of col-
lege students suffering from eating disorders are men. Men of all ages, economic back-
grounds, and sexual orientations are more worried—some a bit, others more substan-
tially—than they were just ten years ago. Is it progress when both genders can be com-
modified and evaluated as objects? Only of the most double-edged kind.

If one can draw one firm conclusion, it is that ten years later, women have a bit more
breathing space to do what I urged them to do at the end of _The Beauty Myth_—to make
the beauty myth their own. Today, many women have a sense of measure of freedom to
dress up or down, put on lipstick or take it off, flaunt themselves or wear sweats—even,
sometimes to gain or lose weight—without fearing that their value as a woman or their
seriousness as a person is at stake. Not too long ago, we did not make these choices with-
out a bit more trepidation. Incredible to think of now, a decade ago too many of us were
asking ourselves, “Will I be taken seriously at work if I look ‘too feminine’?” “Will I be lis-
tened to if I look ‘too plain’?” “Am I ‘bad’ if I gain weight? ‘Good’ only if I lose every
ounce?” If women no longer think this way—or, if they at least know that there is some-
thing terribly wrong if they are forced to think this way—it is testimony to the power of
an idea in the minds of a lot women at once; proof of their ability to create lasting change
and even a bit more freedom.

STATEMENT OF NAOMI WOLF AT THE AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION—COSPONSORED CONGRESSIONAL BRIEFING (1997)

First let me say what an historic occasion I think this is. I don’t think that’s an overstatement. This briefing today attests to the changes there have been in this institution in the last few years as more and more women have assumed leadership. What is exciting to me as a citizen of this country is our intuition, those of us who work on behalf of women’s equality in society, that we women are adequately represented as decision makers at the highest levels of government. The national agenda changes in a way that is more thoroughly democratic and the fact that we’re talking about eating disorders in a place like this is a change from five years ago, when it was considered virtually un-American to question the ideal of thinness in public let alone to treat it as a matter of serious policy discussion. So this is a truly great day for the health issues of all Americans being brought into the light.

My job is to flesh out a bit . . . the sociocultural pressures on women and the cultural picture that I saw, not as a medical specialist, but as a young woman coming of age in American society, and as a writer that I addressed in my first book, The Beauty Myth. I began to feel compelled to write about the devastating effects of anorexia and bulimia on women of my generation and younger. . . . I began to notice at Yale, where I was an undergraduate, that the best and brightest young women of my generation could barely get through the survival issues of their day, they could barely stay on top of schoolwork, barely stay on top of social relations, because so many of them were starving themselves half to death or spending a lot of time vomiting compulsively behind closed doors struggling with eating disorders. I realized there was a correlation between their ambition, their desire to be strong and perfect, and their internalization of a cultural imperative that also involved keeping your body rigorously under control and living up to an extremely unnatural ideal. I began to take a closer look at what this ideal was that so many women were trying to live up to. It turns out that it’s profoundly unnatural. Twenty years ago . . . the average fashion model weighed 8 percent less than the average woman. Today the average fashion model weighs 23 percent less than the average woman.

It’s my argument that what I call “the beauty myth,” the huge cultural pressure for girls and women to live up to these increasingly anorexic norms, supplanted “the feminist mystique” that Betty Friedan described so eloquently in her book. As women began to move into the workplace, as feminism began to transform the landscape, and women asked
for more power in the workplace, the ideals of beauty became more and more rigid as a way to undermine women's new-found confidence and authority.

I, unfortunately, know all too much about anorexia from my own personal experience. The reason I wanted to question what was the conventional wisdom when I first began looking at this issue was that, when I remembered how I became anorexic, it wasn't a particularly neurotic process. When I was 13, a perfectly average-sized kid, a boy, Bobby Sherman, poked me in the stomach, and said, “Watch it, Wolf.” The implication was that I was getting chubby and I immediately did what Cosmo suggested that I should do. I went on a calorie-restricted diet. I was successful. Within two or three weeks, I lost five pounds, but I could also no longer eat normally. I had anorexia for a year. It was the most painful year of my life. At the darkest point of that year, I weighed 83 pounds and I was 5'4". My family doctor said he could feel my spine through my stomach. More devastating, perhaps, than the physical harm I was doing to myself, and I could not stop doing, was the psychological toll it took on me, because all the things I should have been thinking [about] as a 13-year-old girl—adventure, what I was going to be when I grew up, my schoolwork, boys, travel, who I was, what awaited me in the world—all those things were supplanted by thoughts about food. I dreamt about food. My entire consciousness was taken up by food. Now, thank god for that doctor [who] along with my family and feminist background allowed me to think that this is stupid, this is not worth dying for. And allowed me to force myself to consume more calories. As I consumed more calories, my mind cleared. It was a long process, but I was able to recover. This led me to examine anorexia in other ways than merely a personal neurosis. It turns out that what happened to me is not difficult to explain. While many things cause anorexia, so does calorie-restricted dieting. It’s quite possible for victims of famine, for example, afterwards to resume normal eating [and yet] to still be obsessed with thoughts of food and with body distortion as a physiological response to restricted calorie intake.

What is restricted calorie intake? In our culture, it is normative for women to be living on starvation diets. I looked at Holland in the famine after World War II. The Red Cross said this population was living on 1,200 calories a day. This was semistarvation, and they rushed food supplements to them. Dieting centers, including the Beverly Hills Dieting Center, put women on diets ranging from 500 to 900 calories a day. Up to six months at a time. And the striking thing about the image of Dutch women, after World War II, is how chic they looked by modern standards. So it’s not individuals who are neurotic, who are sick, although in some cases, family and other dynamics play into it. It’s clearly a cultural imperative that is weighing down on women and not on men. That is sick, that is a distortion. And this is where a gathering like this is tremendously valuable.
There's something, by the way, that reinforces women having to live up to these norms, that has to do with the work force. Even if you think you are free to be at your own weight or your own size, very often there's what I have called the “PBQ,” or the “Professional Beauty Quotient,” in the workplace. In retail, in sales, not to mention the media and television work, many women find this PBQ operating. Flight attendants have protested about this. Many women find they are expected to fit a rigidly thin ideal in order to stay employed. For many women, their appearance is a criterion by which their workplace abilities are measured. A woman in sales told me that she followed my advice in *The Beauty Myth*, let herself go to her natural healthy weight, and she couldn’t get work anymore. So this is illegal. And I would like to ask that one of the things we could talk about or consider in a legislative sense is to reinforce, more seriously, the issue of noting that this is not a bona fide occupational qualification. As employment law would have it, a bona fide occupational qualification to be thin and conventionally attractive, that it is a differential expectation for women as opposed to men. And that as such is an illegal employment issue.

Finally, I want to ask you to consider the political fallout of this—why it is important for you to treat this as a political issue. Anorexia and bulimia as an epidemic is working as a sort of political sedative on our daughters’ generation, young women coming of age, young women of college level. This generation should be the future leaders of America. Instead of being strong and creative and full of resilience, so many young women I speak to on college campuses, again the best and the brightest, are barely making it through at a level of survival. Because they’re exhausted. And they’re exhausted because they’re starving or they’re exhausted because they’re vomiting compulsively. This generation’s voice is diminished, their reasoning powers are blunted. And this is America’s future leadership. All the more reason to take it seriously.

Finally, we need to take this seriously because American parents are at a loss. They ask me how they can protect their daughters, what can they do? I have some suggestions for your consideration, some possible ways to approach this in the policy arena. Number one: consider regulating the modeling industry. So many models are adolescent girls. They use 14-year-old girls and tart them up to look 35, and it’s common knowledge in the modeling industry that models have to keep their weight down through drug abuse, through smoking, and through anorexia. If you had doctors making sure that these employment conditions were safe, meaning that women and girls did not have to maintain their weight at starvation levels in order to work, and that models were still menstruating, that they were not starving so much that they were submenstrual, then you [would] go a long way toward making sure that an industry that influences American girls is not using American teenage girls in a punitive or abusive way to maintain that ideal.
Another thing you can consider is certainly an awareness campaign. Enlist rock stars—Jewel, Alanis Morissette—to get the message out that looking like Kate Moss is not worth dying for. And the reason that this kind of awareness campaign is so important is that girls are getting their cues about what’s socially acceptable from the authority of culture. What I was desperate for, what allowed me to recover, was an authority figure, my doctor, saying, “It is ok for you to eat.” That’s why if Congress says, “We take this seriously, let’s make this awareness campaign that treats this as seriously as a drug addiction issue, and tell our daughters that they are too precious for us to let them starve themselves to death or blight their bodies in this way,” that gives girls coming of age a sense that an authority in the culture, the highest authority, says, “We want you to stay healthy, we want you to eat, we want to help you.”

I think you should consider how useful in the past, how successful intervention has been in beauty issues. For instance, Kessler did some very important work with breast implants, and the cosmetics companies’ anti-age claims. Now, as you see, Phen/Fen is causing deaths in women. American women deserve as consumers to have attention paid to the industry that preys on their insecurities. And if you enforce, for instance, that kind of work with dieting companies, making sure they are not defrauding women and getting women to do something dangerous and unhealthy, such as extreme calorie-restricted diets, then you go a long way not only in stemming this epidemic but in giving our women, and most importantly our daughters, the message that they are too precious to waste themselves in the pursuit of this unhealthy and, I would say, anti-woman ideal. Thank you very much.

READING THE SLENDER BODY
From Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body

BY SUSAN BORDO

In the late Victorian era, arguably for the first time in the West, those who could afford to eat well began systematically to deny themselves food in pursuit of an aesthetic ideal. Certainly, other cultures had dieted. Aristocratic Greek culture made a science of the regulation of food intake, as a road to self-mastery and the practice of moderation in all things. Fasting, aimed at spiritual purification and domination of the flesh, was an important part of the repertoire of Christian practice in the Middle Ages. These forms of diet can clearly be viewed as instruments for the development of a “self”—whether an “inner” self, for the Christians, or a public self, for the Greeks—constructed as an arena in which the deepest possibilities for human excellence may be realized. Rituals of fasting and asceticism were therefore reserved for the select few, aristocratic or priestly, who were deemed capable of achieving such excellence of spirit. In the late 19th century, by contrast, the practices of body management begin to be middle-class preoccupations, and concern with diet becomes attached to the pursuit of an idealized physical weight or shape; it becomes a project in service of body rather than soul. Fat, not appetite or desire, became the declared enemy, and people began to measure their dietary achievements by the numbers of the scale rather than by the level of their mastery of impulse and excess. The “bourgeois tyranny of slenderness” (as Kim Chernin has called it) had begun its ascendancy (particularly over women), and with it the development of numerous technologies—diet, exercise, and later on, chemicals and surgery—aimed at a purely physical transformation.

In the magazine show “20/20,” several ten-year-old boys were shown some photos of fashion models. The models were pencil thin. Yet the pose was such that a small bulge of hip was forced, through the action of the body, into protuberance—as is natural, unavoidable on any but the most skeletal or the most tautly developed bodies. We bend over, we sit down, and the flesh coalesces in spots. These young boys, pointing to the hips, disgustedly pronounced the models to be “fat.” Watching the show, I was appalled at the boys’ reaction. Yet I could not deny that I had also been surprised at my own current perceptions while re-viewing female bodies in movies from the 1970s; what once appeared slender and fit now seemed loose and flabby. Weight was not the key element in these changed perceptions—my standards had not come to favor thinner bodies—rather, I had come to expect a tighter, smoother, more contained body profile.
The self-criticisms of the anorectic, too, are usually focused on particular soft, protuberant areas of the body (most often the stomach) rather than on the body as a whole. . . . Until the 1980s, excess weight was the target of most ads for diet products; today, one is much more likely to find the enemy constructed as bulge, fat, or flab. “Now,” a typical ad runs, “get rid of those embarrassing bumps, bulges, large stomach, flabby breasts, and buttocks. Feel younger, and help prevent cellulite buildup. . . . Have a nice shape with no tummy.” To achieve such results (often envisioned as the absolute eradication of body, as in “no tummy”), a violent assault on the enemy is usually required; bulges must be “attacked” and “destroyed,” fat “burned,” and stomachs (or, more disgustedly, “guts”) must be “busted” and “eliminated.” The increasing popularity of liposuction, a far from totally safe technique developed specifically to suck out the unwanted bulges of people of normal weight (it is not recommended for the obese), suggests how far our disgust with bodily bulges has gone. The ideal here is of a body that is absolutely tight, contained, “bolted down,” firm: in other words, a body that is protected against eruption from within, whose internal processes are under control. Areas that are soft, loose, or “wiggly” are unacceptable, even on extremely thin bodies. Cellulite management, like liposuction, has nothing to do with weight loss, and everything to do with the quest for firm bodily margins.

This perspective helps illuminate an important continuity of meaning in our culture between compulsive dieting and bodybuilding, and it reveals why it has been so easy for contemporary images of female attractiveness to oscillate between a spare, “minimalist” look and a solid, muscular, athletic look. The coexistence of these seemingly disparate images does not indicate that a postmodern universe of empty, endlessly differentiating images now reigns. Rather, the two ideals, though superficially very different, are united in battle against a common enemy: the soft, the loose; unsolid, excess flesh. It is perfectly permissible in our culture (even for women) to have substantial weight and bulk—so long as it is tightly managed. Simply to be slim is not enough—the flesh must not “wiggle.” Here we arrive at one source of insight into why it is that the image of ideal slenderness has grown thinner and thinner through the 1980s and early 1990s, and why women with extremely slender bodies often still see themselves as fat. Unless one takes to muscle building, to achieve a flab-free, excess-free body one must trim very near the bone.

ON THE BODY

BODY IMAGE IS A SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE

Body image is a subjective experience. In other words, it is a psychological phenomenon. It is the picture of our own body which we form in our mind, and thus relates to all other images and attitudes we hold about ourselves. Body image plays a major role in our self-concept. Of course, self-concept is a complex structure that embraces not only our body but also social roles, material possessions, and personal relationships. But the body figures as a central element.

The aspect of our body image which we most frequently distort is our size. Many studies have documented women's consistent exaggeration of their body as a whole as well as specific body parts, typically the fat-bearing areas of waist and hips. These estimation errors appear to be specific to one's own body. The same women accurately judge the body size of other people.

In an interesting series of studies, Dr. J. Kevin Thompson, a psychology professor at the University of South Florida, has been testing “normal” women who are free of any symptoms of eating disorders. He uses a movable calipers, which participants set at the size they judge their various body parts to be. The psychologist then compares subjects' ratings with their actual measurements. More than 95 percent of the women overestimated their body size, according to Dr. Thompson. Their estimates were typically one fourth larger than their bodies really were. Almost half of the women estimated at least one of the four body parts to be 50 percent larger than it actually was.

Another provocative finding is that women’s feelings about their bodies influence how oversized their image of themselves is. Unlike men, women see large as a negative characteristic. When Dr. Thompson asked subjects to rate how they felt about their bodies, their estimates of size were even bigger than when they gave their objective view. In turn, the more inaccurate subjects were about their body size, the worse they felt about themselves. So, inaccurate judgments of body size and shape and feelings of low self-worth influence each other in a descending spiral of poor self-image.

Body Traps: Breaking the Binds That Keep You from Feeling Good about Your Body, by Dr. Judith Rodin (1992)

THE FEMININE AESTHETIC

Distasteful though it may be, the bound foot illustrates several aspects of the feminine esthetic. . . . It instilled in every woman a deep sense of insecurity born of the conviction that some natural part of her was profoundly ugly (in China the common term was “goose-foot”) and required some extreme corrective measure. And finally, it demanded the shared
complicity of mother and daughter in the desperate work of beautification and the passing on of compliant, submissive feminine values, for the anxious mother was the agent of will who crushed her suffering daughter's foot as she calmed her rebellion by holding up the promise of the dainty shoe, teaching her child at an early age that the feminine mission in life, at the cost of tears and pain, was to alter her body and amend her ways in the supreme effort to attract and please a man.

A different approach to the feminine aesthetic prevailed in the West, where the entire torso from breast to hips was believed to require artistic improvement, and the ingenious device that hampered a woman's motions as it molded her figure to a romantic ideal was the imprisoning corset with its inflexible stays of whalebone or steel. We know from the art and documents of the 16th century that two powerful queens, Catherine de Medici of France and Elizabeth of England, were among the first to wear the compressing cage, taking on, as it were, the armor of their noble knights to push the soft flesh and rib cage inward. How fascinating that history's first tight-lacers should have been the Medici and the Virgin Queen, two bold, ambitious women who were called “unnatural” in their thirst for power. Why did they do it? What made them want to subject their chest and stomach to such discomfort, they who negotiated treaties and plotted murder with such competent skill? Could it be that the singular quality their enemies whispered they did not have—a womanly weakness, a soft, yielding nature—might best be proved and ceremoniously displayed by that excessively small and breathlessly feminine bodice? The slender waist was not exclusively a feminine vanity. Elizabeth’s father, Henry viii, compressed his middle in order to give his chest that extra-burly look—but King Henry and other men stopped short of physical pain.

Two points must be stressed right here. The first is that no discussion of the feminine body in the Western world can make much sense without getting a grip on the corset, no matter how familiar the material may seem, for the corset has played not a supporting but a starring role in the body’s history. The second is that whatever sartorial devices men have put on to bolster their body image—codpieces, elevated shoes, padded shoulders, a boxy jacket—these did not constrict or cause pain. The truth is, men have barely tampered with their bodies at all, historically, to make themselves more appealing to women.

Despite genetic variation, rarely is more than one type of female physique given sexual adulation in a given age, and the imposition of a single ideal pits woman against woman in a peculiar form of physical struggle. A popular chorus in traditional blues music goes like this: “I'm a big fat mama with plenty of meat shaking on my bones, and when I shake, a skinny woman loses her home.” The skinny woman and the big mama are competitors in song because with each change in the standards of attractiveness they are competitors in life, vying for attention as a means of survival.
Hippy or scrawny, busty or flat, the general principle governing the feminine body is not subject to change. How one looks is the chief physical weapon in female-against-female competition. Appearance, not accomplishment, is the feminine demonstration of desirability and worth. In striving to approach a physical ideal, by corsetry in the old days or by a cottage-cheese-and-celery diet that begins tomorrow, one arms oneself to fight the competitive wars. Feminine armor is never metal or muscle but, paradoxically, an exaggeration of physical vulnerability that is reassuring (unthreatening) to men. Because she is forced to concentrate on the minutiae of her bodily parts, a woman is never free of self-consciousness. She is never quite satisfied, and never secure, for desperate, unending absorption in the drive for a perfect appearance—call it feminine vanity—is the ultimate restriction on freedom of mind.

_Femininity_, by Susan Brownmiller (1984)

**MOMMY, AM I FAT?**

Kiah Hart scrutinized herself in the dressing-room mirror. “These pants make my butt look big!” complained the petite ten-year-old. “I’m so fat!” Kiah has been self-conscious about her weight since age seven, says her mom, Katie, of Portland, Oregon. And Kiah’s insecurities are echoed by kids across America—many of whom, like Kiah, are not overweight at all. In Centereach, New York, ten-year-old Patrick Brady refuses seconds and dessert, saying, “I don’t want to get fat.” His mother, Lorel, says that even at age six, her lanky son pulled his belt tightly to accentuate his trim waist. What’s going on here?

“There is huge societal pressure to have the ideal physique, and it’s affecting girls and boys at alarmingly young ages,” says Alison E. Field, sc.d., an assistant professor in the department of pediatrics and medicine at Harvard Medical School, in Boston. Recent studies reveal that children as young as five worry about their weight. Girls want to be smaller, and boys, more muscular. Influenced by the media, peers, and even their parents, some kids are forming unrealistic body images.

And this quest for perfection extends beyond weight. “Kids are growing up with an all-or-nothing mentality about appearance,” says Kathy Kater, a social worker in St. Paul, Minnesota, who specializes in preventing eating disorders. “The message children hear is that if they’re not as thin or tall or beautiful or handsome as they possibly can be, they’re inadequate.” This can cause dissatisfaction with their looks that might lead to early dieting or bodybuilding and perhaps even depression and eating disorders.

Research shows that by middle school, as many as half of all girls feel bad about the way they look. That’s why it’s so important to nurture body confidence in the preschool and elementary-school years, when self-image is being formed.

“Mommy, Am I Fat?” by Ellen H. Parlapiano, _Parents_ magazine, August 2003
NOT JUST FOR WOMEN

It is not surprising in this era of women's new economics that penis enlargement surgery has also come of age. An article in Vogue magazine reports that between 1990 (when those operations began in America) until 1994, there were approximately 3,000 augmentations performed. In 1994 alone there were 3,000 more, and there are those who think that number may have doubled in 1995. Medical experts are alarmed, seeing genital cosmetic surgery as falling into a gray area between urology and chicanery. “We don’t tell guys who pump iron that they’re crazy, do we?” asks Gary Griffin, publisher of a newsletter called Penis Power Quarterly. “Men have always wanted bigger penises,” adds Griffin. “The bigger the better. A big penis is a sign of masculinity, and men are competitive about that.”

At a time when women are having more cosmetic surgery than ever, including breast [and gluteal] implants, can we quibble with men who want to enlarge their penises? The figures vary on how women feel about penis size, whether it matters as regards performance, but one statistic stands out: “Women who rated themselves as more attractive were particularly concerned with larger size,” reports psychiatrist Michael Pertschuk in a Psychology Today survey. “Of women describing themselves as “much more attractive than average,” 65 percent cared strongly or moderately about penis width, and 54 percent cared about penis length. Women who rated their own looks as average were about 20 percentage points lower.

As men get more into overall attraction—clothes, cosmetics, bodybuilding—and women respond to their physical beauty, will men be less anxious about penis size, realizing that there are other things, physically, that appeal to women? According to a Glamour magazine survey, the answer is no. Asked whether they would rather be (a) 5 feet 2 inches tall with a seven-inch penis or (b) 6 feet 2 inches tall with a three-inch penis, 62 percent of the male respondents picked a and only 36 percent picked b.

The Power of Beauty, by Nancy Friday (1996)

A recent study of male business school graduates, by Dr. Irene Frieze, a psychologist at the University of Pittsburgh, and her colleagues, showed a strong relationship between weight, height, and income for men. Surveying over one thousand men, they found that those who were at least 20 percent overweight made four thousand dollars less per year. Leaner men earned higher salaries over time than their overweight colleagues. Height also affected male salaries. Taller men earned about six hundred dollars more per inch than shorter executives. Such differences were not evident 20 years ago.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF BODY IMAGE

PRE-20TH CENTURY
In ancient Greece, men and women wore loose, transparent robes that emphasized the natural shape of the body.

Until the 13th century, Western dress for men and women was similar—a one-piece, loose-fitting garment with a hole for the head.

Fourteenth-century women wore tight, tubular undergarments to flatten the breasts and ruffled collars to draw attention away from the chest.

The corset, popular among the upper classes since the 1500s, became a central element of fashion in the mid 19th century. In the 1870s long corsets were seen as performing a disciplinary function, as well, as they made the wearer more decorous in her movements, and more restrained generally. The corset came into full flower in the 1880s and 1890s.

During the Victorian era, the ideal body type for women was plump, fleshy, and full-figured. By the late 1890s, however, magazines began to advertise diet remedies and rubber girdles to reduce the look of full figures.

1900-20
When bicycles and physical fitness became popular around 1900, it helped change women’s body image. Looser clothing and a more athletic figure became the fashion.

The more slender Gibson Girl of the turn of the century portrayed the physical vigor and increasing interest of women in athletics. Physicians began to see body weight as a “science” of calorie counting and “ideal weights.”

The young Australian swimmer and silent film star Annette Kellerman was a strong advocate of female athleticism and the primacy of the body. At 5’4” and 137 pounds, she embodied the epitome of female beauty in 1918. That same year, a book was published that would revolutionize the way women thought about their bodies. Diet and Health with a Key to the Calories, by a Los Angeles physician named Lulu Hunt Peters, was the first popular American book to endorse dieting for women and to proclaim that fat was out of fashion.

“How anyone can want to be anything but thin is beyond my intelligence,” wrote Dr. Peters. To her overweight readers, she gravely warned, “You are viewed with distrust, suspicion, and even aversion.” Peters was able to disguise her weight-loss propaganda in the form of a humanitarian act. By labeling dieting a much-needed solution to the food shortages caused by the war in Europe, she used the issue of patriotism to strengthen her emotional appeal to women.
1920s

In 1920, American women established the right to vote; 1920 was also the first year of the Miss America Pageant.

During the 1920s, women’s weight began to take on moral dimensions. If a woman was overweight, her excess pounds were viewed as a sign of her weak character and lack of self-control. Women who struggled with weight problems began to feel morally inferior and were burdened with a sense of guilt and shame. Therefore, American women were now up against two formidable foes in the “battle of the bulge”—the argument that dieting was a woman’s patriotic duty during a time of war, plus the claim that additional weight was evidence of a woman’s degenerate moral state. It is no wonder that the dieting craze really began to gain momentum during the 1920s.

The revolution in women’s fashion came with the arrival of a French designer named Paul Poiret, whose dresses called for a female figure that was slim and straight. These new dresses created a “look” to which women’s bodies had to conform. Whereas a woman had previously been able to employ a dressmaker who would fit clothing to her unique body shape, the new “couturier” clothes called on women to change their body size in order to fit into the “proper” mold, which was dictated by the dress designer. Another popular designer of the time was Gabrielle (Coco) Chanel, who created dresses with dropped waistlines and increasingly shorter skirts. Women who wanted to look good in these lightweight little dresses needed to have attractive legs and a smooth, slim body form. The advent of this “flapper” style of dress, along with the emergence of a new ideal for women’s bodies, added to the other pressures on women to diet themselves into a more “acceptable” weight.

The body-image phenomenon of the 1920s occurred just as the women’s rights movement was heating up and women were, at last, starting to take on roles outside the home.

1930s–40s

The invention of the Latex process by Dunlop rubber in the 1930s led to the invention of the modern two-way-stretch panty girdle, which is much more commonly used as a domestic discipline garment these days than the old-fashioned lace-up corset.

Girdles, and later panty girdles, were introduced in the 1920s as garments less severe than the corset, and having the added effect of shaping the abdomen and buttocks. Rather rigid at first, they became elasticized in the 1930s. (They were almost universally worn by adult women until the late 1960s.)

Although the 1920s had brought greater attention to the female body shape, this concern temporarily faded during the years of the Great Depression and World War II, when Americans were more worried about obtaining basic necessities than dieting. At the same
time, however, the distributors of weight-loss information began to target a new audience—children and adolescents. Instead of making allowances for “baby fat,” physicians began to view overweight children as medical problems in need of treatment, and psychologists also started to consider the emotional implications of being a fat child.

The media did its share of promoting teenage dieting, in articles such as one that appeared in a 1940s issue of *Ladies' Home Journal*: “Appearance plays too important a part in a girl's life not to have her grow up to be beauty-conscious. Girls should be encouraged to take an interest in their appearance when they are very young.”

**1950s**
During the politically and socially conservative 1950s, there was a brief return to the curvaceous female figures of the late 1800s. With the rounded shape of Marilyn Monroe representing the ideal of female beauty, curves were temporarily “in” again, and the Miss America of 1954 measured 5'8" and weighed 132 pounds.

**1960s**
By the 1960s, slenderness was judged by women to be one of the most important determinants of physical attractiveness. Geometric, angular clothing required a flat, slim figure. Audrey Hepburn was the body ideal. Her measurements at the time of *Roman Holiday* (1953): 5'7", 110 pounds, dress size 8, bust 32"-waist 20"-hips 35". Twiggy arrived in the United States in 1967, 5'7", weighing 91 pounds, with measurements of 31-22-32. A media frenzy ensued, establishing Twiggy's emaciated form and short skirts as the dominant style.

**1970s–90s**
The dramatic change in society's outlook on women's bodies is evident in the steady decline in the weight of Miss America pageant winners. Between 1922 and 1999, their height increased by less than 2%, while their weight decreased 12%.

American culture began to emphasize physical fitness and athleticism. Women were now expected to be thin and fit, and the most extreme fitness enthusiasts often measured one's moral state by the fitness of the body. With the new emphasis on the “toning of the body,” women were, and continue to, strive for ever higher levels of perfection through exercise.

In 1982, Jane Fonda's workout videos became popular. Models were taller and thinner but physically fit, with no visible body fat and muscles highly toned by hours of working out.

In the early 1990s, the heroin-chic, preteen waif look became popular for adult women pictured in fashion magazines. By the late 1990s, narrow hips and large breasts, a rare combination without the help of breast implants, had become a common requirement for models.
WOMEN’S IDEAL BODIES THEN & NOW

BY JULIA SAVACOOL

Just 100 years ago, the Chinese worshipped a woman’s round belly as a symbol of fertility and sexual desire. Today, they strive for a flat, Westernized ideal. And in South Africa, women’s once-revered big hips have given way to skin and bones. Every day, TV, the Internet, and the inevitable creep of modernization force women around the globe to abandon their unique body ideals. Marie Claire investigates the changing shape of women.

CHINA

Th En For centuries in China, the most desirable women were slim by Western standards with “a modest touch of fullness” in their midsection (the Chinese actually had a term for it: feng man). This body ideal was related to traditional Chinese-medicine principles that said a woman’s qi, or vital energy, has its central reservoir in the abdomen. “For the Chinese, a rounded belly translated into a woman of sexual desire, fertility, and strength,” says anthropologist Susan Brownell, Ph.D., an expert on Chinese culture at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

Now The thin are getting thinner! According to a recent study, up to 70 percent of Chinese college women now think they’re too fat, even though their weight is normal. And Dr. Sing Lee, director of the Hong Kong Eating Disorders Clinic, says he sees 25 to 50 times as many patients as he did 15 years ago. “Fatness is subjective in these women’s minds,” Dr. Lee explains. “In one study we did, more than half the women were at normal or below-normal weight, but they were all trying to lose at least ten pounds.” The growing Chinese fixation on skinniness is apparent in the proliferating weight-loss ads in their women’s magazines—as many as one in every two ads is for diet products, pills, or teas.

The decline of feng man can be traced directly to the 1966 Cultural Revolution and the influence of communism. “With the rise of communism, femininity and softness were discouraged,” Dr. Brownell explains. “A masculine ideal was associated with revolutionary fervor and was emulated because it is also associated with hard work, a communist ideal.” And China’s strict one-child policy today means that women’s bodies are less appreciated as fertility symbols. “In China, thinness and a flat belly are in,” says Dr. Brownell.

FIJI

then When Harvard Medical School anthropologist/psychiatrist Anne Becker, M.D., Ph.D., was studying the women of Fiji in the 1980s, she found that two-thirds of the
population were overweight or obese. Amazingly, almost one in five obese women surveyed said they wished to gain even more weight. “In Fiji, social position was partly determined by how well you were fed. At any meal, you were supposed to eat beyond the point of fullness.” In particular, large calves were a mark of attractiveness. “Thick calves were equated with a woman’s ability to do work—a valued attribute,” explains Dr. Becker. “Calling someone ‘skinny legs’ was the ultimate insult.”

**Now** When Dr. Becker visited the villagers in 1988, eating disorders were unfamiliar, and women laughed at her description of the Western world’s quest for thinness. But today, being thin is the goal of many young women on the island. “The change in women’s thinking about their bodies has been remarkable,” says Dr. Becker.

So what happened? In a word: television. In 1995, **tv** came to the rural island villages, and young women started spending hours watching soaps and sitcoms. The quality of life portrayed in these shows far surpassed the Fijians’ own, says Dr. Becker, and native women equated those higher living standards with the willowy look of the Western actresses—an ideal they began to emulate.

Thirty-eight months after **tv**’s arrival, 15 percent of girls surveyed had vomited to control their weight. [“The girls who watched television on three or more nights each week were 50 percent more likely to describe themselves as unhappy with the size or shape of their bodies or to describe themselves as ‘too fat.’ Several of the girls told interviewers that they wished to emulate the women they saw in Western television shows. The characters from **Fox** Television’s ‘Melrose Place’ and ‘Beverly Hills, 90210’ were mentioned by name.” (“Harvard Study Links tv to Eating Disorders in Fiji,” Feminist Daily News Wire, May 20, 1999, www.feminist.org)]

“Fijians are leaping from an isolated agricultural society into the information age,” says Dr. Becker, “and the psychological impact has been immense.”

**Jamaica**

**Then** “In my mother’s generation, proper proportion was king,” says Gail Marcia Anderson, m.a., the Jamaican co-author of a new study in the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* that compares body-image attitudes of white American and black Jamaican youth. “It was believed that the bust should be moderate, the waist smaller, the hips larger—all in proportion, like an old-fashioned Coca-Cola bottle.” Moreover, says Anderson, it has always been more attractive for a Jamaican woman to be ten pounds overweight than ten pounds underweight: “Jamaicans have traditionally valued the curvy, voluptuous figures of women.”
Voluptuousness is still valued, but today, big butts are emphasized—and proper proportion is a thing of the past. In pursuit of a supersize rear, some women even risk their health by taking animal-hormone pills, used by farmers to fatten chickens, in a misguided attempt to “grow” a larger butt. (There’s no scientific evidence that it works.) “These pills are extremely dangerous,” says Dr. Manuel Pena, representative of Jamaica’s Pan American Health Organization. “They are not meant for humans. Taking them can have severe health implications, including high blood pressure and metabolic problems.”

A driving factor behind Jamaica’s big-bottom fascination comes from the rise in popularity of Jamaican “dancehall” music, which exploded with the current generation, says Anderson. “In dancehall, most dance moves center around the hips and buttocks.”

“There’s even a popular song that explicitly celebrates ‘mampi-size’ women—a colloquialism for the big-bodied female,” adds Carolyn Cooper, Ph.D., a professor of literary and cultural studies at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica and author of Sound Clash: Jamaican Dancehall Culture. “Some foolhardy women are taking chicken pills in an attempt to give themselves the full figure celebrated in dancehall lyrics.”

Reinforcing the image of voluptuous hips are the super-curvy “dancehall queens”—women who win the annual dance contests and wow the crowds with their overtly sexual gyrations. “These women sit at the pinnacle of what most young Jamaicans want their bodies to look like,” says Anderson. “In previous generations, women covered up their bodies out of modesty; their figures were less on display. Today, dancehall queens are just about showing it all.” She adds, “Women in Jamaica have always liked curves; it’s just that the type of curve has changed.”

SOUTH AFRICA

Then For centuries large lower bodies were the mark of sexiness for South Africa’s indigenous women. In fact, women of the Ndebele—one of the largest native populations—wore large, beaded waist and leg hoops called golwani, stuffed with rubber to produce a larger-than-life bottom half. These padded costumes symbolized rolls of body fat, considered marks of beauty. The Zulu, another South African tribe, created rituals to highlight women’s hips and legs. “Among black natives, large buttocks and thighs were considered signs of womanliness,” says anthropologist Carolyn Martin Shaw, Ph.D., of the University of California Santa Cruz. “Large buttocks were the focal point of celebratory dances that required women to turn their backsides to the audience and show off fantastic muscle control by contracting their buttocks to the music.”
NOW All-around thin is in. A new study reports that Zulu women have the fastest-growing rate of eating disorders of any group in the country. “In our study of black female university students in a rural area, 45 percent had some form of disordered eating,” says researcher Julie Seed, senior lecturer in psychology at Northumbria University in the U.K. “Considering that bigness has traditionally been seen as a sign of wealth and beauty, this was a shock.”

“Thin” has even become a political statement. “Prior to the end of apartheid in 1995, there were no documented cases of eating disorders among blacks in South Africa,” says Seed. “But today, women in the black community equate ‘thin’ with being educated and having rights—in other words, being more like a white person. Younger black women don’t want to look big, because big symbolizes their past, and their past has not been particularly rosy.” Seed and her colleagues’ study also reveals that some Zulu and Ndebele women feel being thin will improve their job prospects.

KENYA: THE LAST HOLDOUT
The Maasai are one of the last global cultures to remain true to their natural look (long and lanky). Why are they holding on to their body ideal? For one, their shape is already similar to the Western ideal that other countries are importing. But lifestyle also plays an important role: The nomadic Maasai, who often walk dozens of miles a day, expend a tremendous amount of energy. Meanwhile, their food sources are poor: The traditional diet consists of milk, cow’s blood, and meat on special occasions. And finally, the warrior Maasai (who also inhabit parts of Tanzania) have enormous pride in their culture. Their coming-of-age rituals strengthen the ties of women to their community, and language barriers limit their contact with outsiders.

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THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN

President Bush declared in his 2002 State of the Union address, “The mothers and daughters of Afghanistan were captives in their own homes. . . . Today women are free.”

But they aren’t. More than two years later, many Afghan women are still captives in their homes. Life is better in Kabul than under the Taliban, but in many areas [U.S.] triumphalism is proving hollow. Consider these snapshots of the new Afghanistan:

* A 16-year-old girl fled her 85-year-old husband, who married her when she was 9. She was caught and recently sentenced to two and a half years’ imprisonment.

* The Afghan Supreme Court has recently banned female singers from appearing on Afghan television, barred married women from attending high school classes, and ordered restrictions on the hours when women can travel without a male relative.

* When a man was accused of murder recently, his relatives were obliged to settle the blood debt by handing over two girls, ages 8 and 15, to marry men in the victim’s family.

* A woman in Afghanistan now dies in childbirth every 20 minutes, usually without access to even a nurse. A U.N. survey in 2002 found that maternal mortality in the Badakshan region was the highest ever recorded anywhere on earth: a woman there has a 50 percent chance of dying during one of her eight pregnancies.

* In Herat, a major city, women who are found with an unrelated man are detained and subjected to a forced gynecological exam. At last count, according to Human Rights Watch, 10 of these “virginity tests” were being conducted daily.

Mr. Bush has refused to provide security outside Kabul. Banditry and chaos are rampant, longtime warlords control much of the country, the Taliban is having a resurgence in the southeast. . . . The rise of banditry and rape, often by the Afghan security authorities, has had a particularly devastating effect on women. Because the roads are not safe even in daylight, girls do not dare go to schools or their mothers to health centers. And when women are raped, they risk being murdered by their own families for besmirching the family honor.

“Many women and girls are essentially prisoners in their own homes,” Human Rights Watch declared. And Amnesty International quoted an aid worker as saying: “During the Taliban era, if a woman went to market and showed an inch of flesh, she would have been flogged. Now she’s raped.”

Change in Afghanistan was never going to come overnight. Honor killings of girls and forced early marriages are deeply ingrained. An Afghan proverb says, “A girl should have her first period in her husband’s house and not her father’s house.”

BILLION-DOLLAR BRAINWASH

From No Fat Chicks: How Big Business Profits by Making Women Hate Their Bodies—and How to Fight Back

BY TERRY POULTON

The key is money. In fact, what I ultimately discovered is that the whole diet phenomenon is not about beauty or how much women weigh at all. It’s about how much we can be persuaded to spend trying to be thin. The entire process is just a despicable scheme to guarantee annual sales of weight-loss products and services currently estimated at $50 billion in the United States alone.

The biggest tip-off to the truth of this theory is that the women who are the most deluded of all are the millions who are not fat—by any stretch of imagination except that of the antifat profiteers. Yet these women truly believe they are too heavy and that they have an obligation to lose that weight by whatever means possible.

When I understood the enormity of this deliberate manipulation of perception, emotion, and prejudice, a horrifying word began rocketing around in my mind: “brainwashing.” Was the term too strong, or just right, I wondered? I raced to double-check it in several dictionaries. And came up with precise corroboration:

Brainwashing: 1. A method for changing attitudes or beliefs, especially through torture, drugs, or psychological techniques. 2. Any method of controlled indoctrination.

Given the enormity of the mass deception, the name for what I was dealing with was suddenly obvious. It was nothing less than a “billion-dollar brainwash.” . . .

For starters, waiflike thinness is strictly a 20th-century concept. In fact, actress Lillian Russell, who was considered the world’s most desirable woman of the 1890s, weighed 200 voluptuous pounds. Paintings of other abundantly endowed beauties still grace gallery walls all over the world, still draw droves of admirers, and still fetch enormous prices. For centuries, in fact, these robust images with all the flesh and curves that nature designed, have symbolized the essence of “Woman.”

Yet in the 1990s, if any of these renowned beauties were somehow to step out of her frame and waft from her time to ours, she would find herself not beloved, but virtually demonized. She would have difficulty obtaining something as ephemeral as a date or as fundamental as a husband. Or a good job. Or equal legal protection. Or first-class healthcare. Or a good education. Or decent clothing. Or basic human respect.
Today, like the millions of American women who resemble her, she’d be denounced as an offender of a tyrannical new commandment. A legal and social taboo in any other context, it bellows through all the mass media, from haute couture magazines to the crude common denominator of bumper stickers: NO FAT CHICKS! . . .

As profitable as it has always been to wager on the wayward gusts of fashion, there was a fortune waiting for anyone who could know for certain which way the next wind would blow. And then keep it whistling exactly that way.

But how?

By creating a cash cow, coercing all females into wanting to look just like [the “ideal” woman], and then selling them the myriad products necessary to recreate her image. That the quest would prove impossible for most women guaranteed everlasting profits. The bovine imagery seems ludicrous when applied to a gangly 91-pound English model named Twiggy. Yet since her debut in 1967, when she became the darling of the fashion world and the incongruous ideal of nearly everyone else, her image—and that of latter-day clones like Kate Moss—has been milked for billions. During the first decade after Twiggy’s debut, the annual take from the labyrinthine American antifat industry soared to $10 billion, 95 percent of which was spent by women. And in the following decades, that total has quintupled . . .

New York, March 20, 1967: The shy, near-skeletal English teenager who jets in on TWA flight 703 looks nothing like the cash cow she is destined to become. Nor do her elfin face and urchin figure (91 pounds on a five-foot, seven-inch frame) identify her as a Trojan horse whose secret mission is to entrap the female population of America for the next three decades.

Reporters loitering at an airport newsstand wait impatiently for the press conference to welcome Lesley Hornby, the 17-year-old fashion model who swept to the top of the heap in Swinging London the previous year, despite being so emaciated she was nicknamed Sticks, Oxfam, and, ultimately, Twiggy . . .

In a wacky, six-week whirlwind after Twiggy’s arrival at Kennedy Airport, the diminutive cockney “bird” metamorphosed into a mammoth, completely unprecedented marketing phenomenon. Her image was plastered everywhere. Her photo sessions caused near-riots all over Manhattan. Hairstylists duplicated her cropped locks as fast as their scissors could snip. Modeling agencies trampled one another to sign her up. Mannequins matching her 31-22-32 silhouette suddenly appeared in Fifth Avenue windows, hastily clad in the Twiggy Enterprises line of clothing, which was being imported from London at the rate of $500,000 per week.
Before she winged back across the Atlantic, Twiggy was the object of a genuine media frenzy from which not even the stodgy New York Times could remain aloof, even though it described her as “just like your next-door neighbor, if he happens to be a skinny 12-year-old boy.” Scribes from Life, Look, Mademoiselle, the Saturday Evening Post, the New Yorker, McCall’s, and Ladies’ Home Journal followed her everywhere. A huge press contingent turned out just to watch her get her famous hair trimmed. Women’s Wear Daily, even while denouncing Twiggy in a front-page editorial as just “a massive publicity stunt,” nevertheless splurged with a 16-page feature on her.

Why the commotion? Timing. There were then more than 30 million teenage girls in America, all eager to spend their allowances on anything that differentiated them from their mothers. With rock and roll fomenting rebellion, baby boomers of both sexes were overthrowing parental dominion. And even though the famous “pig in a python” metaphor had yet to be coined to symbolize the sociological clout of these youngsters, what was obvious was that their spending power amounted to a gold rush for marketers.

Even so, few pundits recognized the revolutionary redefinition of beauty Twiggy represented, nor that, in terms of marketing, she was treading where no mere model had ever gone before. One exception was Newsweek, which splashed her on its cover and dubbed her “the first child star in the history of high fashion.” While other reporters cracked jokes, Newsweek’s anonymous feature writer cut right to the big question: “Whether the Twiggy look will now sweep across the U.S., emaciating American teenagers as it goes.”

It was the right query, but it underestimated the geography. Girls all over the world began shortening their skirts, lengthening their eyelashes, and cutting back on calories—although not to any alarming degree, because youth was still on their side. But Twiggy’s older fashion colleagues hit the panic button. “It was a nightmare, trying to keep up,” model Gillian Bobroff recalls in Michael Gross’s Model: The Ugly Business of Beautiful Women. “I . . . started killing myself. . . . I never ate.” Statuesque Wilhelmina, a top international model of the day, put herself on what she called the “hummingbird diet,” eating only twice a week, with cigarettes and black coffee sustaining her between Sundays, when she had a small steak, and Wednesdays, when she ate “a little bowl of soup . . . or a little piece of cheese on a cracker . . . so I wouldn’t get too sick.”

Other fashion models, indeed all women whose beauty was their professional stock-in-trade, soon felt pressured into adopting similarly stringent regimens, often augmented by diet pills and bulimic behavior. Two of the most prominent were actresses Jane Fonda—who has admitted suffering a 20-year eating disorder while trying “to get closer to the bone”—and Sally Field, who developed bulimia in response to feeling “immensely unattractive [because] everybody . . . was Twiggy, except me.”
But what’s most significant here is that, even in ordinary walks of life, it was only a matter of time before the girls who had found it fairly easy to look like Twiggy—and like the Barbie dolls they’d been collecting since 1959—grew up to be women whose bodies had other plans, but whose minds, by then, had been infiltrated by the message of antifat profiteers: that all women have an obligation to be slim. . . .

Nothing could exemplify this dynamic better than a trio of appalling attitudinal surveys. One, conducted by Glamour magazine in 1984, found that a huge majority of the 33,000 female respondents declared they would rather lose ten to fifteen pounds than achieve any other goal in life, despite the fact that only 25 percent were overweight and another 25 percent were underweight. Another, Psychology Today’s 1997 Body Image Survey, determined that 15 percent of female respondents would willingly die five years younger if they could achieve their “ideal” weight. And another poll, reported in Newsweek in 1990, discovered that if informed in advance about a fetus’s predisposition to obesity, 11 percent of the surveyed couples would opt to abort it.

By 1981, just a decade and a half after Twiggy’s debut, the annual take by the multifaceted weight loss industry had rocketed to an estimated $10 billion. . . . All in all, as of this writing, the latest figure being cited by a credible source (Psychology Today) as the total annual spending in the United States on weight loss products and services is $50 billion. That, according to Money, breaks down into an average of up to $84 per pound temporarily lost, or about $500 per year per dieter.

And the true genius of this cavalcade of chicanery is that it prospers despite achieving the exact opposite of what it promises. No one even makes the connection between the deliberately induced delirium and the fact that, during the three decades since Operation Twiggy hit the Atlantic beachhead in 1967, most of us have become not thinner, but fatter.

Excerpted from No Fat Chicks: How Big Business Profits by Making Women Hate Their Bodies—and How to Fight Back, by Terry Poulton (Carol Publishing Group, 1997).
BOOTYLICIOUS IS OK—SO LONG AS IT’S TIGHT

BY NEVA CHONIN

Girl-fat: It’s back. Just as the early ’90s fetishized top-heavy breasts and lanky gams, the early 21st century has shifted its gaze lower, toward what many view as the more realistic assets of a copious bottom supported by well-padded legs. For better or worse . . . the American body politic has entered a new and voluptuous phase.

“Musicians in R&B and hip-hop who are full-figured are becoming powerful role models to teens, even more than actresses,” says Rachel Zalis, West Coast editor for Glamour, whose May [2004] cover features a slimmed-down, but still opulent, Queen Latifah. “They’re standing up and saying, ‘We have a lot of self-esteem and confidence, and you don’t have to be skinny to have those.’”

Full-figured women have long been celebrated in black and Latino culture. Now, with music as its conduit, that acceptance has started to cross over into the mainstream white arena, where girls who once idealized Madonna’s muscles are now wishing they had J. Lo’s bottom and Beyoncé’s legs. Christina Aguilera has embraced her Latin heritage and transformed from emaciated waif to sultry voluptuary, and although white pop stars such as Britney Spears and Pink might obsess over their weight, they’ve never presented a skinny profile . . .

Susan Bordo, author of Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body, agrees that perceptions are improving. “I don’t feel nearly as ashamed to wear tight pants and a top that shows off my shape as I would have five years ago. And that’s thanks to hip-hop culture.”

For those who worry about unrealistic representations of women in media, the trend toward lushness is promising. But many also worry that the current booty fever is simply objectification taken from another angle.

There is, for example, the controversy over misogyny in mainstream rap videos. The sexiness-versus-sexism debate has raged since Sir Mix-A-Lot’s “Baby Got Back” in 1992, which both affirmed the appeal of larger women and exploited their anatomy. Since then, rap has become the dominant force in popular music—and so has the cult of booty, epitomized by videos packed with rote scenes of gyrating women in thongs . . .

Having back, or getting it, has become big business. With the popularity of low-riding jeans and anthems like Destiny’s Child’s “Bootylicious,” cleavage below the waist is now as coveted as cleavage above, and gluteal implants are a thriving commodity in the plastic surgery world.

There’s the rub. As quickly as physical fashion grows closer to a realistic body type, critics say, new ways are invented to make it as inaccessible as the big-breasted, skinny
model archetype. Big is beautiful, but it must also be toned and smooth. R&B stars like Beyoncé, Latifah, and Missy Elliott get sleeker and slimmer with every new platinum record. The bigger the career, the smaller the body.

“There’s an investment in being thin in the beauty industry, an economic investment in women’s insecurity,” says Dereca Blackmon, executive director for the Leadership Excellence youth program and local cochair for the National Hip Hop Political Convention. “And while there’s been a shift, I think the beauty industry is fighting back. There’s a fight in the media for control of images of women. The insecurity lobby has a lot of money, and they’re not going to go away quietly.”

Says Bordo, “We might have a more bootylicious bottom and a little more stomach, but there’s going to be a lot more people working out to keep it as tight as J. Lo. There’s permission to be more zaftig. Yet at the same time, you better make sure it’s toned. You’re still not allowed to be loose. So while I see bodies nowadays that make me think we’re getting a little better with our demands on the body, there’s so much that seems to be suggesting otherwise.”

Including this: Glamour’s Queen Latifah issue might be dedicated to body pride—hence a woman of size gracing its cover—but most models in its pages are thin, with “plus-size” models, who look no “plussser” than average women, relegated to the size-related articles. Compare this to the latest issue of Essence, in which larger models share equal space with their thinner counterparts.

Bordo thinks the double standard comes down to old racial and class codes. “The long, skinny, thin types are the aristocrats,” she says. “And it’s OK to be a little voluptuous if you’re working class. It’s OK to be more earthy or sexy. But the aristocratic woman is above all that. There’s the hot body and the cool body, and there’s still a lot of typecasting going on.”

Hip-hop culture has collided with mainstream consumer culture, and it’s too soon to say what will result from the ensuing mash-up between booty and breasts, body empowerment and sexual objectification, realism and idealism. In the short term, however, women with booty to spare can enjoy their moment with a dose of cautious optimism.

“There was a time when media didn’t advertise to African-American women the way they do now,” Blackmon says. “Maybe it’ll learn to appeal to women’s self-esteem and not their insecurity. I hope so, anyway. There are always these little moments where you think something different is happening, and then they disappear.”

FEEL SEXIER IN YOUR SKIN
Cosmopolitan Magazine Offers “Tips” for the Body-Conscious Girl

BY NICOLE BELAND

Familiar with the don’t-look-at-my-ass dash? You know, that butt-hiding hustle we do on the beach and in the bedroom to keep guys from getting a full view of our bums. Well, we’re gonna change how you feel about your entire body—so you’ll never need to cover up again.

Men may salivate over a girl’s perfect butt on TV, but in real life, they don’t dissect us as much as we think they do.

When you’re naked (or nearly) and walking from your man’s bed to his bathroom or from your beach chair to the water, even a few steps can feel like a friggin’ mile. Whether you’re fretting about a few extra pounds, pesky cellulite, or countless other real and imaginary imperfections, feeling a guy’s eyes glued to you can make even a confident babe totally self-conscious.

On some level, you know it’s silly to obsess about this stuff, but that doesn’t change the fact that you do. “You can be brilliant, talented, successful, and beautiful and still not have a good body image,” says Randi Wortman, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist in Bethesda, Maryland. The answer, though, isn’t going on a starvation diet or auditioning for “Extreme Makeover”: “Feeling proud of your healthy, feminine figure has much more to do with your mind than your mirror,” says Wortman. All it takes are a few shifts in your attitude and the way you carry yourself (yes, we’re serious). So read on for six simple strategies that will stop your useless stressing and have you feeling sexier in your skin.

TIP 1: REMEMBER THAT THE WORLD DOESN’T REVOLVE AROUND YOUR ASS
It’s great to be aware of your weight for health reasons, but like most women, you probably take body consciousness way too far. . . . “Looks do have an effect on our happiness, but sometimes we lose perspective and start to think they dictate everything,” says Wortman. When you’re pre-occupied with your appearance, there’s no way you can be your sexiest self.

So how does a girl get her head out of her ass, tummy, boobs, thighs, or whatever other part of her bod she views as a trouble spot? “On the beach, in bed, and anywhere else, turn your attention outward and focus on the person you’re with and the experience you’re having,” says Annie Judge, Ph.D., a psychologist at the George Washington University Counseling Center who specializes in body image. If you’re seaside, take a second to notice how blue the sky is, how warm the sand feels, or how great it is to be hanging with your friends in the sun. If you’re walking around your bedroom and a guy is watching, turn and ogle him for a minute and relish the idea that you’ll soon be crawling back between the sheets and snug-
gling up against him. Not only will you have a better time and feel more beautiful if your mind is off you and on the person you’re with, but you’ll also be a hell of a lot more fun to be around.

TIP 2: GIVE YOURSELF POSITIVE BODY FEEDBACK
The scene happens over and over again: You say, “I have no boobs and no curves,” or, “Ugh, I look so fat,” and then your friend swears up and down that it’s not true. We all know why we do it—it feels good to get some reassurance. But it’s a tired routine that ends up hurting your confidence more than it helps. “Repeating negative statements about yourself is very powerful and very damaging,” says Wortman. “The information sinks in and becomes hard to shake, even if you get the positive feedback you are fishing for.”

Recognizing what you’re doing when you’re doing it is the first step to squelching your cruel inner critic. Ask a few of your closest friends to call you on it when you start dissing yourself. Better yet, make a deal with yourself that every time you say something bad about your body (“My thighs are so huge”), you have to wipe it out with a strong positive statement (“My thighs feel so good when they’re wrapped around my guy”). For quick inspiration, remind yourself of how much pleasure your body brings you, whether you’re exercising, putting lotion on your legs after a hot shower, or having amazing sex. Or try remembering an awesome compliment you’ve gotten about your body from a guy or friend, and think it over and over again. Don’t be surprised if you still feel crappy after you’ve chanted your feel-good mantra—it’s going to take a while to undo all the body bashing you’ve racked up in the past. “First change your thinking and your feelings will eventually follow,” says Judge.

TIP 3: QUIT OBESSING—HE LOVES YOUR BOD
Most women have no idea how easy men are to please when it comes to the female form. We just assume guys are as hard on our bodies as we are. Wrong! “I once witnessed a male friend of mine drool over three women at a party who had completely different shapes,” says Christie, 31. “When I asked him how he could think they all have great bodies, he looked at me and said, ‘What do you mean?’” Men simply aren’t as nitpicky as we are. They may salivate over some girl’s perfect butt on TV, but in real life, they don’t dissect bits and pieces as much as we think they do. “A hot girl is a hot girl,” says Keith, 25. “Guys look at the whole package, and if they’re turned on, then bam! Whatever shape or size her body happens to be, we’ve already accepted it.”

Sexiness can also do way more to get a guy’s attention than a perfect ass or rock-hard abs. “The women who are really attractive to me are the ones who are flirty and laid back,” says Cole, 28. “Drew Barrymore is way more appealing than any supermodel because she seems like she’d actually be fun in bed.” Men can even be turned off by a too-perfect body. “Behind closed
doors, men admit to being intimidated by women who look like models,” says Judge. So chill out already. If a guy’s in bed with you, he already finds you sexy—let yourself revel in that fact. Stressing about some tiny part of your body in a sexual situation is like focusing on the dashboard as you speed down a gorgeous country road in a convertible. You’re missing the point!

**TIP 4: WORK IT WHEN YOU WALK**

If you’re not convinced that a confident strut will skyrocket your body image and sex appeal, think about J. Lo, whose ass is shimmying all over the video “I’m Glad.” You almost can’t believe she showed off her ample tush so much, but her brazenness makes you buy into the idea that she has the best butt in the world.

Unfortunately, though, when we’re walking around bare assed or in a bikini, we tend to stiffen up instead of taking easy, natural strides. “After having sex with my boyfriend the first time, I said I was thirsty and he told me he had sodas in the fridge,” says Kyra, 22. “So I rolled out of bed and darted for his kitchen, trying not to let my thighs touch when I moved. I thought if I kept them apart, they’d look slimmer and wouldn’t jiggle. But when I came back, he asked if he’d hurt me during sex because I was doing a weird bowlegged walk. I realized that the more I tried to hide myself, the less attractive I looked.”

The next time you want to look fabulous while getting from point A to point B, skip the “crouching tiger, hidden flabbage” tactics. “Allow your torso to release up and away from your hip joints so your legs can move freely beneath you—think up, up, up,” says Kate Kobak, an instructor in New York City in the Alexander technique, a method for improving balance, flexibility, and coordination by correcting bad posture habits. When you scrunch down or tense up your muscles, you look shorter and stumpier, so squeezing your butt cheeks or slumping your shoulders forward is counterproductive. For the sexiest strut, walk with your feet parallel or put one slightly in front of the other like a catwalker does. “When your legs are too far apart, it shifts your weight awkwardly from one side to the other,” says Kobak. And take your sweet time.

**TIP 5: STOP BASHING OTHER BABES**

It can be hard to resist commenting on a stranger’s size-16 rear squeezed into a size-6 miniskirt—especially when you know it would make your friend laugh—but judging other chicks harshly can backfire. “If you’re overly critical of other women’s bodies, you’re bound to be equally critical of your own,” says Judge. “To break the habit, force yourself to find something you like about that person’s looks—turn your negative into a positive.” If you imagine that the person you’re about to rag on is your sister or friend and you force yourself to find something attractive about her, your urge to insult should shrink to the size of a thong.
TIP 6: DO YOUR I’M-A-HOTTIE HOMEWORK
There are dozens of effortless little things you can do to boost your overall body image. Whether that means going to the gym, putting on self-tanner for a golden glow, or just eating better, treating yourself well pays off. An easy way to boost your sexy-little-me mindset is to keep a hot picture of yourself in plain sight in your apartment. Seeing yourself looking your best will help the knowledge that you’re beautiful sink in a little more every day. So will investing in a tall, narrow mirror that tilts up slightly. Another great idea is to look around the gym locker room for a realistic, varied idea of what women’s bodies look like. “When you see how different everyone is, the idea that we should all look one way becomes ridiculous,” says Laurie, 27. “It’s a huge relief.”

Next, get used to how you look and feel in the flesh. Clean your apartment in the buff, wear a skimpy sundress on a hot day, or sport a bikini while washing your car. The more time you spend in your birthday suit or nearly naked, the more natural it’ll feel when someone else is around. If you’re self-conscious around your guy, invite him into the shower and take turns slowly soaping each other from head to toe. Everyone looks sexy with sudsy water flowing over their bods. And once he’s seen every inch of you, there won’t be much to feel embarrassed about.

WHY LOVING YOUR BODY GETS YOU BOOTY
According to a study published in the *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, women who are more satisfied with their body image reported more frequent sexual activity, initiation of sexual activity, and achievement of orgasm.

COULD YOU USE AN IMAGE BOOST?
Read the following statements and jot down the number that corresponds to your feelings (no faking!): Never true (0); sometimes true (1); mostly true (2); always true (3).

* I feel good when I see my naked body in a mirror.
* I never notice if someone is fatter or skinnier than me.
* There are qualities I truly love about my body.
* I believe men appreciate women’s bodies just because they’re women’s bodies.
* During sex, I don’t worry about what my body looks like.

Add up the numbers. If your score is 4 or less, don’t stress—you just need to make that much more effort to follow our tips!

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HELEN GURLEY BROWN: COSMIC GIRL

BY MAUREEN DOWD

I went to *Cosmopolitan* once, looking for freelance work. An editor gave me some red binders filled with story ideas. The ideas were oddly reversible.

You could choose “I Had an Affair with My Best Friend’s Father” or “I Had an Affair with My Father’s Best Friend.”

You could choose “My Fling with My Gynecologist/Psychiatrist/Dentist” or “My Year of Celibacy.”

Or: “I Am a Puerto Rican Cosmo Girl,” “I Am a Black Cosmo Girl,” “I Am a Handicapped Cosmo Girl.”

Helen Gurley Brown always understood you stick with a winning formula.

The editor of one of the most successful magazines of all time had never won a prize for editorial content at the National Magazine Awards. But last week, she was honored for her commercial success, named to the editors’ Hall of Fame.

She put the glass award on a table outside her office, underneath a picture of the young Christie Brinkley glistening in a gold bikini.

“I parted company with the feminists in the 70s when it was thought that you had to wear charcoal gray turtleneck sweaters and no makeup,” said Ms. Brown, wearing Adolfo and jangly gold jewelry. “I was accused of hurting the cause because I was still talking about women as though they were sex objects. But to be a sex object is a wonderful thing, and you’re to be pitied if you aren’t one.”

We are sitting in her office, exactly the lair you would imagine for the editor who has spent her life urging young women to unleash the inner tiger. There is a leopard rug, pink flowered wallpaper, makeup mirrors on the wall, a candle on the desk, Chanel perfume by the window, and *Sammy Davis Jr.’s Greatest Hits* by the CD player.

Even at 73 [she is now still going strong at 82 as editor of *Cosmopolitan* magazine’s 52 international editions], Ms. Brown is relentlessly girlish. Her magazine, which also has a case of arrested development, has been running the same stories (“How Big Should the Big O Be?” and “Just a Good Friend or Is She After Your Man?”) since I was in college. And it’s still the best-selling magazine on college campuses. . . .

Hearst Corporation executives are easing Ms. Brown out, embarrassed by her down-playing of the AIDS threat for women and her pooh-poohing of sexual harassment, and replacing her with a younger editorial model. In this less-permissive era, Hearst fretted that the Cosmo Girl, fond of lingerie and married men, was as passe as the Playboy Bunny.
But they can't get rid of Ms. Brown so easily. The Cosmo Girl has permeated the culture. She is, after all, just a tarted-up Cinderella, always believing happiness is just one makeover away. At any newsstand you'll see her man-crazy, sex-obsessed image endlessly, tiresomely replicated, even for the teen set.


"I used to have all the sex to myself," Ms. Brown sighs.

She stayed in amber so long that women circled back her way. Some go to elaborate lengths—breast implants, collagen shots, Wonderbras—to attract men. The sultry fabrics Ms. Brown always promoted—zebra, leopard, satin—are now common at the office.

...Debbie Stoller, the editor of BUST, a popular new 'zine for "girls," complained that "Helen Girly Brown" is stuck in a Valley of the Dolls world.

But the young editor does homage to Ms. Brown, even if she doesn't know it. She says that the early feminists were "women" who wanted to be like men, while today grown-up "girls," like Madonna and Courtney Love, want the freedom to be "girly" for their own pleasure.

Ms. Brown says: "Even when we grow up, we are all girls. Girl is the feminine side, the playful side, the hopeful side."

Even when Ms. Brown leaves, don't expect the Cosmo Girl to grow up. She's too profitable just the way she is.


HELEN GURLEY BROWN’S LIFE RULES

In her final issue of Cosmopolitan [January 1997] Ms. Brown used her regular editor's note to remind readers of her basic tenets, which she described as "indigenous to Cosmo." Below is a sampling.

MEN ARE NOT THE ENEMY: A good man, worthy of your love, is out there... we'll find him.
SEX IS ONE OF THE THREE BEST THINGS THERE IS: Bless the man or men who bring you this incredible pleasure.
SUCCESS: Loving work is almost as important as loving a man, maybe as.
ALL CALORIES COUNT: There is no free calorie even in lettuce.
EXERCISE IS YOURS: Testimonial: I'm 75, have exercised an hour and a half a day ruthlessly for too many years to count. I haven't had a cold in ten, missed a day of work (for illness) in twenty, I'm skinny, I eat... it's all exercise.
ISABELLA ROSELLINI: A SYMBOL OF BEAUTY UNADORNED

BY DINITIA SMITH

You would have thought it was a man striding through the door of the Mark Hotel on the Upper East Side. Men’s Industria suit with wide shoulders, a man’s shirt with unpressed collar, sensible men’s shoes, hair in a near-crew cut. But the face was soft and round, the skin delicate, the hazel eyes doelike. Seemingly in drag, it was Isabella Rossellini.

“It took me years to find clothes as comfortable as men’s clothes,” Ms. Rossellini said. “So I finally just bought men’s clothes. And my feet are too wide. Men’s shoes are more comfortable than women’s shoes.”

She wears no jewelry, hardly any makeup—just “a little bit of base, beige lipstick” and “some lipstick on my eyelids.” This, the erstwhile highest-paid model in the world during her 14 years representing Lancôme, with a contract often reported at $2 million a year (though she denies it). In fact, until Lancôme, Ms. Rossellini never wore makeup. “My contract stipulated I had to wear makeup whenever in a public place,” she said.

Ms. Rossellini, 44, speaks in a throaty, modulated voice like that of her mother, Ingrid Bergman, only with the distinct Italian vowels of her father, the neorealist film director Roberto Rossellini. As she ages, she increasingly resembles her mother: a symbol of beauty unadorned, she seems womanly and soulful in a constellation of undernourished teenage models.

[In her] memoir, Some of Me [released by Random House in 1997] . . . Ms. Rossellini has summarized the vicissitudes of family, career, and reaching middle age. . . . But next to her mother’s death from breast cancer in 1982, the subject on which she seems to expend the most emotion is Lancôme’s decision to drop her six days after her 40th birthday, to be replaced by three other models, including the 33-year-old actress Juliette Binoche.

“I wasn’t expecting it,” Ms. Rossellini said over a lunch of fresh fruit at the Mark. “We were very successful. They became one of the billion-dollar companies. I told them you could be the first cosmetics company to make a campaign for the mature woman. They think women over 40 are a small minority. In modeling, you target the dream. But I am not convinced women of the baby boom generation dream to stay young.”

Guy Peyrelongue, president of Cosmair Inc., Lancôme’s parent company, responded to Ms. Rossellini’s comments with a fax: “Lancôme enjoyed a long and mutually rewarding
relationship with Isabella Rossellini,” he stated. “Lancôme decided to expand its image by using several models, including Isabella. Isabella, however, wanted to pursue other projects in her own name, and we could not reach an agreement.”

Ms. Rossellini disagreed: “They always say it was because I wanted to be an actress,” she said. She is now getting revenge of sorts by starting her own line of cosmetics for Coty Inc., where she is a vice president. She expects the line, which she will represent in some ads, to be ready in a year and a half, but declined to discuss it before it is trademarked.

She also believes that age stymied her acting career. “I started in my 30s, and most of the parts that are wonderful are between 20 and 35, and I have an accent,” said Ms. Rossellini, whose major credits include Stanley Tucci’s 1996 film Big Night and [David] Lynch’s eerie Blue Velvet in 1985, in which she appears not only naked but bound by rope.

“And then there is my taste,” she continued. “Being European, being my father’s daughter, I like auteur films.”
QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Is there a “moral” to the story of The Good Body? If so, what is it? What does the title mean?

2. Do you find the themes of the play relevant to your own life? How? How might this play have been different if it had been written 10 years ago? 20? 30? 50? What about 10, 20, 30, or 50 years in the future?

3. How does watching one actor perform a series of monologues compare to seeing several actors performing dialogue? How does Eve Ensler let the audience know when she is changing characters, particularly when she plays herself as well as other characters in the same scene? How do you think the play would be different if performed by more than one actor?

4. What are the different physical/geographical locations in which the play is set? Why do you think Ensler chose those locations, and those characters, from among the many places she visited and women she interviewed? Were you struck by how similar, or how different, women’s stories were in various places around the world? To what does Ensler attribute the global prevalence of women’s body issues? Do you attribute it to anything else? How do you think the world can change and become more accepting of a wide diversity of body types?

5. Did you find one of Ensler’s characters most compelling or disturbing? Why? If you were going to write a piece based on interviews, to whom would you like to talk? Friends? Family members? People in your community? What might their “issues” be? Would you like to travel anywhere outside the United States to talk to people? To whom, where, and why?

6. Many of the women Ensler portrays describe ways in which their families, and mothers in particular, contributed to their body image and eating habits as adults. Can you think of ways your family has influenced your own feelings about your body, both positively and negatively? How do you think parents can best teach their daughters and sons to accept their bodies?

7. Ensler identifies herself as a “playwright/performer/activist.” How is each of these roles reflected in The Good Body? Do you consider The Good Body to be a political play? Do you think theater should be political? Is it a good art form for inspiring change? Changing minds? Why or why not?

8. Ensler has said that she has found humor to be the most effective way to convey a serious dramatic message. Do you agree? Do you find The Good Body funny? How might the same messages be conveyed in a “serious” drama? How would the experience of watching the play be different if it were written and performed as a serious drama?

9. How does Ensler’s central character change over the course of the play? What has she learned by the end of the play? Which of the characters she encounters do you think influenced her the most? Why?
FOR FURTHER INFORMATION . . .


**WEB SITES OF INTEREST**


