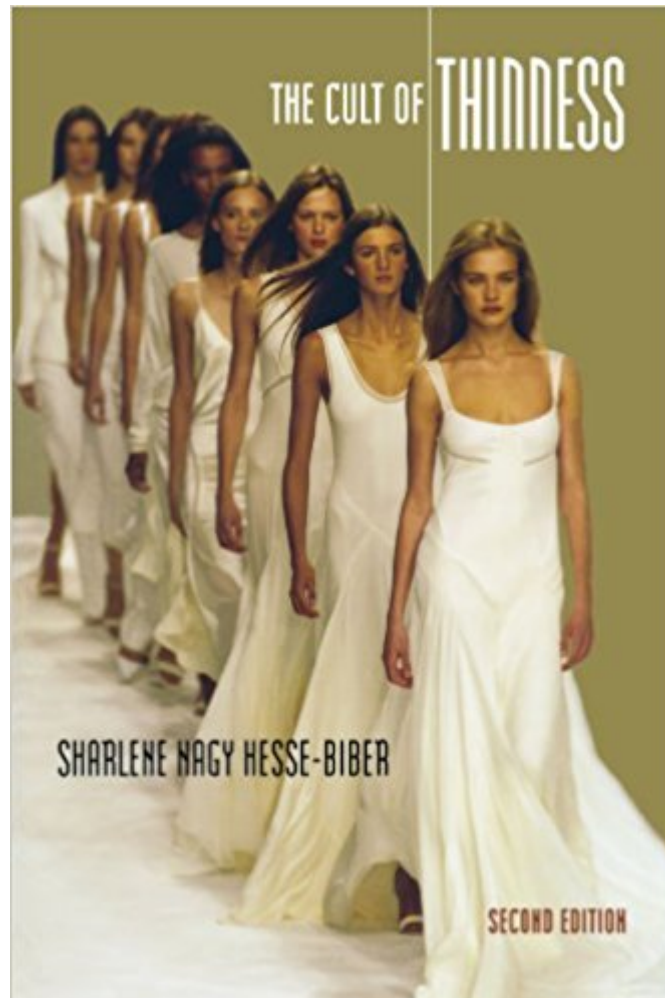




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# The Cult Of Thinness



## Synopsis

Whether they are rich or poor, liberal or conservative, religious or atheist, thriving or stagnant, most American women have one thing in common--they want to be thin--or thinner. And they are willing to go to extraordinary lengths to get that way, even to the point of starving themselves. Why are America's women so preoccupied with weight? Is there more to this preoccupation than weight alone? What has caused record numbers of young women--even before they reach their teenage years--to suffer from weight obsession, poor body image, and disordered eating? Why are some young women able to resist cultural pressures to be thin when others are not? Are there factors within American society that have fueled current outbreaks of anorexia and bulimia? The *Cult of Thinness*, Second Edition--a revised and expanded version of Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber's award-winning book, *Am I Thin Enough Yet?* (OUP, 1996)--answers these questions and more. Hesse-Biber goes beyond traditional psychological explanations of eating disorders to level a powerful indictment against the social, political, and economic pressures women face in a weight-obsessed society--a society that is, ironically, becoming increasingly more fat while worshipping a progressively more thin ideal. She examines the profit motives of corporate America that promote this paradox. Moreover, a new chapter on preteens, masculinity, ethnicity, gay and lesbian body image, and the globalization of body image issues align a refined cultural study of body image with the trends found in current research studies, demographic data, and popular culture. Using the metaphor of a cult, Hesse-Biber conveys the intense, day-to-day involvement that the pursuit of thinness demands. Examining the testimonies of young women concerning the practice of body rituals, she observes the extent to which these women sacrifice their bodies and minds to the pursuit of the ultra-slender ideal. She looks at pressures coming from their families and friends that perpetuate their cult-like practices and evaluates a range of therapies and personal and collective actions available to help women overcome their weight obsessions and eating problems. Hesse-Biber provides new frameworks for envisioning femininity and personal power, overcoming body insecurity, strengthening the inner self, and changing the cultural environment itself. Along the way, the reader is provided with important self-help tips to tackle the growing number of body image issues young women and new recruits to the "Cult of Thinness" continue to encounter. There are alternatives to the Cult of Thinness and this book provides a strong antidote.

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## Customer Reviews

Sharlene Hesse-Biber is at Boston College.

I picked this book up off of my stepsister's desk -- she was reading it for a gender studies class -- and I was so drawn in by it that I had to get my own copy. It is a sociology book, so it is somewhat drier and more academic than most pop psychology volumes. But the author did an excellent job exploring the cultural forces of America's puritanical heritage, capitalist values, and deep-seated sexism, and how they play out in contemporary women's lives. What looks at first like an individual affliction is the product of widespread cultural phenomena. Contextualized in this way, some of the stigma of the desire to be thin is broken down. As one of millions who has struggled with disordered eating, body dysmorphia, and subsequent confusion and shame, I felt a great sense of relief and forgiveness towards myself upon reading this book. Hesse-Biber's writing is insightful and sensitive toward her subjects. She uses interviews and narratives well, and avoids cliches and stereotypes. I would highly recommend this text to anyone looking for insight into this phenomenon that has got so much of the developed world under its thumb. By nature of the topic, it may be triggering for readers with severe eating disorders. Nonetheless, I would recommend it to teachers, parents, or counselors working with young women.

Just as described. Arrived on time.

Very interesting subject matter of social and media representations of female body image and its cultural impacts. Disturbing realities are within these pages, excellent read.

Great resource

This book is great! A great overview of disordered eating in America. Ordered it for my Sex and Gender in Society class but still enjoyed reading it.

I used it for my college English paper in Freshman English. It was a good source with a lot of information on my topic. I received an A on my paper, so the book served its purpose.

if you like sociology, particularly the study of body image, then this is a must. But if not, it's a long read.

I had to read this novel in one of my English classes, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. This novel by Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber describes how our capitalistic society takes pleasure in putting emphasis on weight and being thin because there is *"no business like the body business"*. This then leads into a new discussion of how new *"recruits to the cult"* are being brought in that range from *"preteen girls, adolescents, straight men, gays, lesbians and ethnic women"* and how eating disorders affect them (Hesse-Biber, 188). Hesse-Biber creates her cult analogy through her discussion of the media, family, culture, norms, and society, and linking them on both macro and micro levels. In *The Cult of Thinness*, the author discusses how she conducted an 8 year long case study of 60 college age women, as well as a 395 female and male college student survey in which she asked different members questions about their family, friends, eating rituals they perform, their goals in life, what they want from life, and more. She also conducted interviews with plastic surgeons, fitness instructors, and health professionals. An example of how effective her examples are comes from a woman named Judy who says, *"My mother was very critical of my appearance. I was always the fat one and she was always the thin one. She would say that I have the fattest thighs in the world, and that I'd better watch what I'm eating"* making the reader feel for the person (Hesse-Biber, 145). The author's use of actual people and their opinions on different subjects not only adds relatability to her novel, but also another layer of depth for the readers. It is extremely interesting when Hesse-Biber implements a real-life cult member who discusses the practices and rituals that they would perform on an everyday basis. In return, this allows the reader to see that cults bare a striking resemblance to

those who have disordered eating habits. In my opinion, this puts the whole topic of eating disorders and the strive to be thin in a new light. Hesse-Biber does this through her relation of the bible, temptation, confession, rituals, sin, sacrifice, fellow members to different aspects women use to stay thin, like diet books and weighing yourself. Hesse-Biber writes this scholarly work in a very understandable fashion that a lot of people could follow along with. The book is written in an interesting and thought-provoking way that captures the attention of the reader. However, I find that Hesse-Biber spent the majority of the time discussing white female, privileged, college aged students which does give as wide of a variety to readers. Although she spends one chapter discussing people who are more racially diverse and have different economic backgrounds, I find that it would have been more interesting to hear about a wider range of people more. I also find that Hesse-Biber's main aim is at college students, which may have been her intended focus, but people of every age can be found to have eating problems and it would have been interesting to hear about that. . Although there were a few areas that could have been different, this book was extremely interesting and looked behind the different social and cultural forces that urge women to become thinner and thinner each day. Hesse-Biber took a new approach that allows readers to really capture how much of a problem this is becoming, by comparing it to something as dark as a "cult". Her real-life examples allowed me to read and feel emotion for those who are either going through eating disorders or are pushed by their father and mother to maintain a certain size or shape if they want their acceptance and approval. I also found that this book made me more aware of how much the media controls and manipulates us through their ads and models that are boasted everywhere we see. I think this book would seriously benefit anyone who has either gone through or knows someone with an eating disorder, in that it sheds a new light on the topic.

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