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Cleopatra's Nose is an exuberant gathering of essays and profiles representing twenty years of Judith Thurman's celebrated writing, particularly her fascination with human vanity, femininity, and "women's work"--from haute couture to literature to commanding empires. The subjects are iconic (Jackie, the Brontës, Toni Morrison, Anne Frank) and multifarious (tofu and performance art, pornography and platform shoes, kimonos and bulimia); all inspire dazzling displays of craft, wit, penetration, and intelligence.

Here we find explorations of voracity: hunger for sex, food, experience, and transcendence; see how writers from Flaubert to Nadine Gordimer have engaged with history; meet eminent Victorians and the greats of fashion. Whether reporting on hairstyles, strolling the halls of power, or deftly unpacking novels and their writers, Thurman never fails to provoke, inspire, captivate, and enlighten. *Cleopatra's Nose* is an embarrassment of riches from one of our great literary journalists.

Cleopatra's Nose: 39 Varieties of Desire Details

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Cindy says

If I was reading with a dictionary I'd be learning a whole new vocabulary. These essays by Judith Thurman, a staff writer for The New Yorker, are brilliant and so erudite I can feel my brain stretching. They are essays usually about women, but they explore unusual aspects of being a woman, women's work, or a particular woman being profiled. So far I've read about a bulimic performance artist, the making of tofu in Japan, Diane Arbus, etc. The Diane Arbus essay inspired me to check out a catalogue of one of her exhibitions--Family Album--that Thurman refers to throughout. So interesting. I may have to buy this book eventually because it takes me so long to read each piece.

Fer says

Para los hispanohablantes que se topen con este libro (no pude encontrar una edición en español donde poner mi comentario) y estén indecisos entre empezarlo o no sólo les puedo decir: ¡Háganlo! No se arrepentirán. No sólo es un deleite el leer la fluidez narrativa y lengua mordaz con la que Thurman nos envuelve en sus ensayos, sino que es interesante y de cierta forma, impresionante, darnos cuenta de la cantidad de datos curiosos, datos históricos y anécdotas que esta mujer tiene para dar, sin contar que parece haber conocido a la mayoría de las personas de las que habla, lo que le confiere también un toque personal y de cercanía propia con el sujeto.

Beverly says

Every sentence in every essay stabs. She's so smart, reading her is like an ice-pick lobotomy that makes you smarter and more sensitive.No one has ever made me feel like reading Flaubert so much.

Mangieto says

2.5

I feel inclined to leave it on 2 stars, but I might consider to raise it to 3 stars later.

Anyway, I really enjoyed the first part of the book, it was shocking and interesting and all so well tied. Also I didn't know the subjects of the essays, neither I had ever taken fashion in such a serious way, nor so carefully relate it to the artist's life.

BUT it all faded away by half the book or so. I don't really know why, because the writing is the same and I can't honestly say that topics were less interesting, so maybe I just got tired of the author.

Kristen says

I loved this book! In fact, I'd have finished it much sooner had I not become ill in the middle of reading it. It's a dense book, over 400 pages, but it never felt long to me. Quite the opposite actually, I couldn't get enough! I enjoyed every single one of her essays and, I think, learned something from each one. Her writing is brilliant and insightful. I've never read *The New Yorker* but I know its reputation, and this is exactly the caliber of writing I'd expect from a magazine that carries so much prestige. I felt smarter after reading these essays. That's a rare occurrence for me nowadays, indeed.

Lauren Van vice says

I don't normally review anything I haven't finished or used but this is one of those books that will likely live by my bed for a year or two as I pick my way through it between things.

Thurman is sharp. I sat for a while trying to come up with a suitable adjective and that's where I arrived. Sometimes she's delicate in her writing but she is never soft. She doesn't stop to explain things unless it gives her the opportunity to wax poetic about the semi-erotic experience of tasting tofu prepared in centuries old kitchens and is best taken in small doses. Happily, she is an essayist so it all works out in the end.

I was lucky enough to find *Cleopatra's Nose* at The Dollar Tree (Seriously, you have no idea the authors I find there. Saul Bellow and once even Steven Pinker) is full of interesting tidbits and lovely language. It'll make you laugh and it'll make you grimace as you imagine Thurman imagining you laugh but it probably won't bore you.

Leah W says

"I had no opaque white underpants to wear under my own white linen suit, looked for a pair up and down the rue de Rennes, couldn't find any-there is no such thing, in Paris, as opaque white under pants, which is a reason to love Paris[:]"

Initially, I wasn't terribly fond of this book. Perhaps I shouldn't have read this right after *Twenty-Eight Artists and Two Saints*, which is also by a woman who writes for the *New Yorker* (Joan Acocella), who also writes book reviews of artists, but is better-known for her criticism of a more ephemeral art (for Acocella, dance; for Thurmer, fashion). I do think Acocella is a better book reviewer, and Thurmer has a habit of bringing up something completely unrelated to her essay's topic, using it as an introductory metaphor, and then discarding it. This was done in at least ten of these essays.

However, once she moved into fashion, I was delighted. I am in no way a follower of fashion, but just reading Thurmer's reports of fashion weeks long past and trends long discarded (Neoprene was big in 2003? Really?) has led me to be more interested in fashion than I ever have been before. Also, her museum reportage was excellent, and the penultimate essay about *Cleopatra* was terrific.

In the end, I can't begrudge Thurmer for not being Joan Acocella. I'll just enjoy them both, and avoid any

other New Yorker staff writers for awhile.

Jessica says

This isn't bad or anything, but I'm just not that into it. I've read a few of the essays and I'm just kind of bored, and keep picking up the Robert Moses instead of this at every chance I get. If I'd paid for this book, or even if I didn't have a ginormous stack of other things I'm dying to read, I'd keep going, but I'm just not feeling terribly enthusiastic about it. I think one problem I'm having is that Thurman's essays don't ever give me any kind of "we're in this together" kind of feeling; they just make me feel really distanced from her, and instead of feeling like I'm benefiting from her experiences, I'm mildly resentful that she had them, and I didn't; I feel like in a successful essay, you're happy the other person did something instead of you doing it, because they write about it so engagingly.

In the first one about Vanessa Beecroft (the most interesting essay I read), I felt very detached from the writer, and I really felt like she and Beecroft had a lot more in common with each other than I did with Thurman, which was a little weird for me. She seemed kind of judgmental and snooty, which can be great in a writer, but I just wasn't feeling it in this book. I felt like she looked down on Beecroft just a little for being a bulimic, exploitive nutjob, but she also respects Beecroft's designer clothes and the glamour of her life; then in the essay about the French lady who fucks everyone, I felt like Thurman looked down on that lady for being schlumpy and kind of pathetic and I guess for fucking everyone.... None of this is necessarily in her writing, it's just how I personally felt while reading it. I suspected that if Thurman were ever to meet me, she would be disappointed and condescending. Obviously, this would be the case with most smarty-pants, fancy writerly types, but I feel like I kind of need their writing to obscure that fact, if I'm going to stay on board for an entire book of essays or articles or whatever these things are. This isn't just about me being jealous of writers with more fabulous lives than mine, it's about the question of how successfully said fabulous writer is able to bridge this gap between her rarified, intellectual existence and her off-the-rack, slow-witted popular readership, and maybe this is some weird transference of mine that has nothing to do with Thurman, but I just didn't experience that here. I needed to feel like Thurman and I were a "we," and I didn't. I felt like she would be the popular girl with the Guess jeans in the cafeteria, and I would be wearing the Payless Docs. I think this was distracting and maybe part of why I couldn't pay attention to her writing about subjects I ostensibly find fascinating. "Desire" is my number one topic of interest at the moment! But in the one where she goes to Japan on a tofu expedition, I didn't have the good travelogue feeling of "I got to stow away in your suitcase"; more just this kind of deflating, "Wow, I wish someone would send me to Japan on a tofu expedition, her life is so much cooler than mine. She is smarter than me and probably has an amazing wardrobe. And this article is boring. It seems like it was a lot more fun to research than it is to read. I'm going to put this down now and go eat some tofu." (Which I did.)

Anyway, this really isn't bad by any means; it just didn't really capture my imagination, and I'd read a few more except I really do have a trillion other things clawing at my leg right now, so.... maybe I'll give it another shot someday, but for now I'm going to bail.

ARGH!! Except I just now reread Ginnie's review, and it makes me feel like I should keep reading. I mean, Thurman really writes about themes that interest me. This really seems like something I would love! But right now I'd rather read this book about Katrina, so.... I won't take it back to the library yet, but it is coming off my "currently-reading" shelf, which is looking a bit ugly bloated and definitely needs to be purged.

Pam says

Judith Thurman writes for The New Yorker, and is most well known for her articles about fashion designers - the big ones like Balenciaga, Chanel, Schiaparelli, Saint Laurent. All of these and more are included in this collection, but one of my favorite essays is called "Eminence Rose", about Mme. de Pompadour. One of Thurman's observations.. "If Hillary Clinton had held every cabinet position in her husband's administration and controlled every appointment, her influence might have approximated Pompadour's at the height of her power". She also sent French generals her ideas for battle plans marked with her beauty spots.....I wonder if Carla Bruni ever read this essay?

Rj says

I have just finished reading Judith Thurman's, *Cleopatra's Nose: 39 Varieties of Desire* (New York: Farrar, Giroux & Strauss, 2007). Thurman a staff writer for the New Yorker has collected 39 short, witty and fun essays on desire for this book. After the heavy, but sometimes ponderous reading of books on Federalism and the early Republic, Thurman's light and deft touch was a welcome breath of fresh air. Divided into six sections, Thurman's writing touches on fashion designers, artists, writers, craftsmen, royalty and mistresses. She weaves them all together like an incandescent string of pearls. As outlined by her subtitle all the essays deal with desire and longing. Thurman suggests it was "revealed" to her by a quote from Blaise Pascal, "Anyone who wants to know the full extent of human vanity has only to consider the causes and effects of love, Cleopatra's nose: had it been shorter, the whole face of the world would have been changed." (ix) Thurman's writing awakens curiosity about subjects I did not even know were interesting. Her text bounces along in a light, spritely manner that makes reading her work fun and enjoyable, especially in the darkness just before bed

Lisa says

This is the first book that I read because of Good Reads. I'll let you know what I think of it when I've read more.

I didn't ever read that much more. I read three of the essays and started on a few that I never finished. I picked it up after having read a couple Good Reads reviews because it seemed like an intelligent dealing of desire. I was most interested in the texts about fashion. Critical writing of fashion is something that I have been wanting to read. The commercialist celebrity cult that mainstream fashion writing fosters is not all that there is about clothes, and I was hoping that Judith Thurman take it further than the average Vogue article. Thurman however doesn't really make any deeper analysis of fashion but rather portrays its big icons, Chanel, Elsa Schiaparelli and other grand dames and monsieurs. Despite the name, *Cleopatra's Nose: 39 Varieties of Desire*, the essays lack an analysis of the desire that seems to be essential to fashion. My interest in the book stem from the expectation that I thought it would answer some of my questions of how desire is produced, how it is connected to clothes and fashion and what it all means, but that is unfortunately not what Judith Thurman is dealing with here, and she leaves me unsatisfied.

Chris says

I picked this up because I had read and enjoyed Thurman's Isak Dinesen The Life of a Storyteller. Overall, Thurman can write and makes wonderful use of the language.

However, there are far too many essays about fashion for a non-fashionista like me to really, truly, enjoy the book. I doubt really want to read about Chanel or Blass.

The essays that are not concealed with fashion are interesting. Perhaps the most interesting is the one that describes the history and process of tofu. I still don't like it, but now I have respect for it. (Incidentally, the best fashion essay was about kimono making. Thurman does seem to like Japan). I also enjoyed her essay about the Brontes. I do like reading essays about books I like, and Thurman's critique of Possession A Romance was on point. Her closing essays are historical sketches.

Lightsey says

Present from my darling husband. . . and what a wonderful read. Thurman makes one so much more informed in so little space, almost by magic, the way Colette makes one automatically more sophisticated (and sexy) in a page or two. I am lapping this up. . .

So I should perhaps add, as a caveat, that after the miscellaneous first section there is a heavy dose of fashion writing. If that's not your thing, well, perhaps try something else by Thurman. But if, like me, you're fascinated by plumage and starved for smart commentary thereon, it's catnip.

Maya says

Judith Thurman is one hell of a writer. I picked this book up on a whim at a library sale and I'm so glad I did. Will definitely be revisiting these essays, and probably checking out Thurman's biographies of Isak Dinesen and Colette.

Alexa.elam says

These are Thurman's collected essays from her work for The New Yorker. I had read many of them when they were first published, but her work is so crisply and eloquently written that it is a pleasure to re-read these essays. A big to-read list grew from reading this book-- starting tonight with "A Scented Palace: The Secret History of Marie Antoinette's Perfumer."

I especially love Thurman's writing on fashion and fashion figures. She is able to put fashion and style in a socio-historical context that underscores its relevance, rather than being relegated to the watered down women's section (or "Styles" section as The New York Times euphemistically titles their women's page).

Finally-- her piece on Tofu is fabulous! You will want to get on a plane to Kyoto to try the real thing-- I do!

