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Reviews

Skin: A Natural History



Nina G. Jablonski
University of California Press
ISBN 0520242815
Year 2006

In recent years, there seems to have been a wave of new books focused on mundane items of daily life. A list of the subjects of these books reads like a catalogue of commodities: coal, salt, cod, tobacco, coffee, cotton, not to mention various works dealing with commodities of the shadow economy such as cocaine, cannabis and heroin. These books seem to comprise a growing genre of popular non-fiction that might be called commodity biographies wherein the major narrative focus is on explicating the histories and everyday uses and abuses of perennially popular and ubiquitous items. Nina G. Jablonski's *Skin: A Natural History* (2006) is unique among the aforementioned volumes because its central biographic "character" is not a commodity at all, but is certainly more ubiquitous and has been used and abused on a much more intimate basis than any commodity in history.

The story of skin is simultaneously deep history and current events. Jablonski seems particularly suited to the task of connecting both ends of the temporal spectrum. As a respected anthropologist and a contributor to various popular publications such as *National Geographic* and *Scientific American*, Jablonski's writings reflect both academic acumen and a consideration for popular stylistics.

The 243-page book is divided into eleven slim chapters and includes color plates, a handy glossary, and extensive notes. The book moves the reader through skin's evolutionary history, its biological structure and function, forms of cultural adornment and manipulation and finally concludes with speculation about the future of skin, which is possibly the book's weakest chapter. To her credit, Jablonski manages to hold the reader through bland but necessary discussions, including the mechanics of sweat, as well as discussions of more socially relevant subjects, such as the origin of human chromatic diversity.

Jablonski intends *Skin* for a general readership, and in this she succeeds. Anyone with even a slight interest in physical anthropology will find the book both entertaining and enlightening. However, specialists and people who—forgive the pun—want a book that is a bit meatier might find Jablonski's account only skin deep. For instance, Jablonski repeatedly refers to the process of natural selection in a way that might lead some readers to believe that natural selection is purpose-driven or that organisms directly respond to harmful environmental stimuli by evolving new protections. Of course, Jablonski knows better and even explains natural selection concisely at one point; although overall, she seems to have chosen to sacrifice a certain level of accuracy for stylistic considerations.

All in all, Jablonski has written an entertaining and informative book that would not be out place on a reading list for an introductory physical anthropology course or in just about anyone's home library.

Review by Patrick W. Huff, Department of Anthropology at Georgia State University