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Clean: A History of Personal Hygiene and Purity

By Virginia Smith



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Clean: A History of Personal Hygiene and Purity By Virginia Smith

In this pioneering book, Virginia Smith combines archeology, psychology, biology, and sociology to reveal how and why standards of cleanliness have come to exist today. Using hundreds of first-hand accounts and sources, Smith bring us from the Neolithic age to the present, peppering her engaging prose with enlightening and often surprising details.

Subconscious cleanliness has been with us since the first cell ejected a foreign invader. Even at the earliest stages of human development, our bodies produced pleasure-giving chemical opiates when things smelled or felt clean, inducing us to do things like bathing and removing dirty clothes. The need to be clean led directly to socialization, as we turned to our fellows for help with those hard to reach spots. In Eurasia during the Bronze Age, an emerging hierarchy of wealthy elites turned their love of grooming into an explosion of the cosmetic and luxury goods industry, greatly effecting the culture and economy of a vast area and leading to advances in chemistry and medicine.

The history that follows, from Greece and Rome, where citizens focused much of their leisure time on perfecting, bathing, or just writing about the model athletic body, through Europe in the middle ages and the following centuries, is full of intriguing customs, convoluted treatises, and many reversals. Baths were good for you, baths were bad for you, baths were good again--but only if they were quite cold. Even the enlightened medical knowledge of modern times could not stop an onslaught of health remedies, treatments, spas, and New Age nature cures that were to follow. While today we are immeasurably closer--perhaps too close--to knowing just what "clean" means to our bodies, we are still just as far as we ever were on agreeing what it means to our souls.

This engrossing and highly original work will introduce you to the customs and ideas of a myriad of cultures from centuries of human history. Not only will you gain a new perspective on the wonderful diversity of the world, but you'll never look at your toothbrush the same way again.



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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Smith, a British historian and honorary fellow at the Centre for History in Public Health at the London School of Hygiene, traces the origins of our modern standards of cleanliness by reaching back to the ancient Mesopotamians to look at the kind of grooming we now call pampering: baths, manicures and hairstyling. She argues that the impulse toward maintaining a cleanly outward appearance, which plays a central role in sexual attraction, is opposed by a psychological or religious desire for inner purity linked to Christian asceticism, which disdained physical adornment. Thanks to the development of an ethos of sanitary need in the Victorian era, which linked cleanliness to purity, personal hygiene has now reached the stage of general consensus, with newly emerging middle classes around the world eager to buy hygienic and cosmetic products to meet Western standards of appearance. Smith's chronicle is sprinkled with interesting details and draws on a broad cultural canvas, but the tone is academic; general readers will prefer to await a more popular history. 25 illus. (July)

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Review

"This book is a fascinating read, and it provides new perspectives on daily activities that one tends to take for granted. So take a shower, apply your deoderant, brush your teeth, curl up, and read this book!."--R.M. Mullner, *CHOICE*

"Smith's book is an example of how an academic should research global, *longue durée* history."--Joanna Bourke, *Harper's Magazine*

"Our belief in the transformative power of a good scrub goes back centuries, the roots of which are carefully detailed in *Clean*."--Jabari Asim, *Washington Post*

"This compact volume is also jam-packed with historical information."--Jenny McCartney, *The Sunday Telegraph*

"Because she has examined history through the prism of public baths, lavatories, laundry, teeth cleaning, cosmetics, food storage and panty linters, she has been able to shed new light on the evolution of civilization, religion, public health and sexual politics. There are lots of fascinating revelations."--Liz Jones, *The Evening Standard*

"At last, *Clean: A History of Personal Hygiene and Purity*, has set out, for the first time as far as I can tell, in intricate, intimate, excruciating detail why we live the way we do. There are lots of fascinating revelations."-

-Liz Jones, *The Evening Standard*

About the Author

Virginia Smith is a freelance historian who specializes in the history of personal hygiene. She was previously a Fellow of the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, and is currently an honorary fellow of the Centre for History in Public Health at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Her current research interests include the history of cosmetics, spas, and nudity.

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