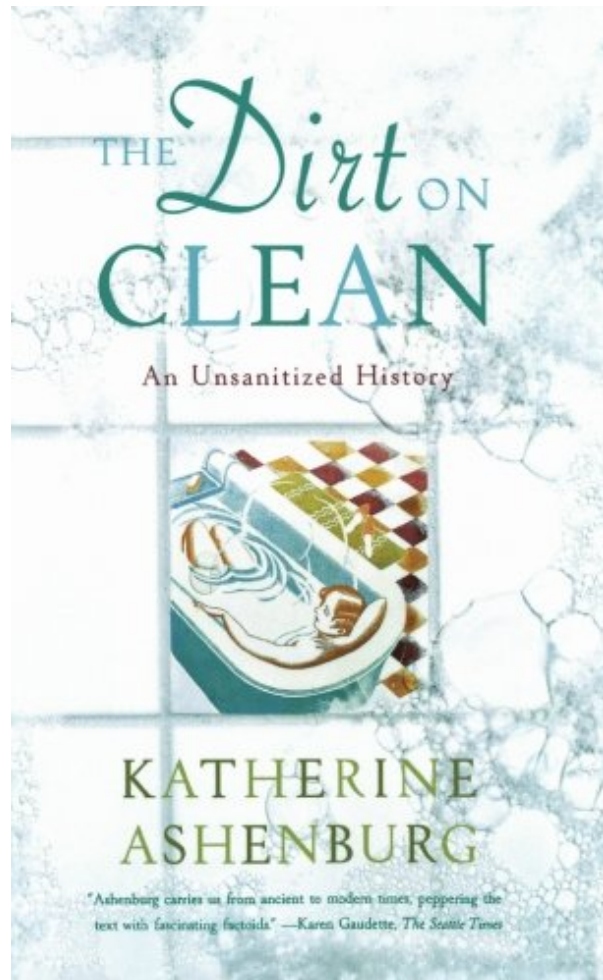
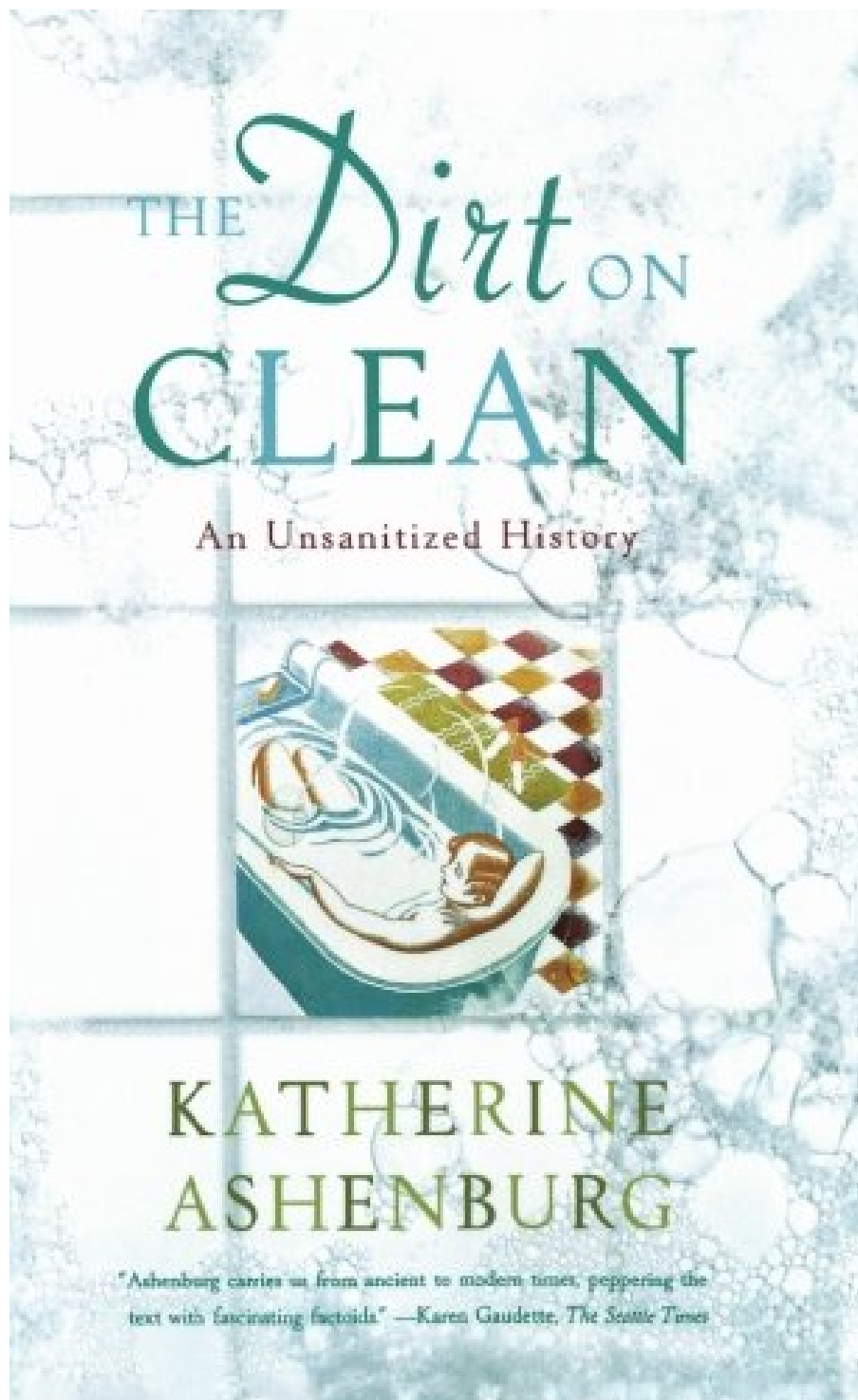


THE DIRT ON CLEAN: AN UNSANITIZED HISTORY BY KATHERINE ASHENBURG



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"Ashenburg carries us from ancient to modern times, peppering the text with fascinating factsoids" —Karen Gaudette, *The Seattle Times*

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From School Library Journal

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The question of cleanliness is one every age and culture has answered with confidence. For the first-century Roman, being clean meant a two-hour soak in baths of various temperatures, scraping the body with a miniature rake, and a final application of oil. For the aristocratic Frenchman in the seventeenth century, it meant changing your shirt once a day and perhaps going so far as to dip your hands in some water. Did Napoleon know something we didn't when he wrote to Josephine, "I will return in five days. Stop washing"? And why is the German term *Warmduscher*? a man who washes in warm or hot water? invariably a slight against his masculinity? Katherine Ashenburg takes on such fascinating questions as these in *The Dirt on Clean*, her charming tour of attitudes toward hygiene through time. An engrossing fusion of erudition and anecdote, *The Dirt on Clean* considers the bizarre prescriptions of history's doctors, the hygienic peccadilloes of great authors, and the historic twists and turns that have brought us to a place Ashenburg considers hedonistic yet oversanitized.

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A Sordid History

By Rob Hardy

Do you smell bad? If you are reading this, it's a sure thing that you are a resident of the 21st century, and it's probable that you also are a resident of a society that reinforces regular bathing and use of deodorizers, so the answer is probably no. But then, if you were living five hundred years ago, the answer would probably be no, too, although if we were somehow to time-machine someone from that time to our own, we would probably answer yes in his particular instance. Katherine Ashenburg says that cleanliness is relative, or in her words "clean is a moving target", in her surprising history of attitudes toward dirt and grooming, *The Dirt on Clean: An Unsanitized History* (North Point Press). In her introduction, she writes, "Even more than in the eye or the nose, cleanliness is in the mind of the beholder. Every culture defines it for itself, choosing what it sees as the perfect point between squalid and over-fastidious." She makes the point by citing cigarette smoke; only a few decades ago, airplanes and restaurants were full of it, and most people, even nonsmokers, hardly noticed, let alone complained. Now we pick up on the smell immediately and take offense. "The nose is adaptable and teachable," Ashenburg writes, and she backs up the assertion with plenty of historical evidence. Her book gives a peculiar social history, one not covered in most history books. It is wonderfully entertaining, even though much of it is uncomfortable reading, first because those other people were so much dirtier than ourselves and they didn't seem to mind it, and second because we have been sold by advertising on a hypercleanliness that is beyond anything that health or social fitness demands.

The Romans didn't use soap, though they liked soaking in public baths. The cleaning got done by oiling themselves up and using a special metal tool called a strigil to scrape off the oil and dirt. Social bathing was not something that fit into a Christian world view. "Many early saints embraced filth enthusiastically and ingeniously," says Ashenburg. The head of a convent in the fourth century warned her nuns, "A clean body

and a clean dress mean an unclean soul." The Spanish Inquisition knew it was on the right track if an accused was "known to bathe," and Spanish confessors would not absolve those who washed regularly. There was an eventual turnaround for cities in which visitors could take the waters. Going to a spa was medical therapy, but eventually bathing was once again for getting clean. Advice books told people how to take baths for the best effect. It was nineteenth century America that took the lead in promoting personal hygiene. Ashenburg cites several reasons why this might be so, including having more room for bathrooms and the cleaning lessons of soldiers in the Civil War. Eventually, mild soaps from vegetable sources (like palm and olive oil to make Palmolive, get it?) insinuated themselves into homes by means of advertising, a commercial endeavor about which Americans have always been enthusiastic.

The advertisers, however, were adept at creating and exploiting fears, subtly helping people to think "Everyone would like me more if I didn't smell bad." "Halitosis" was barely a medical term before Listerine let people know that their bad breath was keeping them from happy marriages and fine paychecks. Other firms harnessed women's fears to make a market for vaginal cleaners. Tooth whitening is now big business, even though dentists say the whiteners damage teeth and gums and anyway bright white is not the way healthy teeth naturally look. Our current level of fussing over bodily cleanliness does little for our mental security or our general health. Ashenburg notes at the end of the book that we have come full circle, for modern science from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has anointed simple handwashing as "the single most important means of preventing the spread of infection." Homeric heroes and medieval knights didn't have the science, but they knew that handwashing was a good practice. However, there is little basis for our jumping in with germicidal soaps, which are another aspect of our overcleaning mania. There are serious scientific proposals that cleaning up too much may mean that our immune systems don't get enough exercise to do their job efficiently. *The Dirt on Clean*, with plenty of humor, quotations from centuries of scrubbing or lack thereof, and many illustrations, shows that humans continue to bumble their way into hygiene, whatever the fashionable definition of that might turn out to be.

46 of 46 people found the following review helpful.

A super read.....

By Robert Busko

Katherine Ashenburg's *The Dirt on Clean: An Unsanitized History* is perhaps the best read in 2007. Ashenburg's sense of irony as she delves into the meaning of clean comes across clearly to the reader. I'm not sure Ashenburg intended to be as humorous as she is or whether this sense of irony is what drives the humor, but I found myself smiling throughout the book.

One of the biggest recommendations I can make is to those who teach marketing. It doesn't matter at what level, community college, junior college, or university. If you talk about advertising, product segmentation, target marketing, this is a must read.

I also enjoyed Ashenburg's idea that cleanliness is a moving target. Clean is, in fact, relative. My parents only bathed weekly, as did I and my brother. We're products of the 50's and the Saturday evening bath whether you needed it or not. This fact grosses out my two daughters, products of the 70's and 80's. Of course, they take their twice daily showers that last at least 20 minutes. The problem was so severe that the paint constantly peeled from the woodwork due to exposure to excessive moisture. The point being in just one generation, the definition of cleanliness has shifted and shifted radically.

The Dirt on Clean is loaded with examples pulled from throughout history. Much of western civilizations attitudes toward bathing is owed to our Arab brothers as is using a fork and washing of hands before eating. This is another ironic twist to me.

The Dirt on Clean will be an interesting read on any one who loves to watch our society evolve and change.

Highly recommended.

66 of 69 people found the following review helpful.

too clean

By Annabella

I'm a little disappointed in this book. It's ... too clean. It discusses in detail the number of bathhouses in different centuries, different countries - who cares? I wanted to know the dirty details of people's everyday lives. Some of the things I've always wondered about are - how did frontier pioneers keep eight babies in a succession clean without running water? What did women do during their periods when they didn't even wear underwear? Which creatures lived in Mme Pompadour's towering hair? What were the health effects on years of dirtiness - rashes? bad skin? What are the teeth like if they are not brushed for decades? How old were people when they started losing their teeth? What was used instead of toilet paper? How did the city streets smell when the chamber pots were emptied there? How did a complete lack of privacy in slums or on a trail affect relationships?

These were some of the things I was hoping to learn about, as they are not often discussed in history books. But none of these was described. This is an informative book (just wasn't for me).

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