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Today we are urged from all sides to slim down and shape up, to shed a few pounds or lose life-threatening stones. The media's relentless obsession with size may be perceived as a twenty-first-century phenomenon, but as award-winning historian Louise Foxcroft shows, we have been struggling with what to eat, when and how much, ever since the Greeks and the Romans first pinched an inch.

Meticulously researched, surprising and sometimes shocking, *Calories and Corsets* tells the epic story of our complicated relationship with food, the fashions and fads of body shape, and how cultural beliefs and social norms have changed over time. Combining research from medical journals, letters, articles and the dieting bestsellers we continue to devour (including one by an octogenarian Italian in the sixteenth century), Foxcroft reveals the extreme and often absurd lengths people will go to in order to achieve the perfect body, from eating carbolic soap to chewing every morsel hundreds of times to a tasteless pulp. This unique and witty history exposes the myths and anxieties that drive today's multi-billion pound dieting industry - and offers a welcome perspective on how we can be healthy and happy in our bodies.

Calories & Corsets: A History of Dieting Over 2,000 Years Details

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Starr says

2.5 stars. Well-researched. However, it felt like a list of historical events. Lacked depth of argument. Yeah, people have dieted for a long time. I needed more.

Dorotea says

I am interested in the subjects of health and dieting, so this book was very interesting to me. I somewhat expected a lighter read filled with more anecdotes, but this is actually a well-researched record on the historical development of dietary advice. The recount doesn't make it more boring or bland, I actually really enjoyed reading this book. It's funny to see how even diets have trends and come back periodically. Maybe someday we'll learn that all it takes it to eat real food, move regularly and sleep.

Chelsea Murray says

A very interesting (if sometimes dry) account of diets over 2000 years. It reads much more like a very long paper, and focuses on facts, but coming away from the book it's very clear how long the struggle with diets and body image has been going on.

Raquel says

Interesting and well-researched, with lots of great anecdotes. The organization was a little haphazard (and confusing), and there wasn't much analysis, but as I was reading this purely for research, I didn't mind.

noelle says

i'm actually somewhat surprised by how much i enjoyed this. i downloaded it on a whim thinking "this is probably going to suck but whatever!" and you know what? it didn't. it's a good, quick breakdown of history & ineffectiveness of yo-yo dieting. i do wish there had been a chapter on surgical weight-loss methods (lapband, lipo, etc.) & the fat acceptance movement (she actually did briefly mention it in the intro) but you can't have it all, i guess

David Persinger says

Ever wonder if the contemporary craze for fad diets is without precedent? Well, it isn't. Louise Foxcroft takes the reader on a tour of starvation diets, grapefruit diets, coffee diets, hair-raising exercise routines,

colonics, and slimming devices that Torquemada would adore that is, by turns, entertaining and frightening. Contemporary humanity is hardly unique in its obsession with slimming - as Foxcroft recounts in diet and exercise advice from the ancient Greeks through Dr. Adkins. I highly recommend this quick, entertaining read.

Caroline says

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

This book just goes to show the very truth of that statement. Two thousand years and mankind is still obsessed with weight, still obsessed with unattainable images of beauty, still desperate for fad diets and 'guaranteed' weight loss pills, lotions, clothing, equipment - particularly women, held hostage to societies fixated on ideal images of womanhood and yet blamed for their gullibility and desperate obsession to be thin, blamed for the fatness of men, blamed for the fatness of their children. Hell, just blamed in general. We're women, we're used to it.

Foxcroft gets on her soapbox a little bit on the last issue, but she's not wrong. This box exposes just how ridiculous all the press articles and political attention on the current 'obesity crisis' are. It's nothing new. About the only time in the last two or three hundred years there hasn't been an obesity crisis was during WW2, and I guess rationing and mass-starvation will do that. Hell, back in the 16th century critics was arguing that more people had died from fatness and overeating than from the plague. Quite a claim in the 16th century.

The tragic thing is how little we learn from history. Each new fad diet that comes along - Dukan, Hollywood, South Beach, Low-Carb, High-Carb, Low-Fat, High-Fat, Paleo - are all the same old story, repackaged for a new generation. What today we call the Atkins Diet was known in the early 1900s as the Salisbury Method, for example. And truly, if any of these diets really work, wouldn't the other fade away? If anyone truly came up with a fool-proof guaranteed weight-loss plan, well, they'd be shooting themselves in the foot, wouldn't they? Killing the golden goose. The diet industry is worth billions, to the press, to the quack doctors, to the advertising industry, the pharmaceutical industry, to fast-food and diet-food manufacturers, even the politicians who like to jump up and down about the issue.

Dieting is here to stay, Foxcroft argues, as long people are more concerned with image than health, as long as people want a quick fix, as long people want results without effort, as long as society forces a standardised image of female (and male) beauty that is utterly impossible for the vast majority of those who aspire to it, as long as we are gullible enough to believe what anyone with a flat stomach and an authoritative voice will tell us. People have been that way for two thousand years. I don't see it changing anytime soon.

Alison says

Obviously quite a lot of research was done for this book, but it was all presented in the driest possible. Sourced material hopped around quite a bit throughout geography and ages; I feel a little more organization and deeper analysis of attitudes and cultural norms would have made the subject matter more digestible.

Katherine says

Fascinating history of dieting

Great descriptions of dieting throughout the ages- explaining how the "trends" we see in dieting today are consistent throughout all of history.

Wendy Jackson says

I read this book as part of the thematic choice ("food politics") for my book club. The intention was to examine time-series data on the approach to food, dieting, and body shape, as opposed to reading one of the newer treatises that fall into the general category of food politics (of which I have read a few - "Fast Food Nation", "The Omnivore's Dilemma", "My Year of Meat", etc.). While my sense is that food politics (neuroses?) are getting worse with time, I wanted to test that against the actual facts.

My findings? People appear to have had issues with body shape and diets for millennia - at least since ancient Greek times. In terms of concrete information, the book starts from Hippocrates (c. 460-370 BCE), and progresses through the ages, referencing normative statements and views toward body shape and diets. Interestingly - but perhaps not surprisingly - many approaches surface again and again (e.g., low-carb, high fat). This provides me with some relief that people today are not especially fixated on these matters, and perhaps these matters are cyclical.

Elements of the book that I found difficult were the verbatim quotes - spanning centuries - with unabashedly body-shaming content. There are many, many of these quotes, which acutely illustrate how nasty and prescriptive society has been about body shape - and that of women in particular. I am conflicted as to whether the argument of the book is obfuscated by the sheer volume of these quotes, or if it is strengthened by their inclusion, which accurately reflects attitudes in general.

Jessi says

The subtitle of this book captures this book perfectly, it is a history of dieting. We learn about how and why people sought to lose weight (for example, Lord Byron thought it would make him stupid). It is also a look at how men have been judging women since time immemorial.

Jessy says

Interesting and very well-researched. Covers the history of dieting from the Greeks to present-day, but mostly focuses on the last 200 years. Mostly factual but at the same time amusing and terrifying, for example: "...the 3-Way Diet Program that rather worryingly claimed to 'LITERALLY MELT THE FAT OFF YOUR BODY LIKE A BLOWTORCH WOULD MELT BUTTER' "

Agnesxnitt says

Try as I might I just couldn't finish this book, which started so well, galloped along and then just gave up on me. or me on it - I'm not sure which. Perhaps I just found after a while that the author was trying to give me so many fascinating historical facts that I just became saturated with them all. An interesting read and I gave up about 2\3rds through but I don't regret reading it or nor finishing it either!

Barbara says

Interesting history of dieting and the extremes people go to to cure the "curse" of overweight, the final frontier of supposedly acceptable prejudice. Not much has really changed in the past 200 years or so.

Liralen says

Well, evidently diets haven't changed much over the centuries. Or—the details have, but there's ever an emphasis on quick fixes and the like...and fat-shaming. (Honestly, the book could have been subtitled *Fat-Shaming Through the Centuries.*)

Because of this repetition of fad after fad, the book itself felt a bit repetitive at times, although I think it was worth that repetition to see the way attitudes have and haven't changed. Sounds like there have always been some sensible voices championing moderation (although within that there are sort of mini-fads of what's considered healthy and what's not, as understanding of food/bodies has changed), but of course fad diets promise faster results, etc., etc.

Some entertainingly tongue-in-cheek moments here, though. Here's one doctor from the early 20th century: *Dieting, he continued, might sound harmless but, get this, 'a woman who is naturally sweet-tempered, good-natured, competent, can be transformed into a different person. She becomes petulant, unreasonable, and hard to get along with' and, again, might even end up as a lesbian (123).*
