

Book Reviews

Fay Bound Alberti, *This Mortal Coil: The Human Body in History and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 304, £20.00, hardback and e-book, ISBN: 9780199599035.

In 1962, Timmie Jean Lindsey was twenty-nine years old, a divorced Texan mother of six children. One day, on an impulse, she allowed a boyfriend to persuade her to have a large tattoo of a rose inked onto her breast. Realising that it was a mistake almost immediately she went to the Jefferson Davis Hospital to have it removed. There, she was seen by plastic surgeon Frank Gerow who, along with Thomas Cronin, was experimenting with breast implants. At that time, implants were made from plastic materials, which were ‘rocklike’ to touch and uncomfortable. Gerow and Cronin had been inspired by blood transfusion bags which, Cronin noted after visiting a blood bank, ‘felt like a breast’. The two physicians made a thin bag out of silicone, filled it with a gel, then implanted it into the body of a dog. When the dog seemed to show no adverse effects, they realised it was time to find a human guinea pig. Lindsey was their choice.

Although Lindsey had not been dissatisfied with her breasts prior to visiting the two cosmetic surgeons, she agreed to the procedure on condition that they fix her ears which, she thought, ‘stuck out’ too much. When Lindsey woke up from the operation, ‘it felt like an elephant was sitting on my chest’, she later recalled. The surgeons, however, were thrilled with ‘the masterpiece’. They were also delighted with the money their new product started bringing in. Within eight years, 50 000 implants had been sold and breast enlargement had become a booming industry. Lindsey was forgotten, only reappearing many years later to tell of the discomfort and pain caused by her new breasts. Remarkably, though, she did not sound bitter.

Lindsey’s story is one of many that appear in Fay Bound Alberti’s latest book. Bound Alberti is well known for her insightful analyses of the body. Most notably, in her book called *Matters of the Heart: History, Medicine and Emotion* (2010), she astutely dissects the cultural and medical history of an organ that is central (‘at the heart of’) modern ideas about emotions and identity. *This Mortal Coil: The Human Body in History and Culture* expands her approach to the entire body. As would be expected, she has a chapter on the heart, but also on the genitals, breasts, spine, brain, skin, tongue, and guts.

Importantly, for Bound Alberti, the human body is largely a female one. Anyone looking for a history of the penis should go elsewhere. As a feminist, she is exquisitely sensitive to the way ideas about the female body contribute to ‘naturalizing inequalities between the sexes’. Nevertheless, while she is clearly appalled by the way physicians treat the female anatomy, she maintains a restrained rather than polemical tone. Her aim is to persuade, and she does this through a judicious mixture of personal stories (‘micro’) and political as well as institutional frameworks (‘macro’).

This is particularly important in the chapters on the breast and genitals, where she explores the largely unregulated surgical practices carried out in private clinics worldwide. Potential patients are lured by financial packages (such as ‘buy one, get one free’ for mothers and their daughters). Women are promised ‘Barbie doll-like’ vulvas. Some clinics offer women ‘hymen reconstruction’, in order to return their bodies to a preferred state of virginity. Women reluctant to submit to the scalpel can even buy artificial hymens. As one

manufacturer advised: 'Insert the Artificial Hymen into your vagina carefully. . . . When your lover penetrates, it will ooze out a liquid that appears like blood, not too much but just the right amount. Add in a few moans and groans and you will pass through undetectable!'

The other major theme in the book is the relationship between the body and metaphor. We have 'gut instincts'; we tell people to 'have a heart'; when afraid, we are 'tongue-tied'. These ways of thinking are reminders that humans are (in Bound Alberti's words) 'social beings that communicate with others – not only through tongues as symbols and organs, but through social practices, behaviours and our very materiality'. As philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty put it 'we don't *own* our bodies; we *are* them'.

Bound Alberti is committed to the view that the physiological body has a history. Indeed, she celebrates the potentially liberating view that 'our bodies are products of the stories we tell'. If this is the case, then 'by taking the body apart . . . we might even be able to construct it anew'. Not all readers will be convinced, but this book is a good place to start thinking anew about reinvigorating debates deconstructing mind–body dualism.

Joanna Bourke

Birkbeck, University of London, UK

doi:10.1017/mdh.2017.38

Thomas A. Apel, *Feverish Bodies, Enlightened Minds: Science and the Yellow Fever Controversy in the Early American Republic* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), pp. x, 191, \$60, hardback, ISBN: 9780804797405.

Some forgotten events stay puzzlingly forgotten, whatever their actual historical importance, even as others secure a place in historical memory. Many members of the educated public now know that the influenza pandemic of the early twentieth century killed more people than did the concurrent battles of World War I. In comparison, few people – including few United States citizens – know that in 1793 yellow fever ravaged the nation's capital, Philadelphia, killing a possible total of 5000 out of a population estimated at 50 000, and sending over 10 000 refugees streaming from the city. Needless to say, Philadelphia ceased to function and, with it, effectively, the federal government itself. The disease returned in six subsequent episodes. Nor was the situation unique to Philadelphia. Multiple yellow fever epidemics afflicted early America's port cities, if none as dire as that in the then capital. These are the facts as known then and now. What remained mysterious to people at the time was how yellow fever developed in the first place. Debates over its possible causes (and therefore its possible modes of prevention) were particularly rancorous. Thomas A. Apel analyses those arguments in his new book, *Feverish Bodies, Enlightened Minds*, characterising yellow fever as 'the most pressing natural problem of the early national period' (p. 2).

The recurring epidemics have had a fair amount of attention from historians of early American medicine (never a very large group) as well as some scholars of the early Republic. The stark divisions of contemporary interpretation have been an enduring puzzle for these historians. Some scholars have proposed that the essential divide was political, Federalists versus Republicans, for instance, at a hot moment of partisan politics that – not yet institutionalised into formal political parties – spilled over into much of the rest of public life. Disagreement according to particular theories of the body and the rest of the natural world have also been examined.

To make his own contribution, Apel focuses on the division between localists and contagionists, as he terms them. The distinction has been previously noted – it was