

Dieting to obsession

by Geoff Martin

The Obsession:
Reflections on the Tyranny of
Slenderness
by Kim Chernin
Harper Colophon Books
206 pages

"Thin is in." In *The Obsession*, Kim Chernin critically outlines the obsession of women with thinness. However, this says little about what Chernin really accomplishes. She insists that the feminist movement, anorexia nervosa, bulimarexia and 'crash' dieting are all part of the same problem, and she makes a very good case.

Anorexia Nervosa is a psychological disorder which occurs almost entirely in adolescent girls (sic) in which the victim continues to 'diet' despite the fact that they become grossly underweight. Instead, they still see themselves as fat. Bulimarexia is another disorder in which the victims (also almost entirely female) eat ravenously and then induce vomiting so as not to gain any weight, at great cost to their health. The 'why' of these two conditions, and Chernin's claim that approximately 90% of all dieters are female, provide the substance of this generally well-argued look at the worsening obsession over slenderness.

Admirably, Chernin does not pawn off any easy answers, mostly because there are none. What she does say has a lot of truth to it, even if it is sometimes poorly expressed. Ms. Chernin sees the obsession as a small part of a larger pattern, a pattern which extends backwards for as long as human society has existed.

Because our human society has evolved from a patriarchal model, women have traditionally had guilt and bad raps laid on them. Chernin looks at the state of women today as a product of a long history of oppression of women by men in the patriarchal society. Men, she says, have in the past and present time failed to deal with women as mature people. In this I think she is right.

As justification for her theory, she points to the rise of 'feminism' in the 1960's as the beginning of what men perceived as a threat to their social dominance. However,

in the society like the fashion and cosmetic companies were as fearful of the feminist movement as the bulk of men were. Chernin feels that as a result, anorexia nervosa and bulimarexia became more frequent as extreme examples of the unconscious psychological backlash against 'women's liberation'.

The women line of Chernin's argument is that these are symptoms of the main problem, which is that women have been taught by society to hate their bodies.

Whether it be through Christian dogma or more recent social doctrine, women have been taught either implicitly or explicitly that they are inferior to men, and to take pleasure in the body is wrong. As a result, all sorts of "double standards" have sprung up. For example, men are more often described as 'portly' than fat, which is actually considered a status symbol. Like in the case of the legendary "Diamond Jim", obesity in men is often seen as another manifestation of their power. However, it is a different story for women. 'Fat' women are implicitly condemned by society, with no questions asked.

She also does justice to the issue of child pornography and the fact that the sexual ideal is getting both thinner and generally younger in appearance. Back in the days of Marilyn Monroe, voluptuousness was in. More recently, "Taxi driver" and Jodie Foster and Brooke Shields are in. Ms. Chernin sees this partly as a result of the search of many men for more vulnerable, less provocative sexual ideals.

I think it would be a big mistake to regard this book as an attack on men, though. If anything it is an attack on both men and women in general because of the insistence of both sexes that the old stereotypes be maintained rather than chucked in the bin where they belong.

The unfortunate thing about this book is that the presentation left something to be desired. In general, there were stylistic problems, too many clichés, and what would seem to be entire chapters which really did not add anything to the theme. Besides that, it provides a unique perspective and interesting reading for man and woman alike.

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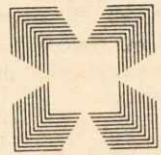
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