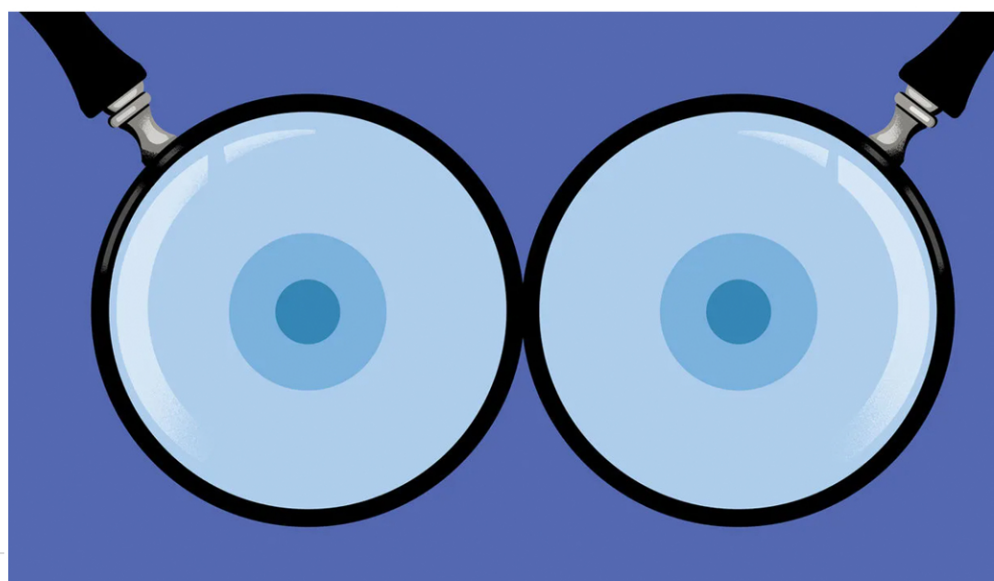


There is more to breasts than meets the eye

A new book offers a cultural history of mammary glands

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Tits Up. By Sarah Thornton. *W.W. Norton*; 336 pages; \$28.99. *Bluebird*; £20

DEPENDING ON HOW you look at them, breasts can take very different shapes. Bare busts can be eroticised or neutral, a symbol of women’s liberation or their oppressive objectification. Perky, ample bosoms are held up as a feminine ideal in popular culture, but those in possession of them report discrimination at work and other negative effects. They are glorified as sources of sustenance for infants: the World Health Organisation preaches that “[breast is best](#)”, and doctors call the milk “liquid gold” for its nutrients and antibodies. In some countries, however, those who nurse in public attract uneasy glances, sometimes even reproof.

Breasts, Sarah Thornton avers, are both ogled and strangely overlooked: “Mine had been hanging out under my nose for 40 years before I began to contemplate their significance.” She begins “Tits Up”, an excellent new book with a bad title, by recounting her experience of a double mastectomy and reconstruction in 2018. She decided to undergo this procedure after years of biopsies and monitoring, owing to a family history of [cancer](#). To her dismay her request for “lesbian yoga boobs”—implying an unobtrusive size between an A and a B cup—goes unheeded. The surgeon fits her instead with sizeable Ds.

She is irritated that her cups runneth over, lamenting the presence of these “silicone aliens”, their bulk and lack of feeling, and how they change her sense of her own personhood. What follows is a four-year quest to seek “the multifarious meanings and uses of breasts”. Ms Thornton, a sociologist and former contributor to *The Economist*, identifies five places where women’s chests are revered: strip clubs, milk banks, operating rooms, lingerie ateliers and female spiritual gatherings.

Readers meet a diverse cast of characters, including a woman who finds high-end escorts with specific bra sizes for her clients; a mother whose child died shortly after birth and so donates more than ten litres of her milk a week to other babies in need; and a male surgical assistant who served in Iraq. Together the interviews show a complex picture of breasts’ utility and seriousness.

Along the way Ms Thornton offers fun flashes of art, history, religion and science. Readers learn, for instance, that there is a bridge in [Venice](#) called *Ponte delle Tette* (Bridge of the Tits), so named for the prostitutes who would advertise their assets there in the 16th century.

In France, meanwhile, you may spy roads with names such as *Rue des Poupardières* (Street of the Breastfeeders, or Street of the Nurseries). That alludes to the wet-nursing industry that took off during the Renaissance: some rich women would send their babies away to be fed by poor rural women. Separated from suckling, busts were easier to eroticise. “Unclaimed by infants, breasts could become the possession, fetish and status symbol of husbands and lovers,” the author writes. Centuries later France boasts some of the world’s best lingerie designers; it also has one of the lowest rates of breastfeeding.

“Tits Up” is an enjoyable but somewhat lopsided book. Some chapters are insubstantial, but those on [sex work](#) and plastic surgery are riveting. Ms Thornton is a witty writer, observing that for those in the titillation business, “breasts are not sex toys as much as salaried assistants”. She addresses broader themes, such as [treatment](#) for gender-dysphoric people, and touches on moral judgments, race, class and cultural differences, as well as medical need. She notes that feminists have long had an uncomfortable relationship with breasts, as they are “associated with nature and nurture rather than reason and power”.

Indeed, it is the topic of boob jobs that best embodies the richness of her subject. Breast procedures—including implant removal as well as augmentations, lifts and reductions—made up 40% of all plastic-surgery operations in America in 2021. The female surgeons Ms Thornton meets are exacting; one, [Carolyn Chang](#), has made a name for herself with “proportionate and appropriate” results. But the majority of surgeons are men, who impose their own aesthetic preferences (often involving unusually high nipples) on patients, regardless of their frame.

Even if some women may still feel awkward about the appendages on their torso after reading her book, Ms Thornton succeeds in offering an appreciation of the oft-derided, oft-maligned organ. Though the terminology for them tends towards the silly and frivolous—think of “bazookas”, “jugs”, “norks” or “funbags”—this book suggests they are anything but. Owners and admirers will not look at breasts in the same way again. ■