



## FREE YOUR MIND

...and the rest will follow. **Keziah Weir** was surprised to discover how much time she spent mentally cataloging her physical shortcomings. With the help of a new book, she embarked on a mission to shut up her inner critic once and for all

**Like most women**, my aesthetic is shaped by my surroundings: in my case, for the last four years, the dichotomous grunge and glamour of New York. I'd decamped here immediately after graduation from the liberal arts bastion of Bard College, where I spent my final two years honing a theory that there's a ghost in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. I won our senior class writing award. My aspirations were high—and highbrow. My first job was as a glorified receptionist for one of the world's most prestigious and deadly serious literary agencies, and my professional uniform consisted of a Banana Republic A-line skirt paired with an Ann Taylor shell, topped off, on a good day, with a low ponytail and mascara. My tenure lasted all of four months before, in an extreme case of right-time-right-place, an informational interview with a friend-of-a-friend begat an editorial assistant position at ELLE. Suddenly my utilitarian look seemed out of place. It's not that my coworkers were intimidatingly decked out every day of the week, but it was clear that many of them had an intentional aesthetic. And they talked

as openly about weekly blow-outs as they did about the controversial publication of Harper Lee's *Go Set a Watchman*. Just as I'd been relieved in college to find it was de rigueur to care about doing well in my classes, I loved that the intelligent, quick-witted women I worked with weren't shy—never mind ashamed—about wanting to optimize their appearance, for dates, for work events, or just out of a desire to feel pretty after a stretch of hard days spent reporting or editing on deadline. I'd found my people.

Over the past four years, I've tried bright coral lipsticks and balayage highlights; stripped naked at a *jimjilbang* for a traditional Korean-spa scrub-down; and learned that there are right and wrong eyebrows for my face shape. It's fun. But when the self-serious red-lipsticked strangers I meet at Bushwick art parties ask what it's like to work at ELLE, I find myself playing down the glitz, dutifully explaining that I actually work mostly on the books section: "Does it look like I know about makeup?" I ask self-deprecatingly while batting my newly tinted eyelashes. First rule of publishing: Know your audience.

Recently, however, a new book landed on my desk that pricked my sanguinity about the beautification arts—that turned my attention away from the play and pleasure I take in my appearance and toward the judgments I make about myself, and the sheer amount of mental real estate I devote to clocking my looks. In *Beauty Sick: How the Cultural Obsession With Appearance Hurts Girls and Women*, Northwestern University psychology professor Renee Engeln, PhD, argues that our preoccupation with female comeliness puts us in an impossible bind. "We have created a culture that tells women the most important thing they can be is beautiful," writes Engeln, who runs the university's Body and Media Lab. "Then we pummel them with a standard of beauty they will never meet. After that, when they worry about beauty, we call them superficial. Or even worse, we dismiss their concerns altogether, saying, 'Everyone is beautiful in their own way,' and admonish them to accept themselves the way they are."

*Beauty Sick* is an info-packed brick of a book, yet it's highly readable, structured around anecdotal interviews Engeln conducted with 21 women and girls ranging in age from 7 to nearly 60. It's also shot through with peer-reviewed studies and surveys that show women tend to be more focused on their appearance than men, tougher in assessing themselves, and more likely to suffer serious health consequences from negative beliefs about their looks. What sets the *Beauty Sick* author apart from the "everyone is beautiful" mind-set is that Engeln doesn't want to convince women to love the way they look; she wants to convince them not to care. At least, not so much.

**Curious about the** extent of my own "beauty sickness," I started a mental tally of how many times a day I "self-objectified," as Engeln describes it. The first ping goes off while I'm still in bed, barely awake and scrolling through the perpetually sunbathed sylphs of Instagram. Upon rising, I examine my clogged pores and skin flare-ups in a 10x magnifying mirror, before dabbing on strategic swatches of cover-up. My daily sartorial choices, I realize, are guided by my desire to hide my "imperfections" (short legs, long torso), and once I'm on the subway, my jealous eyes wander to a woman with remarkable hair—waist-length dreads, or Harlow blond—or a particular peach lipstick, or a good manicure, face shape, nose length. Bold eyebrows. Long lashes. Thin

ankles. At work, I sometimes procrastinate by flipping through female celebrity before-and-afters: haircuts, weight loss, weight gain, nose jobs. If they can do it....

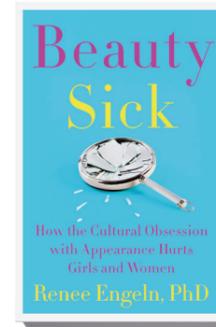
"I think about image so often," I tell Engeln when I interview her, "that I don't think about thinking about it." Engeln calls this phenomenon "background noise." "Because we're not immediately noticing it and dissecting it, we're assuming it's not having an impact on us," she says. In extreme cases, self-objectifying turns down our "interoceptive awareness," Engeln contends, the "natural sensitivity to stimuli from within your body that send messages about things like when you're hungry, what your heart rate is, or when you need rest," which can enable eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia.

But what about the rewards of noticing the figure I cut, how I'm buoyed when I rubberneck my reflection in a store window because man, am I on today—or how I'll get home from work, strip down to my skivvies, and admire my body in the mirror? My boyfriend, while we're reading in bed, will sometimes glance over at me and say, "You're so beautiful," and I'll smile demurely and think, Well, yes, of course—simultaneously thrilled that he notices me.

Engeln acknowledges that of course beauty can be a source of power, but laments how fleeting it can be for women. "I want to see women becoming more powerful with age, with wisdom, and with experience." The commentaries that loop through our minds about our appearance steal emotional and intellectual energy—not to mention money—that could be directed toward career or education, she argues, and may be one factor keeping us from gender parity.

To be clear, Engeln isn't endorsing a total disavowal of exterior improvements. Rather, she's encouraging a reexamination of impulses and priorities. As she writes, "I like lipstick. I don't want to stop buying or wearing lipstick, even if I also don't want to be required (either officially or implicitly) to wear lipstick." As one 15-year-old fashion-loving, pink-haired, self-identified feminist tells Engeln, it can be difficult "figuring out if you wanna wear makeup 'cause *you* wanna wear makeup, or you wear makeup because you feel like you *have* to."

It's really a question of scale. "Our best science suggests that beauty has always mattered. It grabs our attention," Engeln writes. The widely accepted sociobiological



Ask yourself honestly: How important are my "flaws"? How much would my life change if I had smaller pores, long legs, a perfect jawbone?

theory is that the traits we find universally appealing—square shoulders and jaw for men; low waist-to-hip ratios for women; and clear skin and thick hair for both—are indicators of fertility and health. But obviously we've gone far beyond a lady peacock being choosy about which male bird has the flashiest tail feathers. Some evolutionary psychologists compare our relationship with beauty to that with sugar. Because calories were hard to come by for much of human evolution, "we evolved to be extremely sensitive to sugar and desire it fiercely," Engeln says. "Today, sugar is cheap and readily available. Just as we find it hard to turn away from beauty images, we find it hard to turn down cookies."

That's not to say that mate selection, to take all the romance out of it, doesn't still play a major role in the way we view ourselves. I love my boyfriend because he's deeply kind, and because he cares about the environment, and because when he's talking about the nerdy computer things he's learning in his PhD program, I understand why one might describe a person's face as "lighting up." But before I learned all that, what I knew about him was that he had phenomenal bone structure and the arm musculature of someone who has spent hundreds of hours on a surfboard. And I know that while he admires my ambition and enjoys my writing, he also likes it when I wear a little eye shadow (even if he doesn't know, exactly, that I am) and prefers when my bangs are parted to the side, off my face. "It's natural to want to be attractive for your partner; there's nothing wrong with that," Engeln says. "But if all day, from the moment you leave the house to the moment you get home, you feel like you're performing on a runway, that's a different kind of burden."

In the interest of turning down the cookies, as it were, I decide to adopt a pared-down approach for a month. My rule: Any step in my daily routine that provokes even an ounce of discomfort must go. For instance, while I often feel a near-manic compulsion

to examine my complexion—it's been sensitive and breakout-prone since puberty—this usually makes me feel worse about how I look, not better. Ditto with applying concealer (it often leads to even further skin obsessing, and I haven't taken the time to find a formula that's lightweight but effective). And while I groove on my Jane Birkin-esque bangs, between the monthly trims, daily washes, and near-hourly futzing required to keep them looking more Jane and less *There's Something About Mary*, they may be more trouble than they're worth. I forswear mascara (multiple times a day, I want to rub my computer-sore eyes but can't), lipsticks that cause anxiety over migrating pigment, and elements of my twice-daily skin regimen that exceed cleansing, moisturizing, and SPF. I also nix clothes that pinch, hike up, or otherwise bug me—no matter how flattering—and set a no-Instagram rule between 8 P.M. and 11 A.M., my high-traffic, low self-esteem hours.

**Psychologist Judith S. Beck**, president of the Beck Institute for Cognitive Behavior Therapy in suburban Philadelphia, is of Engeln's opinion that effectively beating the critical inner voice entails accepting and moving on rather than reconceiving what beauty is. By the time I talk to Beck, I've already worked through the first step she advises—just becoming aware of my hyper-self-critical thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Her other exercises include imagining what my life would be like a year from now were I to give up cogitating about physical perfection, and honestly assessing the importance of my "flaws"—basically, how much would my life change if I had small pores, long legs, and a perfect jawbone?

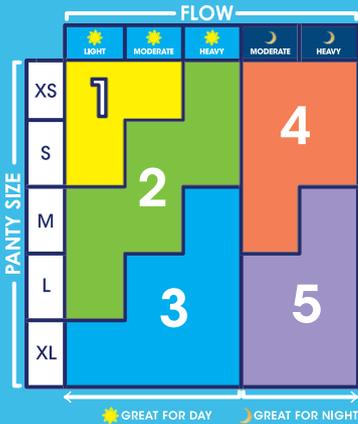
The thing is, at low points over the years, angst about my looks has convinced me variously that I wouldn't make friends at a new high school, would never have a boyfriend, and couldn't possibly be hired by a magazine I like. I recently found an old hard drive from my college laptop: In a folder labeled "Freshman Year Notes to Self," there's a

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Word doc (typed up in a maudlin, post-beer-pong haze, no doubt) that reads, “You’re fat and fundamentally unlovable.” Now, though, trying to be as rational as possible—and, admittedly, being in the fortunate place of having both a job and a boyfriend I love—it’s hard to come up with something concrete that I’d gain from such surface improvements.

When I mention the benefits of this reframing to a couple of (female) coworkers, however, they remain skeptical. “Life is easier when you’re beautiful,” one editor tells me, citing studies that tout all the benefits afforded the aesthetic elite: better jobs, romantic prospects, et al.

We’ve all heard these facts, or versions of them. Consider last year’s viral coverage of a study from sociologists at the University of Chicago and University of California, Irvine, that showed, essentially, that women who spend more time on their appearance also make more money. When I bring this one up to Engeln, she points out that the research didn’t control for the possibility that women may spend more time and money on their looks as they advance in their careers. A higher salary affords redistribution of time and funds—the ability to pay for a cleaning service might make room for a weekly blow-out; extra cash pays for Botox and sprees on Sephora.com.

Besides which, while there is “some good experimental data showing more attractive people get a variety of perks,” Engeln says, “the boost you get is not as substantial as people think.” The data also can be inconclusive and contradictory: One 2012 study, touted by *Business Insider* as proof that “attractive real estate brokers bring in more money than their less attractive peers,” actually noted that while “more attractive” brokers had pricier listings, their plainer colleagues had a higher volume of listings and sales! The better indicators of a higher salary are predictable: personality, health, intelligence—though, of course, that’s complicated, too. Studies have long found that high expectations lead to better performance (the Pygmalion effect)—but, guess what, studies have also found that elementary school teachers expect pulchritudinous students to perform better than their more average-looking peers.

Pushing on with my exercises, I’m surprised to discover that after a few days without the cover-up that has long served as my facial security blanket, the awkwardness of its absence wears off. When I catch myself

worrying that the person I’m talking to is staring at a spot on my chin (something I’m conscious of even while wearing makeup), I remind myself that nobody is as aware of my appearance as I am. On my morning commute, instead of sneaking glances at my reflection in the subway window, I dive full-focus into a book.

It sometimes feels like I’ve added hours to my day—instead of lying in bed, snoozing and half-checking Instagram for up to an hour each morning, I get up (refreshed!—having not stayed up late the previous evening Googling “how to make hair grow out fast”) and exercise, or knock out work e-mails. But there are backslides. One morning, while washing my face, I catch sight of the ferocious case of hormonal acne that not even my contraband cover-up can conceal. Before I know it, I’m crying behind my aviators on my way to the subway—emotions brought on partly by PMS, I’m sure, but also because I’m so sick of thinking about *not* thinking about how I look. Brass tacks: If there were a painless procedure that, in one fell swoop, could endow me with forever-flawless skin and a supermodel-esque leg-to-torso ratio, and I had the disposable income to spend on it, would I do it? Hell, yes. But there isn’t, and I don’t. And I can live with that.

A nice side effect of building a consciousness about my internal beauty monologue is that it makes the moments that I choose to spend thinking about my appearance more enjoyable, as though I’ve gone from consuming nothing but double-chocolate brownies to eating a balanced diet and getting a brownie once a week. It takes under 10 minutes for me to wash and moisturize my face, spritz my hair with salt spray, and apply a coat of Clinique Black Honey Almost Lipstick and a couple of strokes of M.A.C Eye Brows brow pencil—but those 10 minutes are comfortable and ritualistic, and leave me feeling like a sleek, professional woman. The routine actually *stops* me from obsessing about my appearance. Most of the time, however, getting more complicated than that just doesn’t feel necessary to me—not that I don’t occasionally indulge when I get the urge. One night, while lying in bed reading, I catch a glimpse of my freshly polished Deborah Lippmann Born This Way toenails and get a kick of happiness. It’s a deeply satisfying feeling to do something entirely ornamental. It’s luxurious. Decadent. That’s where the magic comes from.