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A star writer for the *New York Times* Styles section captures the follies, frauds, and fanaticism that fuel the American pursuit of youth and beauty in a wickedly revealing excursion into the burgeoning business of cosmetic enhancement.

Americans are aging faster and getting fatter than any other population on the planet. At the same time, our popular notions of perfect beauty have become so strict it seems even Barbie wouldn't have a chance of making it into the local beauty pageant.

Aging may be a natural fact of life, but for a growing number of Americans its hallmarks—wrinkles, love handles, jiggling flesh—are seen as obstacles to be conquered on the path to lasting, flawless beauty. In *Beauty Junkies* Alex Kuczynski, whose sly wit and fearless reporting in the *Times* has won her fans across the country, delivers a fresh and irresistible look at America's increasingly desperate pursuit of ultimate beauty by any means necessary.

From a group of high-maintenance New York City women who devote themselves to preserving their looks twenty-four hours a day, to a “surgery safari” in South Africa complete with “after” photographs of magically rejuvenated patients posing with wild animals, to a podiatrist's office in Manhattan where a “foot face-lift” provides women with the right fit for their \$700 Jimmy Choos, Kuczynski portrays the all-American quest for self-transformation in all its extremes. In New York, lawyers become Botox junkies in an effort to remain poker-faced. In Los Angeles, women of an uncertain age nip and tuck their most private areas, so that every inch of their bodies is as taut as their lifted faces. Across the country, young women graduating from high school receive gifts of breast implants – from their parents.

As medicine and technology stretch the boundaries of biology, Kuczynski asks whether cosmetic surgery might even be part of human evolution, a kind of cosmetic survival of the fittest – or firmest? With incomparable portraits of obsessive patients and the equally obsessed doctors who cater to their dreams, *Beauty Junkies* examines the hype, the hope, and the questionable ethics surrounding the advent of each new miraculous technique. Lively and entertaining, thought-provoking and disturbing, *Beauty Junkies* is destined to be one of the most talked-about books of the season.

Beauty Junkies: Inside Our \$15 Billion Obsession With Cosmetic Surgery Details

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Surgery Alex Kuczynski**

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Laura says

I found this an interesting and, at times, horrifying, though rarely surprising, read. I expect some of the information is a little outdated now as it was written in 2004 -- new procedures and products have undoubtedly come out on the market -- but the concepts are unchanged. There were a couple procedures I wasn't aware of, including cosmetic toe surgery and injecting fat into the soles of the feet to compensate for long-time high-heel use, but for the most part I think I'm pretty current on available surgeries (including those that reshape the vagina or navel and the one required after gastric bypass surgery that removes all the extra skin). I *was* jaw-droppingly surprised to read about the Navy SEAL who had a bullet wound scar created by a plastic surgeon because he was embarrassed that he didn't have any battle scars from his time in the military.

For the bulk of the book, I was generally pleased with the author. She presented things pretty fairly, I thought. She did regularly refer to the "ugly" people in the world, often along with a description of whatever it was that made them so, which sat with me poorly. I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised to hear the word tossed around so casually in a book about cosmetic surgery, but I was. I was also initially surprised to learn, as the book progressed, that the author has had quite a bit of cosmetic work done herself -- about \$12,000 worth, as I recall, including numerous Botox injections and, later, eyelid surgery and liposuction. I suppose from a journalistic standpoint, this is a good thing as she can speak directly about the process, the thoughts behind the decision to make it, etc. I don't know why it initially sat with me strangely, but it did. (I did have to laugh at her "I'm not obsessed, I'm not, I'm not, I'm not" lead in to describing all the work she elected to have done. And I was not at all sympathetic to what happened with her last lip injection.)

I found parts of the book very sad, and not just reading about the people who were disfigured or killed during or as a result of their surgery. There is, of course, the inherent sadness of how young patients are these days and the strength of the media and social demand for conventional beauty. What struck me most was Mrs. X - - a wealthy man's housewife who has regular procedures and surgeries, so many that they encompass three paragraphs of description/listing. WHEN asked by the author if she regretted not having a career, Mrs. X. said no, because she probably would never have been good enough at anything to make a difference. I find that incredibly sad.

(A bit unrelated: I had to stop and put the book down after learning that crematoriums are discouraging the cremation of morbidly obese bodies because "during the process, vast amounts of fat often leak and cause fires outside the cremation device." Ick.)

So, in short, a decent, if disturbing, read.

Kirsti says

Appealing, well-researched, not very objective account of cosmetic surgery's history and future. While the author is highly intelligent, she seems to live in a rarefied world in which it is assumed that just about every normal person gets cosmetic surgery eventually. I was horrified to read that not only had the author had an eye lift, but her cleaning lady--a "Guatemalan grandmother"--had also had one. So maybe I'm the one living in a rarefied world, because if my friends and neighbors are getting tucks and lifts, they ain't telling me. And they don't have that awful, slightly surprised expression common to people who've had work done on their

faces, so I think they are still cosmetic-surgery virgins. :-)

"A reed-slender body is so important in Hollywood and New York that many starlets have begun, on the advice of their personal trainers, taking a steroid called clenbuterol that is used to treat asthma in horses. It is called "clen," for short—as a mere abbreviation but also as a nod to the notion that being smaller, being skinnier, ingesting nothing somehow *cleanses* a girl, makes her better and shinier and just a touch more luminescent than the rest of us. The steroid, ingested in regular doses over just a few weeks, rewards users with a so-called sample-size figure, a size 2 or smaller—so that the stylists who dress these mini-celebrities can get their clients' clothes for free from designers. . . . Clen can also increase your risk of stroke and heart attack, destroys endurance, and stiffens the heart muscle. In the end, you'll look great. But you might be dead."

"*Sports Illustrated*, once proudly implant-free, used its first surgically enhanced model in the late 1990s, after a longtime editor (a woman who was opposed to implants on aesthetic grounds) retired. Today, as many as half the women in the annual swimsuit issue . . . have had surgery."

Annie says

Very interesting book. For me, the most interesting parts were the historical precursors to modern-day cosmetic surgery. I know there will always be people trying to find the proverbial fountain of youth, but breast augmentation for a high school graduation gift? Plastic surgery "safaris" to South Africa, where the price is right? What?

Chana says

This is a fascinating book. I appreciate that she gives detailed information on how to judge the credentials of your potential plastic surgeon. These are the things that I liked about this book: The writer is a reporter and has a skeptical, thorough and observant eye, she is also seduced by the idea of looking young and beautiful, tries some of these procedures herself and shares her experiences and feelings with us. In the past four years I have considered much of this myself, tried some of it and have been thinking about more. I totally appreciate her input.

Meg says

This was pretty good. The author uses her first-hand experience with plastic surgery to figure out why it's so popular. I must admit that the author admitting to Botox injections and liposuction made me feel, well, a bit morally superior to her; I was mostly battling with my arrogance while I read it (an advance reader's copy from the bookstore I worked at), and that's more of what I remember than any facts from the book. I mailed my mom a copy when she threatened to get a face lift and to my relief she decided against it.

Martine says

Women who get foot facelifts to be able to wear their \$500 Jimmy Choo shoes. Men who lie to several

doctors in order to make sure they get Botox shots every eight weeks. Young women modelling themselves on porn stars. People willingly having themselves injected with corpse flesh and collagen derived from the stem cells of an infant's foreskin to get Angelina Jolie-like lips. Makeover subjects who all end up looking the same, conforming to the same dull beauty ideal. Bel Air wives who spend all day looking after their own bodies. Women who pose topless at websites in order to earn money for breast implants. Dentists who insist that they, too, are entitled to perform plastic surgery so as to be able to cash in on the beauty fad. Quacks selling bootleg 'Botox' that ends up ruining several people's lives. These are just a few of the people described in *Beauty Junkies*, a look at America's \$15 billion cosmetic surgery industry by *New York Times* journalist Alex Kuczynski, herself a former beauty junkie who needed a pretty harsh wake-up call to realise that maybe, *maybe*, she and several million Americans were taking their obsession with looking good a bit too far.

Kuczynski quotes some staggering figures to prove that America is well and truly obsessed with cosmetic surgery. She cites famous and less famous surgeons, talks to extreme beauty junkies as well as 'regular' people undergoing surgery, describes mind-boggling new beautification techniques and demonstrates quite ably that in today's America, looks are everything, to the point where girls do not want to *be* good – just *look* good. Needless to say, much of the book focuses on extremes, but even so, one gets the feeling that these extremes might one day become normal – that they're harbingers of what is to come for America as well as the rest of the world. It's a scary thought.

What I enjoyed most about the book was the chapter in which Kuczynski traces the historical origins of plastic surgery, in an age when it had nothing to do with getting bigger boobs, but everything with being made somewhat socially acceptable. Kuczynski describes sixteenth-century nose jobs which were awfully uncomfortable to the patients and frequently resulted in noses falling off in cold weather, disastrous late-nineteenth-century attempts to fill facial lines, and early-twentieth-century techniques to restore the faces of WWI soldiers who had had their jaws blown off in combat. It's fascinating stuff and I wish she had devoted a bit more attention to it. Instead, however, she very quickly takes us to the present day, describing all manner of obsessions, excesses and nasty experiences (including a few of her own) to convince us that things have got a little out of hand. Well, we knew that, didn't we?

My main problem with *Beauty Junkies* is that it is incoherent and unfocused. Kuczynski has some interesting, well-researched stories to tell, and she undeniably has an easy-to-read writing style, but the way the stories are linked together is not particularly smooth. It is clear the book started out as a collection of newspaper articles rather than as a scholarly endeavour, making it rather less successful as an in-depth analysis of a cultural phenomenon. Furthermore, it seems Kuczynski cannot make up her mind as to whether the book is to be about herself or not. She brings up her own experiences far too many times for *Beauty Junkies* to be an objective read, but too few times to make it a proper memoir. Instead it's a rather curious mix of research, gossip and ego-babble – definitely interesting, but not as revealing and effective as it could and should have been.

Laurie says

Satisfies the craving for voyeurism.

A podiatrist shortens toes so her clients can fit into Jimmy Choos, and a lawyer who's argued before the Supreme Court routinely lies to a succession of doctors to feed his Botox habit. As this depressing survey of a global beauty business rooted in self-hatred and a fear of aging demonstrates, an unfortunate few are literally dying to be pretty: the Nigerian first lady expired after liposuction and a tummy tuck, and Olivia

Goldsmith, whose novels lampooned middle-aged women afraid to look their age, succumbed during a chin tuck. New York Times reporter Kuczynski has attitude to spare as she outs Sarah Jessica Parker and Nicole Kidman as probable Botox users, and assesses the "traumatized" naked body of a litigator who's showing off the results of a total body lift after gastric-bypass surgery: "to be honest and brutal and bitchy, she doesn't look that great." A canny and witty guide to the excesses of a conformist society with more money than sense,

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Amy says

This investigation of the modern obsession of cosmetic surgery reads like part magazine article, part personal blog. Kuczynski, a New York Times reporter specializing in all things beauty, is immersed in the world of Botox and breast augmentations ('BA's as they are called by the cognoscenti'). She interviews both doctors and patients, focusing mostly on the wealthy inhabitants of L.A. and the Upper East Side of New York (duh, only the wealthy can afford this obsession). Both share the triumph or tribulation plastic surgery may bring (e.g über-hotness, death). Kuczynski shares her personal experience of "addiction to and recovery from" cosmetic procedures, as well. Nothing too shocking for the everyday reader of *Cosmopolitan*, though I was surprised to learn the average BA costs only \$3,437. After reading this book, I'm quite grateful not to be part of a subculture that mandates lipo and microdermabrasion. At least not yet, anyway.

Erin says

interesting, but kind of fluffy.

Erin says

After reading this book, I came away with the impression that Alex Kuczynski may well be absolutely insufferable to be around. She writes this book from the lofty balcony of judgment about the women (and they are mostly women) who have vaginal rejuvenation surgery, yet then admits to having an amazing number of procedures herself (though not that particular one). And what type of world does she live in? After her surgery to correct her "puffy" upper eyelids, her cleaning lady likes the results so much that she has the same surgery. Her CLEANING LADY. What the hell? Where is it that cleaning people can afford expensive elective surgery when most people I know who have cleaned houses can't even afford health insurance for themselves for, you know, REAL illnesses?

So, I did enjoy my own seat from my moral high ground - when she asks, "[is:] it wrong to pay my mortgage late so I can get some Botox?", I am shouting to myself, "How can you even ask such a question?". But I dog-eared two pages in the book. One was the above quote, but one was the page when Kuczynski gives the list of things that it is important to look for in a plastic surgeon. You know, just in case. Damn, that fall from the moral high ground is a loooooong one.

At the end of the book, Kuczynski has sworn off additional procedures. However, it's worth noting that she wrote this book when in her mid-30s, and I'm guessing it's quite surprising that she had as many procedures as she did before age 40. I'm guessing that when the seemingly-shallow Kuczynski sees her face at 45, she'll

be right back in her doctor's office. But will she see me there?

Renee says

Beauty Junkies, by Alex Kuczynski, gives us the history of plastic and cosmetic surgery, the charlatans, the risks, the popularity especially in the U.S. and its ridiculous extremes. The story is told deftly, with humor and a sense of veritas: the author herself had undergone several procedures, including one that had the unintended effect of swelling her mouth to grotesque proportions (a severe response and fortunately for her, a temporary one). This last experience compelled her to wean herself from her growing obsession with cosmetic surgery and procedures.

I've never been a fan of purely cosmetic surgery or injections. If it's not broken, no need to operate on it or stick a needle in it (yeh, yeh, I'm for tattoos, but big difference between a little ink and a dangerous toxin). The thought of having foreign objects stuffed under my skin, especially since they can burst, harden, leak and migrate – just to fill someone's aesthetic profile – pretty much disgusts me. Ditto, shots in the forehead or other places on the face, forceable Hoovering of fat from one's rear-end, and the cutting and stretching of facial skin. I find it disturbing and ridiculous that younger and younger women are opting for procedures. I mean, it's positively asshatted of parents to give their daughter a gift of new boobs for graduation.

Now, although this trend of surgical change doesn't only apply to females, it's with the females that it is most prevalent and to me, most offensive: to change oneself into the porn star mold (i.e., sexual object), to reduce one's features so the result is a person indistinguishable from scores of other blandly appealing "beauties" (i.e., loss of that which makes us unique) or to chase youth as if it were the only thing worth having. We've come so far as women, only to reduce our efforts - by drastic and dangerous means - to, well, attracting men.

It's sad that the inner selves of these people – intellect, creativity, personality, achievement – is so neglected and disparaged – in order to maintain a superficial and ultimately impermanent illusion. Ms. Kuczynski, in fact, discusses a woman for whom her appearance – and all the supporting procedures – is ALL she does with her time and money. This book is a cautionary tale, and an honest and entertaining – if disheartening – read.

Georgia says

I've been thorough about posting every book I read in 2007 EXCEPT I FORGOT THIS ONE UNTIL JUST NOW when I read Alex Kuczynski quoted in the Observer ("you just can't keep putting stuff in your face and think it's going to look natural after five or ten years"). And then I remembered that I had read her book-length treatise on this very topic.

The point she made that stuck with me the most was that she, as a 5'10, 138 pound woman was considered to be pretty slender by New York standards, because her tallness made up for it, while in LA, she was considered grossly large. This affirmed my feeling that I have no business ever going to LA. But I still, apparently, have business buying dark purple mascara because the guy at the makeup counter at Henri Bendel said it would make my eyes look greener.

I thought this was a vanity, but Kuczynski had micro-liposuction for the little fleshy part under her eyebrows to make her eyes stand out more vividly.

In conclusion, we are hopeless and stupid in our pursuit of beauty, but this knowledge will not stop us, help us, etc.

Ashley says

Before reading this, I was naive to all the varieties of cosmetic surgery and to the billions of dollars American's spend annually for things like collagen injections for feet so they better withstand the pounding shock of high heels etc. Kuczynski is an intelligent blunt writer isn't afraid to try a number of these tactics on herself and she drags the reader right along with her. It's full of interviews with patients, doctors, and throws out a number of celebrity examples when explaining the results of these surgeries.

Jennifer says

I am really, *really* starting to appreciate nonfiction. (=

Much like how I think that aspiring young actors would benefit from reading *Secrets of My Hollywood Life* and its subsequent series, it is imperative that anyone who is even remotely curious about cosmetic surgery (which, as I learned, is NOT the same as plastic surgery) should take the time to read this fascinating, horrifying, brutally sad commentary/memoir on what beauty has become in American society.

My heart ached many times over as I read accounts of men and women who strive for external validation of personal significance and worth-- some of whom died in search of that fleeting vanity. The author herself, a *New York Times* reporter, shows some steel in her willingness to incriminate herself as a former "beauty junkie" to serve as a warning to all of us who are ignorant of what it is really like.

Alex Kuczynski has done to the allure of plastic surgery what Lori Gottlieb did to the myth of "not settling" in her book *Marry Him: The Case for Settling for Mr. Good Enough*: exposing the misconceptions, the ugly truth, and the lies that we've come to believe. Bravo.

Danica says

Why 5 stars? Although the writing is funny and entertaining, what really cinched the deal for me was the fact that most of the women in this book...

apparently live around my high school. Am I surprised? No, not really - I made/make fun of them all the time. It just scares the bajeezus out of me realizing that the most relentless of my caricatures has not captured the full level of vanity (or neurosis) of some of these, well, beauty junkies.

Reading this in conjunction with "Food Fight" = one helluva scary portrayal of modern day America.
