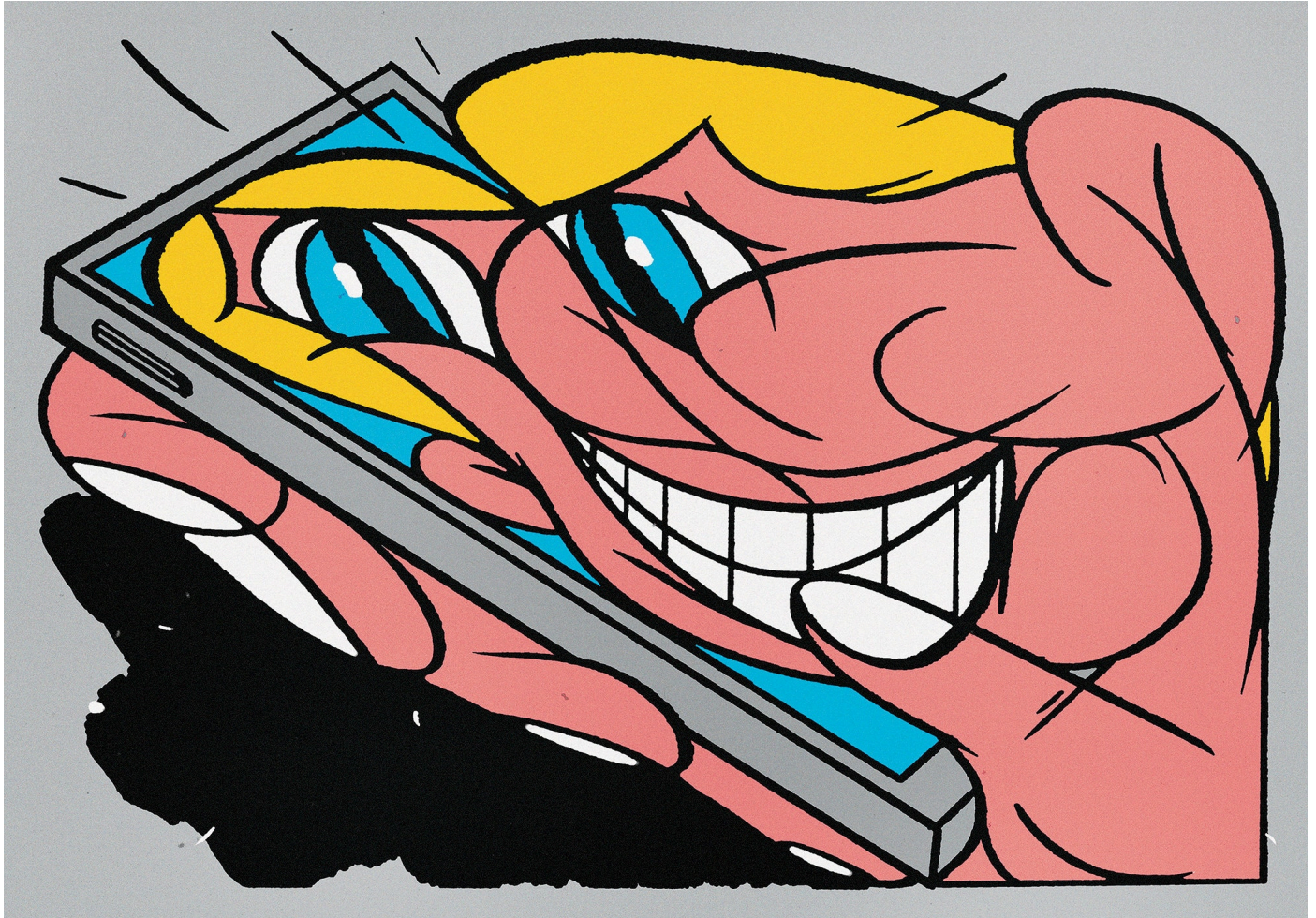


How We Got to Be So Self-Absorbed: The Long Story

By Anthony Gottlieb June 21, 2018

Nonfiction



Bráulio Amado

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SELFIE

How We Became So Self-Obsessed and What It's Doing to Us

By Will Storr

403 pp. The Overlook Press. \$29.95.

Worrying about one's own narcissism has a whiff of paradox. If we are suffering from self-obsession, should we really feed the disease by poring over another book about ourselves? Well, perhaps just one more.

“Selfie: How We Became So Self-Obsessed and What It’s Doing to Us,” by Will Storr, a British reporter and novelist, is an intriguing odyssey of self-discovery, in two senses. First, it tells a personal tale. Storr confesses to spending much of his time in a state of self-loathing and he would like to know why. On a quest to explore self-esteem and its opposite, he interviews all sorts of people, from CJ, a young American woman whose life revolves around snapping, processing and posting hundreds of thousands of selfies, to John, a vicious London gangster who repented of his selfish ways, possibly because of his mother’s prayers to St. Jude. Storr takes part in encounter groups in California, grills a Benedictine monk cloistered at Pluscarden Abbey in Scotland, and gets academic psychologists to chat frankly about their work. Storr’s side of the conversations he recounts tends to be blunt, inquisitive and peppered with salty British swearing. One comes to like him, even if he does not often like himself.

The book is also a quest to trace the idea of the self in Western thought. Starting with ancient Greek individualism and conceptions of the heroic, we progress through the “dourly introspective” Christian self, the contributions of “Sigi” (Freud) and some of his rival therapists, and on to ruminations by some recent neuroscientists and philosophers who suggest that the self, and its supposedly free will, are more or less a myth.

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Storr's main focus, though, is on some nostrums that emerged in the 1960s, especially from the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, Calif. Esalen was a sort of hub for the counterculture of its day. It was a home for what became known as the Human Potential Movement, which sold the idea that personal and societal ills can be remedied by unlacing the straitjackets of conventional religions and therapies to unleash the confident energies within us. All you need is love, especially of yourself. Storr suggests that the self-esteem fad, which went mainstream in the late 1980s and 1990s, evolved into the epidemic of digitally enhanced self-absorption from which we are said to suffer today.

Be that as it may, one fairly solid result to emerge from Storr's research is that the self-esteem boom was ignited by what amounts to a fraud. His account of its rise is a reminder of how easy it can be to mislead a willing public about scientific studies.

“An entertaining history of the self,
from Narcissus to Trump.” —*OBSERVER*

Selfie



How We Became So Self-Obsessed and What It's Doing to Us

WILL STORR

author of *The Unpersuadables*

OVERLOOK

In 1986, John Vasconcellos, a somewhat tortured California state assemblyman who had attended programs at Esalen, persuaded Gov. George Deukmejian to fund a “task force to promote self-esteem and personal and social responsibility.” Professors from the University of California were to study the links between self-esteem and healthy personal development. And California — nay, the world — could then design programs to nip homelessness, drug abuse and crime in the bud, by teaching people to value

themselves and achieve their potential. At first, the task force was ridiculed. It was lampooned in Garry Trudeau's "Doonesbury" cartoons: The character of Barbara Ann "Boopsie" Boopstein served on the task force, when not busy channeling one of her previous incarnations. Johnny Carson, The Wall Street Journal and many others joined in the fun.

All this bad publicity turned out to be useful, though. Everyone got to hear about the task force, so when the first findings of the California professors were announced in January 1989, it was big news. Newswires carried the story that impeccable academic research had found the correlations that the task force wanted: Low self-esteem was linked to social problems. Word got around that the data was in, and that those flaky Californians had been proved right.

The task force's final report in 1990 was endorsed by Oprah Winfrey and Bill Clinton, among many others. In 1992, a Gallup Poll found that 89 percent of Americans regarded self-esteem as "very important" for success in life, and schools in America and Britain were soon busy trying to instill it.

But actually the flaky Californians had not been proved right. The academic research found some correlations, but no solid evidence of causes: Alcohol abuse, for example, might cause low self-esteem rather than the other way around. Because Vasconcellos was chairman of the State Assembly's Ways and Means Committee, he was in a position to make life difficult for the University of California. It seems that the professors responsible for the research did not want to make trouble by pointing out that their work was being misrepresented by the task force's publicists. Perhaps those involved in the deception had too much self-esteem to be ashamed of what they had done.

There was always a dark side to the Human Potential Movement. If a positive

attitude and a sense of self-worth are what matters for success, then failure is always your own fault. Storr argues that this uncompassionate edge of self-esteem dovetails with the economic ideas of Ayn Rand and the competitive individualism of her followers in neoliberal politics. Rand's acolyte and onetime lover, Nathaniel Branden, worked closely with the task force, and was the author of the best-selling "The Psychology of Self-Esteem." As Storr colorfully puts it, the self-esteem craze was "a rapturous copulation of the ideas of Ayn Rand, Esalen and the neoliberals."

The "lie at the heart of the age of perfectionism," according to Storr, is that "we can be anything we want to be." At the end of his quest, he decides that we should stop trying to change ourselves and focus instead on worthwhile ways to change the world. Nowhere in his account of Western ideas of the self does he mention Rousseau. This is quite an omission, since Rousseau was not only the first thinker to examine self-esteem in depth but also ended up with conclusions that are similar to Storr's.

Rousseau distinguished two forms of self-love, *amour de soi* and *amour-propre*. The former is a natural desire for self-preservation, and is always wholesome. The latter arises from society, has to do with our relations to others, and comes in both good and bad forms. Like the California task force, Rousseau thought that *amour-propre* was a necessary ingredient of amity and a fulfilled life, though he was also keenly aware of the destructive vanity to which it could give rise. Vanity gives "value to that which is valueless," whereas pride, a good form of *amour-propre*, "consists in deriving self-esteem from truly estimable goods." In other words: If you want self-esteem, earn it.

Anthony Gottlieb is a fellow of All Souls College, Oxford. His most recent book is "The Dream of Enlightenment: The Rise of Modern Philosophy."

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