AOW 9: Examining a society obsessed with appearance

Book review of Beauty Junkies: Inside Our $15 Billion Obsession With Cosmetic Surgery, October 29, 2006|By Kathryn Masterson

In today's world, we all have a shot at being beautiful.

Feel cheated in the looks department? With enough money, you can nip and tuck your way to a whole new you. You can redo your teeth, plump your lips, reshape your nose, reduce your thighs. Medicine allows us to enhance cheekbones, shorten toes to fit into designer stilettos, improve a chin, increase breast size and freeze the forehead so wrinkles no longer appear there.

Last year, Americans spent $9.4 billion on cosmetic surgery, according to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons. More than 10 million cosmetic procedures were performed in 2005, including 3.8 million Botox injections. Cosmetic surgery is so common it has branched over to entertainment: A host of plastic-surgery shows, including "Extreme Makeover," "Dr. 90210" and "The Swan," allow us to watch the unattractive (or those who simply feel that way) pursue an ideal of physical attractiveness.

In "Beauty Junkies," New York Times Styles section reporter Alex Kuczynski holds up a mirror to the inner workings of America's cosmetic-surgery complex. She shows readers what's fueling the industry and who the people are inside it who are either selling physical perfection or buying it.

Kuczynski makes the argument that we are a culture of beauty junkies, addicts continually looking for our next fix to keep us looking young and pretty. We value beauty above other things and see it as an ideal worth sacrificing for, something we, especially women, are expected to be in addition to being smart and successful.

"Looks are the new feminism, an activism of **aesthetics**," Kuczynski writes, and she is not immune to the pull. In the book, Kuczynski admits to an addiction with cosmetic enhancement that starts with Botox and progresses to liposuction and an unfortunate lip-filling incident with Restylane that causes her to miss a good friend's memorial.

Kuczynski is a thorough reporter, and the book delves deep into the hows and whys of today's culture of cosmetic enhancement, doling out facts and figures to show the readers that, yes, this really is a big trend. Much better are the parts where Kuczynski writes about the players in the plastic-surgery world. She has a keen eye and a talent for description, and she is at her best exposing the hucksters and snake-oil sellers in the business.

In the chapter "Harvey Weinstein's White, White Teeth," she deflates an egotistical dentist who claims he worked on the movie mogul's teeth and brags he'll be executive producer on a movie soon. " 'Harvey loves me,' " he says. (Weinstein's spokeswoman wouldn't confirm for Kuczynski whether Weinstein had ever been a patient, and a source says Weinstein can't recall ever making such a movie-producing promise.) Kuczynski's evaluation is as cold and quietly devastating as the ones plastic surgeons and dermatologists offer when she interviews them. Kuczynski listens when doctors tell her at 25 that she could use some eyelid surgery and when another tells her that her eyebrows aren't doing her any favors.

As much as she knows about the underbelly of the industry--that magazine writers accept free work in exchange for articles and that much of the industry is simply slick marketing--she, too, comes to believe getting some work done would make her feel better about herself.

Ultimately, Kuczynski concludes that time can't be stopped no matter how much collagen or Botox we inject and that the cost of constantly trying to fix things on her body is too high. But that uplifting message--I'm OK the way I am--is overshadowed by the dark view readers are left with of a society obsessed with looks that isn't showing signs of stopping. At the end of "Beauty Junkies," readers may conclude our quest for thinner bodies, tighter skin and bigger breasts is an empty one that may do us more harm than good in the long run.

A cynical plastic surgeon from California sums up that emptiness best in a chapter about the pursuit of beauty in Los Angeles. Over lunch at the Beverly Hills Ivy restaurant, the surgeon tells Kuczynski that women in Los Angeles live in a world that is all about looks. And once those start to fade and their husbands trade them in for younger women, things get especially ugly.

" '[I]t gets desperate on a deeply metaphysical level,' " he says. " 'I've seen it get very dark. They wake up one day and realize that they are nothing but a shell of skin. They didn't do anything on the inside. And I don't care how many yoga classes you go to, they won't be able to cope. They're not equipped. And they don't know why.' "

**QUESTIONS: complete sentences, on notebook paper.**

1. What is the main idea of the book that is being reviewed?
2. I left the ads on the article on purpose. What is the irony of these ads in this article?
3. Define **aesthetics** according to clues in the article.
4. Go to the paragraph labeled “1”. What “free work” would magazine writers accept? Why would they accept this? What do they have to do to get the free work?
5. Why do you think the pursuit of beauty is even worse in cities like Los Angeles and New York?
6. Name two or three people or things that influence teenage girls/guys regarding their looks.