

# REVIEWS

## Pretty Crazy

### *Laboring to be Beautiful*

"Life is too interesting to focus on my hips," an older friend once told me, and I remember wishing that I could agree. In *The Beauty Bias* (Oxford, \$17.95) Deborah L. Rhode laments that much of the effort and concern that individuals now invest in their appearance could be better spent, and that the consequences of our cultural preoccupation with appearance require legal redress. Rhode, a law professor at Stanford, begins with a personal account of her own "ludicrous experience" of having her wardrobe vetted by the American Bar Association so as to select a suitable outfit for her to wear to the organization's annual luncheon. The irony was not lost on Rhode, who was

on grooming than on books. While over one-sixth of Americans lack access to basic health care, cosmetic procedures are the fastest growing medical specialty—with women accounting for 90% of the procedures. Rhode shows how our preoccupation with appearance overlaps with other prejudices: the first Americans to seek cosmetic surgery in significant numbers were Jews who wanted less distinctive noses, or members of other ethnic groups who did not want to look Jewish.

The beauty industry is just one among many biological, market, technological, and media forces that drive our focus on appearance, from women's magazines with their focus on "fashion, figures, food, and furnishings" to "Say it with Liposuction," the Valentine's Day gift "for the woman who has everything." And then there is

seven American jurisdictions that ban appearance discrimination as part of their civil rights law, highlighting cases such as *Tardif v. Quinn* (1976), in which a public high school official fired a teacher because he disapproved of the length of her skirt. And she exhorts us to shift our individual and collective focus from aesthetics and cosmetics to health and fitness.

Rhode's argument is part of a larger conversation about the relationship between beauty and justice. Harvard English professor Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, \$14.95) was a poetic exploration of the relationship between aesthetics and ethics. Scarry argues that beauty presses us towards a greater concern for justice by leading us away from our self-preoccupation and towards a concern for others. Whereas Rhode contends that our aesthetic concerns prevent us from judging others fairly, Scarry points to the etymological evidence: "fair" means both "lovely" and "just," suggesting an overlap between the two.

Of course, this conversation goes back centuries—not just to Plato but to our own religious tradition. The Mishna famously states, "Do not look at the vessel but at what is inside it"—yet other rabbinic sources suggest a more complex relationship between surface and depth. The Talmud relates that Rabbi Elazar ben Rabbi Shimon once encountered an ugly man and insulted him—a clear case of appearance discrimination. The ugly man responded, "Go tell the artist who made me: How ugly is this vessel that you made." Rabbi Elazar is reminded that all human beings are created in God's image, and to insult a person's appearance is to insult the divine Maker. The rabbis teach that when we encounter someone who is beautiful, we should praise God by uttering a special blessing. We all have aesthetic biases, but

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chair of a commission seeking to promote equality for women in the profession. This experience sensitized her to the double standard of attractiveness for men and women, and to the reality of living in a world in which "shoe design may be the last politically acceptable haven for closet misogynists."

Gender is just one aspect of what Rhode terms the "beauty bias," the appearance-based discrimination which influences employment, income, self-esteem, and personal relationships. She cites a range of statistical studies about our investment in appearance, including the distressing fact that Americans spend more money

the billion-dollar beauty pageant industry, which Rhode dates back not to the first Miss America Pageant in 1921 but at least 24 centuries earlier to the Persian Queen Vashti's celebrated refusal to appear naked before her husband's drunken revelers.

*The Beauty Bias* is not just a survey of aesthetic demands in American culture, but an impassioned call to action. Rhode argues for a legal response to appearance-based discrimination to promote equal opportunity in the workplace, outlaw fraudulent advertising claims, and relieve the disproportionate burdens placed on women as a result of sex-based double standards. She offers a survey of the

Jewish tradition encourages us to recognize that everything in this world—the beautiful and the ugly—comes from the same divine source, a God who demands that we behave justly and righteously in our dealings with one another.

“Beauty may be only skin deep, but that is deep enough to confer an unsettling array of disadvantages,” Rhode asserts. Perhaps her book is most valuable in holding up a mirror to our own aesthetic prejudices; though ideally, as Scarry contends, our contemplation of the beautiful would inspire loftier reflections.

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## Émigrés in America War

*Love, After the War*

*The Oriental Wife* (Other Press, \$15.95) by Evelyn Toynton begins in World War I-era Nuremberg, with an innocent-seeming scene of three children at play. Louisa is sweet-tempered and eager to please; her cousin Otto is as understanding as he is outgoing; and shy, self-conscious Rolf hides behind an emotionless exterior. All from well-to-do assimilated Jewish families, they are clueless as to what is obvious

to the reader: their futures will prove anything but rosy, unless they escape.

With a little foresight and luck, they do—Rolf and Otto find their way to New York, while Louisa goes to finishing school in Switzerland. It is the first of several stops where she will play the

of New York, she would seem to have found a place of comfort at last, especially after her marriage to Rolf. But her earlier sufferings and sense of displacement are no guarantee against future ones: when a brain tumor leaves her partially paralyzed, her husband leaves her, seizing custody of

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thankless role of uncomprehending outsider. She falls for the snobbish brother of a British classmate and follows him to London, where he soon abandons her; she does not realize, until too late, that as a Jew she does not fit the family criteria for a wife. She then takes up with a charming but unstable journalist, whom she accompanies to New York as his assistant and fiancé—until his enchantment with her quaint-seeming manners and inability to understand his brand of socialist politics turns to abuse and rage. Will she fit in anywhere?

Reuniting with her childhood chums amid the Jewish immigrant community

their daughter. One character comments, “If we knew when we were born what lay in store for us, none of us would have the courage to see it through.” It’s a grim story, told with acuity and elegance, of a life that seems sadly destined to be always alien to its surroundings.

Canadian novelist Gabriella Goliger also explores a woman’s sense of otherness in her coming-of-age novel, *Girl Unwrapped* (Arsenal Pump Press, \$15.95). Growing up as the daughter of Holocaust survivors in Montreal’s Jewish community in the conformist 1950s, Toni Goldblatt feels different from her classmates. First, unlike their neighbors, her

