



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

By 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.

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- Sales Rank: #621206 in Books
- Published on: 2004-06-29
- Released on: 2004-06-29
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 7.71" h x .75" w x 5.12" l, .52 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 352 pages

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Are we more than the sum of our parts? Perhaps, but it's fascinating nonetheless to look at our noses, ears, feet, and other bits as isolated evolutionary stories. That's just what Michael Sims does in *Adam's Navel*, an amusing collection of bodily facts. Sims wrote the book while laid out recovering from back surgery, jotting free association musings about whatever body part he had in mind. The result is a set of chapters with such titles as "Skin Deep," "The Not-Quite-Naked Ape," and "Our Steed the Leg." Besides anatomy and evolution, Sims turns to literature, movies, comics, and pop culture to glean references. He doesn't have patience for puritanical or non-egalitarian attitudes toward body parts, defending Eve Ensler's *Vagina Monologues* against a "conspiracy of silence" and dismissing Camille Paglia's "nonsensical argument" that male urination is superior to that of females. But Sims doesn't let things get too serious:

The cleft where the buttocks begin to form into two hemispheres--the butt crack famously exhibited by fat plumbers who drop wrenches--was once called the *nock*. The word survives elsewhere, as the name of an arrow's notch to accommodate the bowstring.

As engaging as it is fact-filled, *Adam's Navel* brings together delightful anatomical trivia with abundant evidence that we pay as much attention to breasts, fingers, and patches of hair as we do to whole people. -- *Therese Littleton*

From Publishers Weekly

Sims's scattered thoughts while lying flat on his back, recovering from surgery on a dislocated cervical disc, were the origins of this delightful tour of our various body parts, from head to toe. It focuses on the outer body, and there's plenty to dwell upon with regard to eyes and ears and even the belly button. (The book's title derives from a centuries-old debate over whether Adam and Eve had navels since, not having emerged from a womb, they had no umbilical cord.) After an overture considering the skin, the book explores the head, the arms and torso, and the lower extremities (including genitals), each with its own set of colorful expressions and artistic interpretations. There's an entertaining fact on nearly every page, covering a wide range of subjects, from why human hair appears to grow after death to what French kissing was called in France (they considered it Italian). Historical sources reveal the roots of Barbie and Charles Atlas and the damage a lifetime of trumpet playing did to Louis Armstrong's lips, with some figures—including Charles Darwin and 19th-century criminologist Cesare Lombroso, who claimed he could identify the physical characteristics of the criminal classes—coming in for regular attention. Sims (Darwin's Orchestra: An Almanac of Nature in History and the Arts) marshals his disparate stories and facts into a cohesive whole with frequent humorous asides and poetic waxings. It all adds up to a rollicking "fantastic voyage" over the surface of the body. 15 line illus. not seen by PW.

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From Booklist

From Houdini's toes (astonishingly dexterous) to Charlton Heston's hair (prophetically regal), Sims surveys the ways in which cultural ingenuity has embellished and interpreted the biological endowments of the human body. There is more than a little physiology on this anatomical tour, but mostly Sims entertains us with the amazing strategies humans have devised for displaying, manipulating, and encoding our body parts. In the juxtaposition of Chinese foot binding and modern high-heeled shoes, for instance, he traces curious

transmutations--and even more curious continuities--in cultural attitudes toward the body. We also learn that while today's chiromancers (palm-readers) languish in the shadow of skepticism and ridicule, their predecessors attracted at least passing interest from Aristotle. Predictably enough, humans have expended exceptional imaginative resources in assigning cultural meaning to the body's erogenous features: ancient Roman men wore phallic amulets to ward off bad luck; twentieth-century German men collected buxom dolls to stimulate erotic fantasies. A lively and wide-ranging excursion. *Bryce Christensen*

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Users Review

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