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The Skinny On Fat: Our Obsession with Weight Control

Shawna Vogel
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“The incidence of obesity in the United States had held steady at about 14 percent of the population since 1960 … between 1981 and 1991, it shot up to a quarter of Americans.” From Weight Watchers to Slimfast, Thigh Master to phen-phen almost every American has tried dieting to lose weight at some point in their life, yet for all the billions of dollars spent on weight-loss programs and “miracle” drugs, Americans continue to pack on the pounds.

Vogel examines the biological questions at the heart of this dilemma. As a former editor of Discover magazine as well as a writer whose works have appeared in Scientific American, Earth and Discover and Health, Vogel excels at sorting and translating scientific jargon into pertinent information a layperson can easily digest. In her second book, the Skinny On Fat, Vogel engages the questions rarely raised in the hundreds of books and articles printed daily on losing weight: Why don’t diet plans work in the long run? Does being fat preclude being healthy? Will there ever be a failsafe method for losing weight?

Vogel begins by examining to what degree genetics influences whether one tends to be fat or skinny, fast metabolizers or slow and where one tends to store fat. She goes on to provide a brief history of the discovery of the OB or obesity gene in humans and the pharmaceutical implications of that discovery. In subsequent chapters she explains the body’s natural resistance to weight loss, the failure of weight-loss pharmaceuticals of the past and the possibility of a “miracle” drug for the future. Vogel relates scientific findings and speculations such that the reader comes to understand not only why nearly all dieting ends up “causing people to gain back the weight they may have lost, and often a few extra pounds,” but also that, “dieting teaches people to ignore the natural signals their bodies use to express hunger and satiety.”

From the beginning Vogel centers her study of weight loss on the chemical and biological factors, neglecting to focus on the psychological influences which promote compulsive eating disorders. Her biological focus, however, does allow her to cover a great deal of information in easy to swallow morsels—information which heretofore has been inaccessible to the average dieter.

While The Skinny On Fat does not offer a fail-safe formula for shedding pounds, it does demystify the human chemistry we cannot seem to tame, and asks a refreshing question to dieters of the future: Is our goal to be skinny or to be healthy? The lucid and well organized writing, peppered with informative case studies, makes this book a healthy alternative to a crash course in dietetics.

JENNIFER SPERRY (March / April 1999)

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