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# Anatomies: A Cultural History of the Human Body

By Hugh Aldersey-Williams



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**Anatomies: A Cultural History of the Human Body** By Hugh Aldersey-Williams

**“A marvelous, organ-by-organ journey through the body eclectic. . . Irresistible [and] impressive.”?John J. Ross, *Wall Street Journal***

The human body is the most fraught and fascinating, talked-about and taboo, unique yet universal fact of our lives. It is the inspiration for art, the subject of science, and the source of some of the greatest stories ever told. In *Anatomies*, acclaimed author of *Periodic Tales* Hugh Aldersey-Williams brings his entertaining blend of science, history, and culture to bear on this richest of subjects.

In an engaging narrative that ranges from ancient body art to plastic surgery today and from head to toe, Aldersey-Williams explores the corporeal mysteries that make us human: Why are some people left-handed and some blue-eyed? What is the funny bone, anyway? Why do some cultures think of the heart as the seat of our souls and passions, while others place it in the liver?

A journalist with a knack for telling a story, Aldersey-Williams takes part in a drawing class, attends the dissection of a human body, and visits the doctor's office and the morgue. But *Anatomies* draws not just on medical science and Aldersey-Williams's reporting. It draws also on the works of philosophers, writers, and artists from throughout history. Aldersey-Williams delves into our shared cultural heritage?Shakespeare to *Frankenstein*, Rembrandt to *2001: A Space Odyssey*?to reveal how attitudes toward the human body are as varied as human history, as he explains the origins and legacy of tattooing, shrunken heads, bloodletting, fingerprinting, X-rays, and more.

From Adam's rib to van Gogh's ear to Einstein's brain, *Anatomies* is a treasure trove of surprising facts and stories and a wonderful embodiment of what Aristotle wrote more than two millennia ago: "The human body is more than the sum of its parts."

16 illustrations



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## **Anatomies: A Cultural History of the Human Body** By Hugh Aldersey-Williams Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #593449 in Books
- Brand: W W Norton Company
- Published on: 2014-05-19
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.30" h x .90" w x 5.50" l, .56 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 320 pages

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### Editorial Review

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Aldersey-Williams has previously written about buckminsterfullerene (*The Most Beautiful Molecule*, 1995) and chemical elements (*Periodic Tales*, 2011). Here he works as a geographer, inspecting the territory of the body while merging medical science with art, literature, history, and philosophy. Anatomic superstars—Andreas Vesalius, William Harvey, and Henry Gray—bask in the spotlight, but they share the stage with the likes of Karel Capek, Gogol, Shakespeare, Descartes, Rembrandt, and Hieronymus Bosch. The book is crammed with curiosities: the recipe for shrinking and preserving a human head, body-snatchers, phrenology, synesthesia (a sort of mingling of the senses), and Einstein's brain. Aldersey-Williams has us think about the variety of body parts that have infiltrated common idioms: elbow grease, nose around, fight tooth and nail. The enjoyable and unpredictable text is sprinkled with illustrations and concludes with musings on self-transformation (expanding the body's abilities and extending lifespan). The Greek philosopher Epictetus once warned, "You are a little soul carrying around a corpse." Whether a work of art, a biological machine, the epitome of evolution, or a cold cadaver, the human body is astonishing. --Tony Miksanek

Review

"Fresh [and] revelatory." (Florence Williams - New York Times Book Review)

"Irresistible. . . . A marvelous, organ-by-organ journey through the body eclectic.... We have only to read *Anatomies* to realize that the body is still a thing of wonder." (John J. Ross - Wall Street Journal)

"Not so much an attempt to make sense of the body as an attempt to make sense of all the ways we've ever tried to make sense of it. . . . A massive cocktail-party primer filled with anecdotal pearls." (Leslie Jamison - New Republic)

"A magnificent exploration of the myths and mysteries of human anatomy.... Aldersey-Williams writes like a latter-day Montaigne." (Thomas Wright - Telegraph (UK))

About the Author

Hugh Aldersey-Williams is the author of many books, including *Anatomies*, *Periodic Tales*, and *The Most Beautiful Molecule*, a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize. He lives in Norfolk, England.

### Users Review

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