ANTHROPOLOGY: Showing Some Skin

Qais Al-Awqati, *et al.*

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does not hide his preference for grass farming. He acknowledges that food consumption is a trade-off that one has to personalize according to one's ethical standards. However, that personal approach is complicated by the fact that the average consumer rarely has the information necessary to reach a carefully considered decision. Therefore Pollan argues in favor of the "right to look" and advocates shorter, less complex, and more visible food chains: "Were the walls of our meat industry to become transparent … we would not long continue to raise, kill, and eat animals the way we do."

Reference

1. M. Pollan, *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World* (Random House, New York, 2001).

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ANTHROPOLOGY

Showing Some Skin

Qais Al-Awqati

No organ reflects our inner life and culture more than the skin. Our heart may race on seeing our beloved, but it is our flushed face that gives our emotions away; although you might convince your neighborhood surgeon to tattoo your liver as a way of advertising that you belong to some gang, that won't protect you from being knifed. Nina Jablonski's *Skin* promises to show how skin reflects our age, state of health, ancestry, and cultural identity.

Skin
A Natural History
by Nina G. Jablonski
University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 2006. 293 pp. $24.95, £15.95. ISBN 9780520242814.

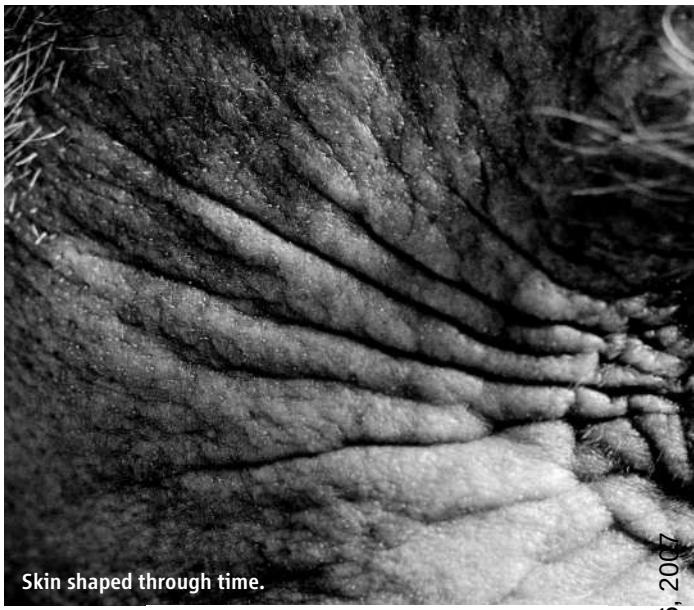
An author contemplating writing a book about an organ is faced by two choices. Does she want to write a guided tour of its structure and functions? Or would she prefer to concentrate on a few things she thinks are emblematic? Jablonski, a physical anthropologist at Pennsylvania State University, chose the former. She has written what can be described as an introductory text to the study of the skin, a slim volume of 175 pages of text supplemented with an additional 65 pages of notes, glossary, and bibliography. The reader learns, for example, the skin's cellular components, the role of sweat in human evolution, and the importance of touch in human communication. The author also discusses the consequences, good and bad, of having different skin colors and the many ways humans have used the skin as billboards of the self to advertise group solidarity or difference.

In its discussion of the human skin, the book's principal theme is evolution, and almost every page contains that word. There have been many splendid examples of books focused on the evolution of an organ or one of its functions. One that comes to mind is Ashley Montagu's *Touching: The Human Significance of the Skin*, an insightful and influential account of the cultural aspects of the sense of touch (*1*). A best seller in its time, it remains in print decades after its publication. One reason for its success is that Montagu avoided writing a "textbook," with all its connotations of dry academic prose and a lack of narrative drive. Jablonski, on the other hand, seems to lack a clear view of the level of expertise of her intended audience. Too often, technical medical terms pop up in the text never to be mentioned again.

Although the author wants to provide an evolutionary perspective on all attributes of skin biology, the accounts she provides seldom rise above the provision of plausible hypotheses. Is it really true that we were selected to be hairless sweaty creatures? That sounds possible, but what is the actual evidence for such an assertion? Is it also true that vitamin D synthesis, a major locus of interaction between sunlight and diet, is the dominant factor in the natural selection of skin color? This idea is simply presented without any of the documentation that would make a convincing story. One would like to see the evidence of how rickets (vitamin D deficiency) might act as an agent of evolutionary selection.

For many subjects where an anthropologist could have provided an exciting narrative—such as the roles of tattoos, body piercing, scars, or henna drawing—the book offers something closer to extended definitions than to in-depth considerations of their roles in social interaction. I would have loved, for example, a riff on the recent explosion of tattoos and piercings among young people from economically privileged backgrounds. The topic is only touched on in the chapter "Statements," and the search for individual difference is not placed in its social context. The thorny issue of the social construction of the roles of skin color is reduced again to a brief survey of skin color biology and its evolutionary implications.

Scientists writing for broad audiences tend to write about the focus of their own work. Although only a few of Jablonski's research papers address skin evolution, the lack of deep expertise need not prevent a nonspecialist from pulling together findings from different fields to generate an exciting, even fresh view of nature. An enviable example is Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (*2*). (Diamond, incidentally, has provided a very positive blurb for the book jacket.) Unfortunately, *Skin* suffers by comparison, as it lacks the narrative drive, coherent theme, and telling anecdotes that so enrich Diamond's book. However, the book's extensive notes and references testify to Jablonski's hard work and wide reading; their diversity encompasses the mutational analysis of the melanocortin-1 receptor, identification of new genes in zebrafish, chemistry of melanin, and anthropological studies of warriors. That breadth may be the book's principal strength. *Skin* offers an accessible and well-referenced overview of many aspects of the biology of human skin. Although none of the sections is comprehensive enough to serve as a primary resource, the book as a whole explains why we should care about its subject. Beauty may only be skin deep, but Jablonski shows us that the skin, be it thin or thick, is the true mirror of the soul.



Skin shaped through time.

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The reviewer is in the Department of Medicine and the Department of Physiology, College of Physicians and Surgeons, Columbia University, 630 West 168th Street, New York, NY 10032, USA. E-mail: qa1@columbia.edu

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1. A. Montagu, *Touching: The Human Significance of the Skin* (Columbia Univ. Press, New York, 1971).
2. J. M. Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (Norton, New York, 1997).

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