Breasts: A Natural and Unnatural History by Florence Williams

In the spirit of Mary Roach, an engaging exposé about and incredible, life-giving organ and its imperiled modern fate.

Feted and fetishized, the breast is an evolutionary masterpiece. But in the modern world, the breast is changing. Breasts are getting bigger, arriving earlier and attracting newfangled chemicals. Increasingly, the odds are stacked against us in the struggle with breast cancer, even among men. What makes breasts so mercurial—and so vulnerable?

The intrepid science journalist Florence Williams sets out to uncover the latest science from the fields of anthropology, biology, and medicine. Her investigation follows the life cycle of the breast from puberty to pregnancy to menopause, bringing her from a plastic surgeon’s office where she learns about the importance of cup size in Texas to the lab where she discovers the presence of environmental toxins in her own breast milk. Endowed with a witty and inquisitive voice, Williams explores where breasts came from, where they have ended up, and what we can do to save them.

12 illustrations

My Personal Review:

The family of animals known as mammals are so named because they are the only creatures on earth that have mammary glands with which to feed their young. Of the mammals, humans are unique as we have the only mammary glands that extend from the body from the time of puberty onward. All other species in the mammal family have mammary glands that extend and become engorged for the purpose of lactation following pregnancy, but they also retract when lactation ceases and the infant is weaned. Why humans have this feature is a serious area of research and there is much debate over how this development evolved. Some scientists believe it had a sexual purpose, while other scientists believe it had a
distinctly functional purpose. The author examines both schools of thought and provides information from both.

Following the examination of the development of breasts, the author reviews the biology and functioning of breasts. Descended from sweat glands, it would appear from the outside that breasts are fairly simple apparatus that become functional following pregnancy and then returned to dormancy. However, the breasts are extremely complicated organs and one of the least studied organs in the human body. While we know a fair amount, there is a great deal that has yet to be discovered about the workings of the breast. Biologists are working on a continual basis to try to unlock the secrets of the breast, and with luck will be able to do so at some time in the future. Even breast milk itself is little understood, there are literally tens of thousands of components of breast milk, yet only a relatively few have actually been identified.

Moving on from the biology of the breast, the author examines the issue of breast augmentation and its effect on the health of women who partake of this practice. Beginning with the development of silicone as a breast enhancement material, the author follows advances in breast enhancement technology, as well as the pit falls. She also discusses a San Francisco woman who made a career out of her giant, enormous breasts. She wanted to see the effects that breast augmentation have had on her through the years. It is a relatively young medical field, yet breast augmentation has become one of the most common surgical procedures, with thousands done every year. Even though there is a high rate of complication, women continue to flock to surgeons have breast augmentation done.

The author finishes out with the final chapters on the effects of chemical pollutants and the role of estrogen and progesterone play in disease development. She examines a number of chemicals to explore what, if any, affect they have on both breast tissue and on the nursing infant. We know that a number of chemicals are passed on through breast milk, but we dont know what effect that has. In addition, we do not know the true facts of prolonged estrogen and progesterone exposure to breast tissue, particularly after the period of menopause. The examination of chemical pollutants and hormones leads to an examination of the state of breast cancer research and where we are at in the fight to prevent breast cancer. It is amazing how little we currently know about the causes of breast cancer and what we can do to prevent it in the future.

In writing a book of this nature, it would be easy for the author to fall into one of several traps. The first would be to write a scientific tome loaded with data and statistics, as well as biological information that would be better suited for a medical journal rather than a general circulation book on the subject of human breasts. The other would be to write a book that contains titillating, sophomoric humor. The author does a fine job of walking the narrow line between being overly biological and overly
sophomoric. She presents the information in an easy, understandable way and the book is actually a pleasure to read and fairly difficult to put down. She doesn’t shy away from the occasional joke, but they are always in good taste and are actually rather funny.

I would highly recommend this book to all women as an owners manual. It contains a great deal of information that women should know about the state of breast cancer research, as well as breast self-examination and how the breast actually functions. I would also highly recommend it to any male who has a female in his life. Many men tend to think of the breast as little more than sexual objects, yet they are complicated and fascinating organs in the human body. If men knew how complicated the breast was, they would probably give it a great deal more respect.

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