National Bestseller

"*The Beauty Myth* is a smart, angry, insightful book, and a clarion call to freedom. Every woman should read it." —GLORIA STEINEM

THE BEAUTY MYTH

How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women

Naomi Wolf

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY THE AUTHOR

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Naomi Wolf


HarperCollins e-books

For my parents, Deborah and Leonard Wolf

A hardcover edition of this book was published in 1991 by William Morrow and Company.

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It is far ***more difficult to murder a phantom than a reality.***
—Virginia Woolf

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Synopsis

The bestselling classic that redefined our view od the relationship between beauty and female identity.

In today's world, women have more power, legal recognition, and professional success than ever before. Alongside the evident progress of the women's movement, however, writer and journalist Naomi Wolf is troubled by a different kind of social control, which, she argues, may prove just as restrictive as the traditional image of homemaker and wife. It's the beauty myth, an obsession with physical perfection that traps the modern woman in an endless spiral of hope, self-consciousness, and self-hatred as she tries to fulfill society's impossible definition of "the flawless beauty."

Annotation

In this controversial national bestseller, feminist scholar Naomi Wolf argues that there is one hurdle in the struggle for equality that women have yet to clear--the myth of female beauty. She exposes today's unrealistic standards of female beauty as a destructive form of social control and a reaction against women's increasing status in business and politics.

Publishers Weekly

This valuable study, full of infuriating statistics and examples, documents societal pressure on women to conform to a standard form of beauty. Freelance journalist Wolf cites predominant images that negatively influence women--the wrinkle-free, unnaturally skinny fashion model in advertisements and the curvaceous female in pornography--and questions why women risk their health and endure pain through extreme dieting or plastic surgery to mirror these ideals. She points out that the quest for beauty is not unlike religious or cult behavior: every nuance in appearance is scrutinized by the godlike, watchful eyes of peers, temptation takes the form of food and salvation can be found in diet and beauty aids. Women are ``trained to see themselves as cheap imitations of fashion photographs'' and must learn to recognize and combat these internalized images. Wolf's thoroughly researched and convincing theories encourage rejection of unrealistic goals in favor of a positive self-image. (May)

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Introduction

When *The Beauty Myth* was first published, more than ten years ago, I had the chance to hear what must have been thousands of stories. In letters and in person, women confided in me the agonizingly personal struggles they had undergone—some, for as long as they could remember—to claim a self out of what they had instantly recognized as the beauty myth. There was no common thread that united these women in terms of their appearance: women both young and old told me about the fear of aging; slim women and heavy ones spoke of the suffering caused by trying to meet the demands of the thin ideal; black, brown, and white women—women who looked like fashion models—admitted to knowing, from the time they could first consciously think, that the ideal was someone tall, thin, white, and blond, a face without pores, asymmetry, or flaws, someone wholly "perfect," and someone whom they felt, in one way or another, they were not.

I was grateful to have had the good luck to write a book that connected my own experience to that of women everywhere—indeed, to the experiences of women in seventeen countries around the world. I was even more grateful for the ways that my readers were using the book. "This book helped me get over my eating disorder," I was often told. "I read magazines differently now." "I've stopped hating my crow's feet." For many women, the book was a tool for empowerment. Like sleuths and critics, they were deconstructing their own personal beauty myths.

While the book was embraced in a variety of ways by readers of many different backgrounds, it also sparked a very heated debate in the public forum. Female TV commentators bristled at my argument that women in television were compensated in relation to their looks and at my claim of a double standard that did not evaluate their male peers on appearance as directly. Right-wing radio hosts commented that, if I had a problem with being expected to live up to ideals of how women should look, there must be something personally wrong with me. Interviewers suggested that my concern about anorexia was simply a misplaced privileged-white-girl psychodrama. And on daytime TV, on show after show, the questions directed to me often became almost hostile—very possibly influenced by the ads that followed them, purchased by the multibillion-dollar dieting industry, making unfounded claims that are now illegal. Frequently, commentators, either deliberately or inadvertently, though always incorrectly, held that I claimed women were wrong to shave their legs or wear lipstick. This is a misunderstanding indeed, for what I support in this book is a woman's right to choose what she wants to look like and what she wants to be, rather than obeying what market forces and a multibillion-dollar advertisersing industry dictate.

Overall, though, audiences (more publicly than privately) seemed to feel that questioning beauty ideals was not only unfeminine but almost un-American. For a reader in the twenty-first century this may be hard to believe, but way back in 1991, it was considered quite heretical to challenge or call into question the ideal of beauty that was, at that time, very rigid. We were just coming out of what I have called "The Evil Eighties," a time when intense conservatism had become allied with strong antifeminism in our culture, making arguments about feminine ideals seem ill-mannered, even freakish. Reagan had just had his long run of power, the Equal Rights Amendment had run out of steam, women's activists were in retreat, women were being told they couldn't "have it all." As Susan Faludi so aptly showed in her book *Backlash,* which was published at about the same time as *The Beauty Myth, Newsweek* was telling women that they had a greater chance of being killed by terrorists than of marrying in mid-career. Feminism had become "the f-word." Women who complained about the beauty myth were assumed to have a personal shortcoming themselves: they must be fat, ugly, incapable of satisfying a man, "feminazis," or—horrors—lesbians. The ideal of the time—a gaunt, yet full-breasted Caucasian, not often found in nature—was

assumed by the mass media, and often by magazine readers and movie watchers as well, to be eternal, transcendent. It seemed important beyond question to try somehow to live up to that ideal.

When I talked to audiences about the epidemic of eating disorders, for instance, or about the dangers of silicone breast implants, I was often given a response straight out of Plato's *Symposium,* the famous dialogue about eternal and unchanging ideals: something like, "Women have always suffered for beauty." In short, it was not commonly understood at that time that ideals didn't simply descend from heaven, that they actually came from somewhere and that they served a purpose. That purpose, as I would then explain, was often a financial one, namely to increase the profits of those advertisers whose ad dollars actually drove the media that, in turn, created the ideals. The ideal, I argued, also served a political end. The stronger women were becoming politically, the heavier the ideals of beauty would bear down upon them, mostly in order to distract their energy and undermine their progress.

Some ten years later, what has changed? Where is the beauty myth today? It has mutated a bit and, thus, it bears looking at with fresh eyes.

Well, most satisfyingly, today you would be hard-pressed to find a twelve-year-old girl who is not all too familiar with the idea that "ideals" are too tough on girls, that they are unnatural, and that following them too slavishly is neither healthy nor cool. *American Girl* magazine, aimed at nine-year-olds, discusses the benefits of loving your body and how misguided it is to try to look like Britney Spears in order to be happy. Junior high schools bring in eating-disorder lecturers and post collages of destructive beauty ideals in their hallways. I would say that when what started as an outsider's argument becomes the conventional wisdom of a Girl Scout troop, it is a sign of an evolution in conciousness. The time was right; girls and women were ready to say no to something they found oppressive. This is progress.

In spite of this newly developed media literacy, however, I've also noticed that it is now an increasingly sexualized ideal that younger and younger girls are beginning to feel they must live up to. The notorious Calvin Klein ad campaigns eroticized sixteen-year-olds when I was a teenager, then eroticized fourteen-year-old models in the early nineties, then twelve-year-olds in the late nineties. GUESS Jeans ads now pose what look like nine-year-olds

in provocative settings. And the latest fashions for seven- and eight-year-olds re-create the outfits of pop stars who dress like sex workers. Is this progress? I doubt it.

Any number of high school and college projects I have seen—ranging from a CD about "looking perfect" to a senior thesis about the African American beauty myth as it relates to hair—have analyzed media images of women and have taken apart ideals. Even pop culture has responded to women's concerns: take the TLC music video for the song "Unpretty," for example, which shows a woman tempted to have breast surgery simply to please the demands of a boyfriend but who then decides against it. Yet while *The Beauty Myth* has definitely empowered many girls and women easily to critique mass culture's ideals, there are many ways in which that one step forward has been tempered by various steps back.

When this book was first written, in 1991, silicone breast implants were routinely inserted into women's bodies, and pornography was influencing popular culture in such a way that women were newly anxious about the size and shape of their breasts. If it seems odd that an anxiety, such as one about breast shape, for example, can arise and flourish among millions of women at once, think about how powerful sexual imagery is. Because of the new influence of pornography on fashion, millions of women were suddenly seeing "the perfect breast" everywhere and, consequently, started to worry about their own, naturally "imperfect" breasts. The phenomenon persisted until the focus of the beauty myth moved on to the next anxiety. Many women responded to this new breast ideal by scheduling breast implant surgery, while advertisers for the surgery became a new ad market for women's magazines, which, as a result, ran one uncritical "puff piece" after another on breast operations. When *The Beauty Myth* raised the alarm about silicone's—and the surgery's—side effects, there was very little general awareness of its dangers.

Now, more than a decade later, silicone's dangers have been all too thoroughly documented. Breast implant manufacturers were faced with substantial legal action, and thousands of articles exposing the dangers of silicone implants have been published since the mid-nineties. By the year 2000, silicone breast implants had been taken off the general market. Again, not coincidentally, these days one rarely reads about breast-size anxiety. Why? Because increased scrutiny of the procedure has led to legal action, which closed down the expanding market for breast implants. There is no longer an ad budget driving