



Skin: A Natural History

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We expose it, cover it, paint it, tattoo it, scar it, and pierce it. Our intimate connection with the world, skin protects us while advertising our health, our identity, and our individuality. This dazzling synthetic overview, written with a poetic touch and taking many intriguing side excursions, is a complete guidebook to the pliable covering that makes us who we are. *Skin: A Natural History* celebrates the evolution of three unique attributes of human skin: its naked sweatiness, its distinctive sepia rainbow of colors, and its remarkable range of decorations. Jablonski begins with a look at skin's structure and functions and then tours its three-hundred-million-year evolution, delving into such topics as the importance of touch and how the skin reflects and affects emotions. She examines the modern human obsession with age-related changes in skin, especially wrinkles. She then turns to skin as a canvas for self-expression, exploring our use of cosmetics, body paint, tattooing, and scarification. *Skin: A Natural History* places the rich cultural canvas of skin within its broader biological context for the first time, and the result is a tremendously engaging look at ourselves.

Skin: A Natural History Details

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From Reader Review *Skin: A Natural History* for online ebook

Lee Kofman says

This is a solid, mostly scientific study of skin with some forays into socio-cultural aspects too. I hoped for more of the latter, but still enjoyed this book, particularly that occasionally Jablonski's voice turns poetic.

Yifan Zhang says

I read this book with my question "What skin color will those who migrate to another region end up with?" Apparently, I got the answer and more out of this book.

Rivqa says

This is an excellent primer on the anatomy, physiology, history and anthropology of skin. There's enough detail for non-scientists to understand the science; indeed, it's a great starting point for learning about human evolution as a whole. And there is plenty there for non-beginners, too.

I found some sections disappointingly brief, but what's there is well-written and thought-provoking.

Melissa says

This book was missing something for me, but I can't blame it on the book, per se. I think I wanted it to be a little more ethnographic even though that is not what Jablonski is doing with her natural history of skin. I think because she was working to keep it accessible and shorter than it could have been, she also turned it into more of a summary of the different things she discovered during her research which made for a less interesting read in the end than it started out in the beginning. The project itself is incredibly worthwhile and I'm glad she has written it. It provides some good anthropological insights into the cultural aspects of an otherwise biological topic, in some regards, bringing together culture and biology in interesting and readable.

Colleen says

Skin. The organ you probably take the most for granted. It seems extremely simple, but as Nina G. Jablonski shows us in this book, *Skin: A Natural History*, it is extremely complex. I chose this book for my alternate reading assignment in my Biological Anthropology class this past semester, and it's fascinating. She goes over, of course, the "basics" that most (if not all) of us know from our introductory biology courses in high school or college, but she takes it a little more in depth as well. ...

For full review, please visit me at [Here Be Bookwyrm](#)s on Blogger:

Diana says

Nina Joblanski has studied and researched skin for many years and has put together all that she has learned in a nice concise book that's pretty accessible for everyone to read. I especially like her thoughts about how humans have socially removed touch as one form of communication and for forming community and relationships. And there is so much more ...

Armen says

the flat-out best bioethnopsychosociological book i have read, which basically means it's very accessible and written with enough of a sense of humor to remain engaging throughout...she explores the biological basis of the development of the Other and finds evolutionary answers for pressing questions regarding race throughout the world...soooo good

Tfalcone says

Nina Jablonsky is the world expert on why different skin colors arose - very interesting reading about UV protection versus folic acid needs of the body. Strange to think that chemical differences cause wars!

Simran Buttar says

An excellent book especially on a topic which is rarely tackled by authors. I especially like Nina's take on the role that skin played in human evolution and how it allowed our ancestors to support a larger brain and evolve into modern homo sapiens.

Book is not bogged down by complex scientific terminology or is too simplistic to be considered unscientific.

A good read.

Esther says

Heavy on the dermatology jargon, but a worthy and brief read on the title topic.

Things to consider after reading:

1. The relative hairless quality of human skin lends itself to quickly evaporating sweat, which works in favor of a brain that gives off a lot of heat, and a body that can cool itself off fairly easily during daylight hours. Both qualities have been incredibly advantageous to human evolution.

2. There is no such thing as "a healthy tan". By the time you're an adult, your skin has a fixed number of melanocyte cells that produce melanin, or the skin coloring pigmentation. People with different skin pigmentation have widely varying amounts of melanocytes in their skin, and as such, need widely varying amounts of daily sunlight to facilitate vitamin D absorption, and prevent the destruction of skin cells by ultraviolet rays. So over-tanning, and therefore over-exposure to UVR, is an effective way to damage skin and cause premature aging and skin cancers.
3. There is no mention of vitiligo in the "Wear and Tear" section. Quite a few family members of mine have had the condition, so it would've been informative for me to read about Jablonski's knowledge on the subject.
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Sam says

This is one of my favorite books to date. I discovered its existence when I was writing a paper on the effects of ultra-violet radiation on the evolution of human skin - this book was a perfect reference point for the assignment. To paraphrase Albert Einstein, "If you can't explain it simply, you don't know it well enough." *Skin* is bursting with interesting information as well as passion and great writing technique and skill. The result is a book that will keep you up at night instead of putting you to sleep. I wish that I had the time to reread it, because one reading is certainly not enough to absorb the knowledge it supplies. Highly recommended for those that enjoy learning something in free time.

JJ says

An great book. It's written as a natural science historical piece allowing her to give the data as well as the history and stories. Skin is one of the most under appreciated organs we have. This book is very powerful because it demystifies a superficial indicator that ha led to do much hated and cruelty in the form of racism. Excellent book

Megan says

An entertaining read, Jablonski has some fantastic and informative prose. Also, a delightful history, with some interesting tidbits. However, some of the science lacks sufficient detail for my mind (though I realize this is entirely not Jablonksi's fault, as she is writing a natural history, not a scientific treatise); some social issues are not raised, and at times, the book is slightly redundant. Overall, a good read- and well worth a leaf through, if only for the stunning color pictures in the middle.

Aiyana says

A lovely study of the human skin-- its history, its structure, and what we do with it. Surprisingly little about the various prejudices surrounding skin colors, but I suppose that topic has been thoroughly gone-over in other places.

Notes and quotes:

- In the chapter on touch (p 106-7), there is a brief discussion of skin hypersensitivity in autism, and the preference for deep pressure over light touch. I was quite gratified to see that the author noted autistic adult self-reports as a source for this information (it's surprisingly rare for anyone quoting anything about autism to actually refer to anything said by autistic people), even if her primary source was the ubiquitous Ms. Grandin.

- *"Modern American culture is mostly touch-averse, especially in the settings of schools, hospitals, nursing homes, and most workplaces, where concerns about litigation have reduced the amounts of acceptable touching to a minimum. Children growing up in this culture adapt by learning to express their emotions through words and facial expressions rather than by touch. But such accommodation comes at a cost, as older children and adults suffer from awkwardness in demonstrating physical affection and ineptness in body relationships with others. From the point of view of comparative primatology, touch-averse cultures are an anomaly, and the bouts of depression, anxiety, and more serious forms of social pathology among individuals who live in them are entirely predictable."* p 110

I found this passage fascinating, and I'd love to read more about the actual evidence behind it. It makes intuitive sense to me, which always makes me think I need to scrutinize the evidence and not rely on my hunches. I have heard a great deal of solid scientific critique of how modern western cultures don't engage in enough contact with their babies, although this is changing. Obviously, we would have to balance a more touch-friendly culture with the needs of the severely touch-averse, but if the author is right, might a more touch-friendly culture reduce the frequency of molestation and other attacks that leave so many people too traumatized to endure further physical contact? Interestingly, my mother engaged in far more contact-heavy parenting than is the norm in this culture, and I still grew up with severe anxiety and depression. Might my emotional problems have been even worse if not for my mother's frequent physical comforting? The author also discusses plentiful evidence for the power of therapeutic touch in medical settings.

- *"The scientific literature on the biology of erogenous zones and the reactions of skin during sex is disappointingly but perhaps not surprisingly sparse. Fortunately, this is one area of science in which most people can boast some expertise, gained from personal experience."* p 120 :)

- In the final chapter, entitled "Future Skin," the author discusses the possibilities for embedded microchips, in everything from performance art to PTSD treatment. *"The possibilities for benign, malign, and artistic applications are nearly endless and undoubtedly will be explored vigorously in coming decades..."* p 171

Zhou Xiaozhu says

A captivating narrative of our skin: full of information and new insights of what our skin is. It also provides leads of how we can use this knowledge to prevent and treat skin diseases. The e-skin is particularly resonating since I have been following Professor John Roger's work in these areas. Endless opportunities lay ahead to explore; we all should benefit from the authors' exploration and expert perspectives.
