



The Dirt on Clean: An Unsanitized History

By Katherine Ashenburg

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The Dirt on Clean: An Unsanitized History By Katherine Ashenburg

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 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 *Clean*, her charming tour of attitudes to hygiene through time.

What could be more routine than taking up soap and water and washing yourself? And yet cleanliness, or the lack of it, is intimately connected to ideas as large as spirituality and sexuality, and historical events that include plagues, the Civil War, and the discovery of germs. An engrossing fusion of erudition and anecdote, *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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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

According to Ashenburg (*The Mourner's Dance*), the Western notion of cleanliness is a complex cultural creation that is constantly evolving, from Homer's well-washed Odysseus, who bathes before and after each of his colorful journeys, to Shaw's Eliza Doolittle, who screams in terror during her first hot bath. The ancient Romans considered cleanliness a social virtue, and Jews practiced ritual purity laws involving immersion in water. Abandoning Jewish practice, early Christians viewed bathing as a form of hedonism; they embraced saints like Godric, who, to mortify the flesh, walked from England to Jerusalem without washing or changing his clothes. Yet the Crusaders imported communal Turkish baths to medieval Europe. From the 14th to 18th centuries, kings and peasants shunned water because they thought it spread bubonic plague, and Louis XIV cleaned up by donning a fresh linen shirt. Americans, writes Ashenburg, were as filthy as their European cousins before the Civil War, but the Union's success in controlling disease through hygiene convinced its citizens that cleanliness was progressive and patriotic. Brimming with lively anecdotes, this well-researched, smartly paced and endearing history of Western cleanliness holds a welcome mirror up to our intimate selves, revealing deep-seated desires and fears spanning 2000-plus years. 82 b&w illus. (Nov. 15)

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From School Library Journal

Adult/High School—This is a fascinating examination of the changing notions of what it means to be clean, and how those concepts fit into the worldview of different societies. The book is especially valuable for exploring the daily lives of people in past societies, but also for providing perspective on our attitudes toward ourselves, our bodies, and our world. It begins with the communal baths of the Greeks and Romans and explores the religious and ritual aspects of bathing, including Christian baptism. The public bath returned with the Crusaders, who brought the custom back to Europe in the form of the Turkish bath. With the plague and fears of communicable diseases, people avoided water—which they feared made the body vulnerable—in favor of linen cloth, which could be changed regularly, in lieu of bathing. Fear of immersing the body in water continued into the 20th century. Ashenburg, who uses interesting quotes from contemporaries to illustrate her history, speculates that in the future, when water shortages dictate new concepts of cleanliness, our own day may be seen as an age of excessive bathing and deodorizing.—*Tom Holmes, King Middle School, Berkeley, CA*

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Review

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