

Merril D. Smith (Ed.): Cultural Encyclopedia of the Breast

Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014, 288 pages, \$80.75

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Published online: 23 December 2014
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The breast is the most recommended part of the female body in every day life. In advertisements in magazines and television, female breasts are often seen with the product. Feminists know about the importance of female breasts and use the “free breast” concept for political debates. New Jersey independent scholar Merrill D. Smith offers a bright view on cultural, medical, social, and historical implications of the female breast. One hundred forty essays from different authors explain historical persons (Anna of Austria, died from breast cancer in 1666), myths (Amazons), social phenomena (pornography, prostitution), medical advances and problems (e.g. hormones), social conditions (hygiene, racism), and bra’s relevance to political disputes. Every essay has a similar structure: cultural historical introduction, references to female breast, and presentation of special related features. All essays have a literature list. In case of topics, where pictures explain much more than words, black and white images are given (corset, flapper, mammography). All essays are well written, understandable even for non professionals. A problem seems to be the emphasis on some topics. The essay about pregnancy is just one page short, but “popular music” is explained much more extensively.

But there are further problems, especially omissions. There aren’t any essays about drag kings/drag queens (they were squashed into transvestism), the Middle Ages, Antiques, or Islamic cultures. Breast enlargements/silicone aren’t mentioned in individual essays. Aspects referring to homosexuality can’t be found (e.g. Kathoey or South-Asian cultural relevance). Social enforcements and controls are more by-catch than central. The book doesn’t offer an index. All in all, Smiths work is a mediocre introduction to North American social conditions. The target audience might be beyond academic halls, but the high price may be a problem.

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