



The Anatomy of Disgust

By William Ian Miller

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The Anatomy of Disgust By William Ian Miller

William Miller embarks on an alluring journey into the world of disgust, showing how it brings order and meaning to our lives even as it horrifies and revolts us. Our notion of the self, intimately dependent as it is on our response to the excretions and secretions of our bodies, depends on it. Cultural identities have frequent recourse to its boundary-policing powers. Love depends on overcoming it, while the pleasure of sex comes in large measure from the titillating violation of disgust prohibitions. Imagine aesthetics without disgust for tastelessness and vulgarity; imagine morality without disgust for evil, hypocrisy, stupidity, and cruelty.

Miller details our anxious relation to basic life processes: eating, excreting, fornicating, decaying, and dying. But disgust pushes beyond the flesh to vivify the larger social order with the idiom it commandeers from the sights, smells, tastes, feels, and sounds of fleshly physicality. Disgust and contempt, Miller argues, play crucial political roles in creating and maintaining social hierarchy. Democracy depends less on respect for persons than on an equal distribution of contempt. Disgust, however, signals dangerous division. The high's belief that the low actually smell bad, or are sources of pollution, seriously threatens democracy.

Miller argues that disgust is deeply grounded in our ambivalence to life: it distresses us that the fair is so fragile, so easily reduced to foulness, and that the foul may seem more than passing fair in certain slants of light. When we are disgusted, we are attempting to set bounds, to keep chaos at bay. Of course we fail. But, as Miller points out, our failure is hardly an occasion for despair, for disgust also helps to animate the world, and to make it a dangerous, magical, and exciting place.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

The title of William Ian Miller's book is a play on Robert Burton's 17th-century classic *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, an examination of human emotion. In his modern *Anatomy*, Miller narrows the focus to the function of disgust in human life. Disgust, Miller posits, is a kind of protection; just as fear causes us to flee danger or loyalty prompts us to support one another, disgust draws boundaries and insulates the individual from outside incursions--anything from the unhygienic hair in our soup to the frightening explosion of homelessness in our cities. Among his theories is one that democracy depends on the even distribution of disgust across class lines.

Mr. Miller is not afraid to explore the darker side of disgust as well--the fact that we may feel it in conjunction with contempt toward people, objects, or concepts that do not warrant it. Nevertheless, disgust serves an important role in humanity's complex emotional and social makeup, and *The Anatomy of Disgust* is novel in its approach to uncovering just what that role might be.

From Library Journal

Miller (law, Univ. of Michigan) is certainly an expert on the unsavory. He brilliantly marshals sources that span a millennium of Western history, drawing critically on the works of such diverse thinkers as Hume, Hazlitt, and Freud. One of his main and persuasive conclusions is that disgust fills a social function by identifying and sanctioning class behaviors and attitudes. In making this case, however, he reveals his own apparent insecurity about class as conditioned by his acknowledged privileged perspective. Readers may also need to work through his notion that true love?and sexual pleasure?depend on overcoming disgust. Casual readers need not apply; although Miller writes well, his tone is relentlessly professorial. Given his universal theme, that's a mild disappointment. A category-defying book most appealing to psychologists, anthropologists, and philoophers, this is essential only for liberal arts collections.?Scott H. Silverman, Bryn Mawr Coll. Lib., Pa.

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From [Booklist](#)

This is unique: an investigation into disgust and how we manage to sublimate aversion into sociological, psychological, and cultural channels. The catalysts for Miller's examinations of our disgust with the human body's emissions are often literary; quotations from English literature abound as Miller digresses on "the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to." Some may think writing about feces, urine, semen, blood, body odor, bad breath, bad skin, bad hair, and so forth is a lunatic idea. But readers willing to overcome their own disgust may find it a brilliant one and also an unusual way to address how we love (e.g., by suppressing distaste for our beloved's appalling eating habits) and how we hate (e.g., by holding contemptuous the habits of a different class). More than mapping out revulsion, however, Miller maintains that moral outlooks emanate from disgust--a radical proposition that is argued provocatively. *Gilbert Taylor*

Users Review

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Hattie Jasso:

Here thing why this specific The Anatomy of Disgust are different and reputable to be yours. First of all examining a book is good nevertheless it depends in the content of computer which is the content is as

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