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**Review of Sharlene Hesse-Biber's *Am I Thin Enough Yet?: The Cult of Thinness and the Commercialization of Identity*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1996, 164 pages including notes**

Reviewed by Michael Fumento

People who write in that amorphous subject area known as "women's studies," continuously pore over the issues of the day like so many web search engine spiders, seeking out anything they can use to show we live in a society hell-bent on persecuting women and minorities. Breast cancer. Employment. Sex. You name it. Psychologist Susie Orbach succeeded grandly twice with her books "Fat Is a Feminist Issue" and the inspirationally titled "Fat Is a Feminist Issue II," both times using psychobabble to show that both obesity and eating disorders result from a white male-dominated culture. Never mind that, as Orbach neglected to tell her readers, white males in the U.S. are actually a bit more likely to be obese than white females. Oops!

But in the publishing world, build a better mousetrap and authors will beat a similar path. Such it is with Sharlene Hesse-Biber's *Am I Thin Enough Yet?* which really offers very little new from its many, many predecessors.

Once again, Hesse-Biber's book offers up the tired old contradiction of "I am woman hear me roar!" on the one hand and "Women are hapless victims of a wicked capitalist system run by exploitive males" on the other.

"Capitalism and patriarchy most often use the media to project the culturally desirable body to women," claims Hesse-Biber. It's part of a conspiracy to require women to divert money, time, and energy away from more empowering activities.

The patriarchy? When last we checked women's magazines were almost universally edited by and written by women, the largest diet centers were run by and almost entirely staffed by women (unless Jenny Craig is a man in disguise), and most of the exploitive worthless diet books are written by people with names like Susan Powter, Adele Puhn, and Debra Waterhouse. True, the best-selling such book lately, "The Zone," was authored by a man. It was also edited and published by a woman. If it's true that women are being victimized, clearly they are also the prime victimizers.

As for that nasty capitalist system, Hesse-Biber states, "These [capitalist] interests have made big business out of women's preoccupation with their bodies."

But nowhere in her book does Hesse-Biber mention that the body type she insists is being forced upon women is that which evolution has favored, not which Madison Avenue has created. Sure there have been body-related fads throughout history, including skin shades and hairstyles. But tests

in cultures around the world find that to an amazing extent, beauty is a universal concept. Women tend to favor tall, lean, muscular men who are also successful breadwinners. Men place more emphasis on looks, favoring symmetrical faces, larger breasts, and hour-glass figures. Art from the Minoan civilization of the 14th Century B.C. show women with the wasp waists and huge breasts of a Barbie doll.

For all the hatred that waifish supermodel Kate Moss engenders among feminists, including Hesse-Biber, most men favor a more rotund (though hardly fat) shape.

It is thus natural in the literal sense of the word that women—as well as men—would WANT TO adapt to normal standards of beauty. But Hesse-Biber knows better.

"In America today, women who diet, or have their breasts enlarged or their tummies tucked, regard this as an exercise of free will," she writes. "But if we compare these practices with two historical examples, one from ancient China and the other from the Victorian era (corsets), we may gain a new perspective." She then discusses in horrific detail the old Chinese practice of foot binding. Thus a woman who decides to lose ten pounds is similar to a little girl whose parents break her feet and turn them into virtual stumps because the culture found this attractive.

Meanwhile, each year men undergo over 200,000 hair transplant operations, each of which is painful and bloody. Several sessions are required and the total bill can be more than \$20,000. Men also work like dogs to earn a good living because they know bigger breadwinners attract more desirable women. But don't wait for a book called "Do I Have Enough Hair Yet?" or "Do I Make Enough Money Yet?" When men jump through hoops for women it's free will, but when women jump do likewise for men it's cruel patriarchal mind-control.

This book is not wholly without merit. It rightly bashes the diet mills like Jenny Craig's, quoting one brochure from that chain as promising that its "results are so long lasting," that "it teaches you to how to keep your weight off," and it "helps you lose weight quickly and easily."

In fact, it's largely because Jenny Craig's diet plans lure in women with diets that do cause quick initial weight loss that they place virtually no emphasis on keeping the weight off. The result is Miss Jenny's long-term success rates probably approach zero. (Jenny Craig has provided no data to indicate otherwise.)

On the other hand, Hesse-Biber ridicules a woman who says, "When I notice that my pants fit a little tighter or something like that, then I'll stop and go to my conventional diet where I just don't eat as much as I have been." Yet that is exactly the type of weight control that works. It's self-imposed without benefit of a diet mill, it's moderate, it doesn't rely on pills or silly shakes. Add in some exercise and it's the universal "secret" as to how people who have lost weight keep it off.

Even though Hesse-Biber herself has lost apparently all her excess pounds, she's practically apologetic for it. Instead she urges women to

simply settle at their "natural weight," a term that is medically meaningless but rather was invented by the fat acceptance movement to justify being any and all sizes, from the healthiest on up to at least 600 pounds.

Hesse-Biber says the "best antidote to the Cult of Thinness" is "creating a society that values women." Sorry, but we already have that. Ask all those hair transplant "victims." There are myriad reasons why any given woman may develop an eating disorder. But neither Hesse-Biber nor any of these other self-styled experts on the subject ever bother to say eating disorders are far more prevalent in the U.S. than anywhere else in the world (how can you write a whole book about eating disorders and not be aware of this fact?) and to connect this to the U.S. also being the fattest country in the world.

In short, a society that worships at the altar of excess food consumption (a.k.a., gluttony) and watches an average of 4.4 hours of TV daily (a.k.a., sloth) but also places a high value on thinness is practically begging for a problem that comprises first binging on massive amounts of food and then throwing it up. It's not a patriarchy or capitalism that's at greatest fault, but these mixed messages of eat like a pig, get no exercise, and still be in good shape.

Getting back to a society that once again treats gluttony and sloth as two of the Seven Deadly Sins—that's the best way of dealing with eating disorders. It's not a feminist issue; it's an issue for all of us.

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