

Adam's Navel: A Natural and Cultural History of the Human Form

Michael Sims

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In this amusing and brilliantly conceived book, Michael Sims introduces you to your body. Moving from head to toe, Sims blends cultural history with evolutionary theory to produce a wonderfully original narrative in which he analyzes the visible parts of the body. In this fascinating brew of science and storytelling, readers encounter not only accessible explanations of the mechanics of their anatomy, but also the layers of mythology, religious lore, history, Darwinian theory, and popular culture that have helped to shape our understanding of any given body part. A titillating and unique book, **Adam's Navel** is learned and entertaining, a marvelous lens through which to study the form we all inhabit—but may not really understand.

Adam's Navel: A Natural and Cultural History of the Human Form Details

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From Reader Review Adam's Navel: A Natural and Cultural History of the Human Form for online ebook

Mark says

There are two types of nonfiction: 'Look at all the cool stuff there is.' and 'Look at all the cool stuff *I* know.' Sims falls clearly into the latter pile, smug and condescending. He brings up the beliefs and traditions of ancient and foreign cultures solely for the purpose of deriding them, but the perspectives of Western secular humanism go unquestioned because of course *we've* arrived at pure knowledge. Disjointed, aimless, and peppered with inept analogies, it's okay in snippets, but intolerable for sustained reading.

Amber the Human says

I happened to check this out of the library and enjoyed it enough to give it as a gift to my science-minded father. Now I have it again and I've been meaning to read it ... but again, terrible about reading books I own (or am borrowing).

Katey says

Although judging by the ridiculous length of time it took me to read this, I eat up books like this. Tons of useless knowledge and trivia, extensively and generously referenced. I added about a dozen and a half books to my "to read" list because of this one.

The author does make some editorial asides, which for the most part aren't off putting, though you can tell he votes Democrat.

Viktoriya says

It was a cool book. Definitely more cultural than anything else. If you ever wanted to know who wrote what about any body part, Michael Sims will tell you that. One thing that I found very lacking is the pictures :(A lot of time is spent discussing one painting or the other, and it would really help if I had a picture of it right there, instead of constantly googling it :(

Julia says

Dirty girl that I am, I almost wish this book had been condensed into the chapters on the sex organs (preciously named "Madonna del Latte" and "Privy Members"). Which were excellent. There were certainly gems in other sections of the book--informative tidbits on why we have back pain, attitudes towards hair, the bogusness of palmistry--and I LOVED how snarky he was about Freud, with other good jabs at the occasionally absurd attitude of patriarchy towards various elements of the female body, but once in a while

his quirky sense of humor got a little too quirky. While in general it's fascinating to hear the skips and stops a quick mind makes (he's a positive genius with selecting funny quotes), once in a while it was a little disjointed. Don't spend too much time on it, and you'll remember some good cocktail factoids and let the rest slide.

Gregg Sapp says

As a person often accused of navel gazing, I found some validation in Michael Sims's "Adam's Navel: A Natural and Cultural History of the Human Form." Finally, I learned that contemplation of one's navel has rich cultural, scientific, and theological antecedents. Freud saw it as a symbol of the unknown. Whether or not Adam possessed one occupied the minds of many of the early Church's greatest thinkers. Its exposure on the body of Barbara Eden in "I Dream of Jeannie" is seen as a landmark in television history. Such matters are worthy of the musings of me and my fellow Omphalopsychites; i.e., navel gazers.

"Adam's Navel" is a truly trivial book, in the best sense of the word. I have always believed that 90% of what we think of as knowledge is just so much trivia – facts and anecdotes that we can use to amuse, entertain, and impress an audience... and ourselves. Good trivia gives you something to think about. Appropriately, perhaps, Sims conceived of writing this novel while lying flat on his back for an extended period of time, after a serious injury. Under those circumstances, it is understandable that he might ponder the oddities and frailties of the human body. It might provide some light distraction to learn that in Egyptian mythology the left ear represents death, that the buxom American Barbie doll is modeled after a German sex toy, or that there was a common medieval belief that babies who refused to suckle on the mother's left breast were destined for sainthood.

Chapters cover the expanse of the human body, from the hair to the toenails. Sims explores the parts of our bodies with a sense of irony – how common they are, yet how function, how specialized, and also how strange. He is also not above the art of a wretched pun, such as where he refers to the Holy Ghost impregnating Mary by entering her ear as an act of "aural" sex. Groan, rimshot.

At some restaurants, Trivial Pursuit cards are left on the tables to occupy guests while waiting for their food. Read "Adam's Navel" in the same way. It will pass time in a pleasant, engaging way. But you never know what you might actually learn, too.

Ginna says

Eclectic and thorough -- I like the voice of this book, which darts from formal to conspiratorial, as well as the treatment of the subject matter. Sims takes a tremendous topic -- the human body -- and addresses it through an unusual lens, although it's the one we usually use -- what you can see. So, no holding forth on the appendix, but a good long treatise on the bellybutton (as you might expect) and very thorough treatment of the area below the belt. I appreciate the glee in Sims' fact-finding and his delight in matters etymological (I was writing the word "fascinating" on the board in front of a bunch of 9th grades yesterday and almost giggled because of what I learned about it the night before). The author doesn't shy away from matters political, religious, or (as you may have guessed) sexual, and I appreciate the frankness of his opinion.

Kassilem says

This is not a book that is easily read in a few sittings. It's littered with so many little facts that you have to put it down every once in a while to just take in all you've just read. But it's pretty readable if you take your time. I've heard some of the evolutionary theories as to why we look the way we do or why we're upright etc that most of those were not new to me, but all the other, cultural and psychological theories were all new. I learned a bunch reading this book, even though it's things that won't necessarily stay with me long term. Recommended if you like learning about the body.

Trevor says

This book is a joy. Michael divides this book into the parts of the body and tells us terribly interesting stuff about each bit along the way. It is funny, shocking and sometimes a bit off putting. But always a delight.

Austin Larson says

A broad, rambling series of riffs on the cultural interpretations of the human body. References as varied as greek mythology, Shakespeare (frequently), Calvin and Hobbes and Playboy. His prose is erudite, but fluid and very readable; though the book suffers from a lack of a central argument or any driving force.

Melissa says

I struggled to get through this -- it gets three stars for fitfully engaging passages and plenty of trivia. The book reads like a 300-page New Yorker article, and coming from me, that is not a compliment. The author injects far too many opinionated asides as well, which are extremely distracting. He references classic literature and mythology extensively, disdaining more modern references and popular culture, which adds to the condescending tone of the book. Space constraints prevent the discussion of several areas of the body (knees! teeth! armpits!), according to the introduction, contributing to a somewhat cursory tone as well. There is trivia aplenty here though - who knew that the platypus has 8 hours of REM sleep, more than many 'higher' mammals? I also found it curious that the author has no problem listing and discussing numerous slang terms for male and female genitalia, but is much more restrained when writing about the navel, for example.

Maybe it's just me...but I was expecting more. Disappointing. Read Diane Ackerman or Desmond Morris for better coverage of similar themes.

Mary says

The author states that he began writing this primarily to amuse himself while recuperating, and it certainly reads as though he is the main reader he's trying to entertain. I would have liked a bit more depth; ultimately, this book opens some tantalizing doors just a crack and moves on before the reader gets much more than a glimpse of what lies beyond.

Miles Baxter says

Not my favorite piece of non-fiction literature, but an interesting read nonetheless. It's a good mix of anthropology, natural history, evolutionary biology, anatomy, and my personal favorite, etymology.

One of my pet peeves with non-fiction works is organization, or the lack thereof. Not an issue with Adam's Naval. Granted, it's not a very complex topic, but the simple, easy-to-read structure (at least for a anal, semi-neurotic reader) was refreshing.

Nicole says

this book relates different parts of the body to culture, history, and science...as you can imagine it covers A LOT of ground. for example, the author briefly mentions numerous scientific studies on the most random things (eg. earwax and toe movements), quotes calvin of calvin & hobbes, and references classical pieces of art, even those drawn on cave walls. sims is sometimes hard to follow as he jumps from one fact or insight to another, but the subject matter (i like random facts), sarcasm and humor got me through the book.

Jillian says

There are definitely some entertaining facts in this one. Ancient superstitions about hair included poorly timed haircuts causing weather disasters and hair in birds' nests causing headaches or death. The tortellini was allegedly modeled on Venus' belly button. Louis Armstrong suffered horrible lip bleeding from his trumpet playing. The treadmill was originally invented to break prisoners with its monotony. The Barbie doll was based on a European sex toy...

But I'm only giving it 3 stars, because I often found myself unexcited to keep reading, and I'm usually fascinated with cultural, historical, and bizarre information about the human body. There were simply too many uninteresting or unnecessary facts alongside the interesting ones, and something about the author's voice and attempts at humor really irritated me at points. Also, there is only a selected bibliography and no footnotes, which seems shady in such a heavily researched book.
