



You Feel So Mortal: Essays on the Body

Peggy Shinner

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Feet, bras, autopsies, hair—Peggy Shinner takes an honest, unflinching look at all of them in *You Feel So Mortal*, a collection of searing and witty essays about the body: her own body, female and Jewish; those of her parents, the bodies she came from; and the collective body, with all its historical, social, and political implications. What, she asks, does this whole mess of bones, muscles, organs, and soul mean? Searching for answers, she turns her keen narrative sense to body image, gender, ethnic history, and familial legacy, exploring what it means to live in our bodies and to leave them behind.

Over the course of twelve essays, Shinner holds a mirror up to the complex desires, fears, confusions, and mysteries that shape our bodily perceptions. Driven by the collision between herself and the larger world, she examines her feet through the often-skewed lens of history to understand what makes them, in the eyes of some, decidedly Jewish; considers bras, breasts, and the storied skills of the bra fitter; asks, from the perspective of a confused and grieving daughter, what it means to cut the body open; and takes a reeling time-trip through myth, culture, and history to look at women's hair in ancient Rome, Laos, France, Syria, Cuba, India, and her own past. Some pieces investigate the body under emotional or physical duress, while others use the body to consider personal heritage and legacy. Throughout, Shinner writes with elegance and assurance, weaving her wide-ranging thoughts into a firm and fascinating fabric.

Turning the category of body books on, well, its ear, *You Feel So Mortal* offers a probing view of our preoccupation with the body that is both idiosyncratic and universal, leaving us with the deep satisfaction of our shared humanity.

You Feel So Mortal: Essays on the Body Details

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Tim Chapman says

Fellow author, teacher, and martial artist Peggy Shinner's collection of essays has a picture of two bras on its cover. You can forgive me for thinking, at first glance, that it was a "chick" book. It is not. It is a book for anyone who has ever considered the fragile threads that tie us to our friends, our parents, our lovers. If you want to learn the connection between a famous killer, a nose job, and a Jewish cemetery, read this book.

Leah Canner says

Peggy Shinner's essays in *You Feel So Mortal* that retain focus on the body--specifically, the aging female body--are endearing, worldly, and well-written. The later essays diverge slightly, but are still enjoyable to read.

Christine says

This is such a witty, meticulously researched, and moving collection of essays in which Shinner writes with self-effacing humor and true humanity about her body, her secular Jewish upbringing, about what it means to be a reflective, intelligent woman in early 21st century Western society, to live in a city like Chicago, to have the family, the friends, and the life partner that she does.

Michelle Blankenship says

The book is called an essay collection, but I would also classify it as a memoir because the author lays bare so much of herself as she examines the body through her writing. It is full of interesting facts, observations, and hard-hitting insights. From slouching to finding out your mother wrote to a murderer in prison and much more, Shinner turns these topics into a fascinating read that every mere mortal can relate to!

Nikki says

This was...boring, quite honestly. Maybe because I'm not Jewish, and that seemed even more of a major thread of the essays than the body, I just couldn't get into them. Maybe I just missed the point.

Abby Howell says

Just last night I finished Peggy Shinner's captivating new book of essays. It started with feet and ended with autopsies. And in between, well, bras, posture, and lots of other things. I loved her style--yes, the first essay

is about her feet, but also about a world of feet. What feet are, mean, have been, will be. I learned more and more about Peggy as I got further and further into the book, and this was charming and wonderful. But I also learned more and more about the world. And with her experiences as the reference point in each essay--the bulls eye that her writing extends outward from-- I got Peggy, yes, but I also got a new world that I will continue to think about days, weeks, months to come.

Rachel says

Really enjoyed the Jewishness of this collection of essays on the body.

RIYL: The Empathy Exams by Leslie Jamison

Kati Heng says

I'm so fucking glad University of Chicago Press finally published a collection of Peggy Shinner's essays on the body. Except, though, I'm not glad it got published, like, in Chicago, for whatever reason (I don't pretend I know the politics of this stuff), only because Shinner's already a local legend and I need people outside this city to realize THIS LADY'S A LEGEND.

I love this book. You'll love this book if you've ever looked at even one part of your body and thought why the fuck are you like that, or had trouble understanding even one idiosyncrasy of the particular brain inside you. God, these essays are so fucking fantastic, I greedily read them all in a day (even though, in reality, they've been parceled out, appearing in lit mags as earlier as 2000) and just KNOW I'll be digesting them for a long long while to come.

As mentioned, every essay in here is unapologetically centered around the body. Of course, we springboard from there. Pieces about posture become about race in America; thoughts on autopsies summon religious beliefs; nose jobs relate into a man's ability to function at a peak professional level.

Shinner, an outsider from the American ideal in many ways (Jewish, woman, lesbian), struggles with the way her body, this misshapen Jewish body of hers, fits into the larger context of the world in many essays.

Here are parts of her she feels oddly about and contributes to her race: Feet; posture; nose; inability to face cremation; unease with organ donation.

Here are parts of her she feels oddly about and contributes to being a woman: a tinge of kleptomania; decreased ability to defend herself; breasts; hair.

Here are parts of her she feels oddly about and contributes to her brain: desperation to feel unique; discomfort with being mildly depressed; being a lesbian; guilt about feeling oddly about her Jewish qualities; guilt about feeling oddly about her womanish qualities.

These stories, though, are amazing.

"Pocketing" reveals what I've always thought to be true, but never asked my friends: Don't you just get the urge to steal things you could very well buy? Shinner's stolen a few things from stores, something I've never been brave enough to do; any pocketing of mine has been from friends and families homes, which is

probably worse. I only steal tiny tiny things, items I can put in a pocket like beads, trinkets or miniature figurines, sample squirt bottles of perfume, a perfect lipstick. Of course, once these items make it back to my house, I'm too guilty to ever touch them, never able to use or look at the objects, and then I go on beating myself up over taking the thing. What Shinner confirms: I am not insane for doing this. In fact, someone reading this is probably nodding her head (because it's likely a woman) in agreement. Unlike some experts believe, kleptomania is not a sexual fetish; it's an impulse-control issue. Much like picking a scab, we know it will never end well, but we must do it nonetheless.

"Berenice's Hair" may be my favorite piece, despite it's subdued, third-person tones. Tracing the mythologies and the rules surrounding womens' hair for thousands of years, Shinner offers no advice on how to keep one locks, only a reiteration of what society has always told us. There is no telling who is right who is wrong; it's plainly laid before us without comment.

"Postmortem," the conclusion of the book, sees Shinner struggling to come to terms with the science and cultural significance of her father's autopsy. When first asked if they elect for the procedure, she and her family accept. A funeral is had, and weeks later, Shinner learns doctors are still examining her father's brain. Because it wasn't buried inside him. None of his organs were. That's just how autopsies are. But it's funny – wouldn't we know that? Why does that seem like new information? Do we hear that, nod, and promptly forgot because it's too strange to imagine our skin, dressed in suits and silk dresses, going into the earth empty not just of soul, but of, really, all substance?

Maybe that's what I love about You Feel So Mortal the most. Shinner raises these questions, probes around her own world, her own body, yet puts no judgment on ours. She does not dismiss you for having a nose job. She does not roll her eyes at your rock hard abs, posture of a princess. She looks at these fleshy, mortal bodies, realizes the fragility of these objects and does nothing to injury the spirit inside. Instead, we are only asked to wonder.

Julie says

I really loved this collection of essays. Shimmer is an incredible prose stylist and I loved the subjects she engaged in the essays. I had not heard of her work before so this was a real find for me.

Mills College Library says

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Alice says

This is more essays on Jewishness than essays on the body. Which isn't a problem, just not what I was expecting.

Rhonda Cutler says

I found this essay collection to be one of the most enjoyable books I have read in a long time. The thread that runs through all the essays is the body, and there is hardly a body part that the author doesn't explore. Feet, noses, hair, brains, spines – they're all fair game. She considers many of them through the lens of her Jewishness, and her ambivalent feelings toward this, and the results are invariably poignant and comical. Also fascinating, as in making her points, the author draws on an extraordinary knowledge of history, religion and philosophy. I learned and laughed as I read these essays, which I found hard to put down. I also nearly cried, as well, when the author discusses her teenage decision to have a nose job, having bought into the larger society's view that Jewish noses (if there really are such things) are ugly, while snub gentile noses attractive. Without a weak essay in the entire collection, this is a book to be treasured.

Christine Rice says

Five stars and then some.

Laura Perez says

DNF 68% it was sorta interesting, just Not what I was thinking it was about. It seemed like every chapter was just about how Jewish and how gay she is. While there is nothing at all wrong with those things, I just don't care to read a whole chapter on how "Jewish" your nose is.

Milt says

autopsal deliberance recounted
