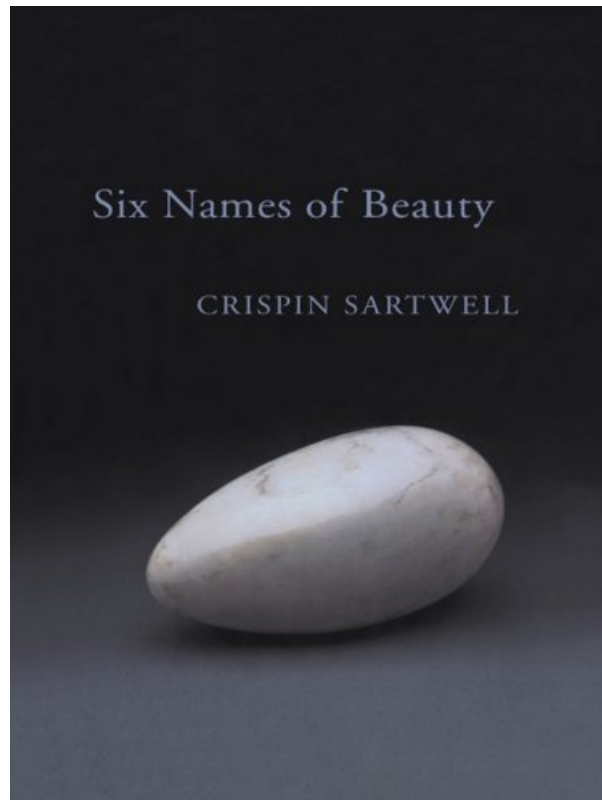


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Review

Crispin Sartwell has written a classic book on experiencing the world aesthetically. It is rich with real examples and personal knowledge of the way each of the six names of beauty discloses a different mode of beauty's meaning in human life. The book has the clarity and acuity of philosophy at its best, without jargon or dogma or the kind of heaviness that typically weighs down the discussion of what should be marvelous to think about. I enjoyed it greatly, and would recommend it as an antidote to those that believe aesthetics is marginal or minor, and a treat for those who realize that beauty is what gives value to life at its best.

—Arthur C. Danto, Johnsonian Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Columbia University, and author of *The Abuse of Beauty*

Crispin Sartwell not only speaks with a fresh and distinctive voice, he says fresh and distinctive things. Pursuing the word for beauty through six different cultures, Sartwell illuminates its richness and breadth through a multitude of fascinating meditations that range from the fine arts to the popular ones: from rock to reggae, fireworks and perfume to Grünewald and Brueghel, from Plato and Frege to Emerson and Confucius. Sartwell's commentaries are perceptive and often profound but never pretentious, and his personal, informal style is engaging. This book will fascinate the reader who delights in curious but illuminating observations that extend from everyday life and popular culture to philosophy and the insights of non-Western traditions.

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Most helpful customer reviews

10 of 11 people found the following review helpful.

A Worthy Little Book

By Slowdown

Lovely and enjoyable and illuminating book, with chapters on six different names and conceptions of beauty.

However, to experience its merits you must clear away some obstacles. This is not a scholarly book, so do not expect it to be one or you will see only its faults. It is not even a collection of essays. The book is written in a very personal voice, and it is more conversational than anything else, with the stance and tone changing the way it might in a conversation. Sartwell also writes in a more unrestrained way than most, and although the two are quite different in other respects, in this he reminds me of the critic David Hickey.

The rewards of this book are not meager. Sartwell talks us through Greek, Hebrew, Sanskrit, Japanese, Navajo, and English names for beauty. His running commentary is full of surprising connections and juxtapositions, often taken from his own life. Although he differentiates the different approaches to beauty, his own mind is strongly synthetic, and there is an underlying conviction, supported in his examples, that these different beauties are all active in our experience in some way. This is one significant difference between contemporary scholarship, in which magnifying differences is a primary (and sometimes sole) merit, and Sartwell's writing, which differentiates in order to magnify relatively neglected and diminutive dimensions of (at least potentially) common experience.

The upshot was that Sartwell actually helped me to differentiate some aspects of beauty that I had conflated -and to enjoy them more.

14 of 17 people found the following review helpful.

Revealing the Known

By Edward

Impressive in so many ways: a clear focus that is simple yet profound and important. What a clear entry into a lively, elegant and learned discourse: six words in six languages and cultures for beauty. And what a delightful ride on a high-wire intellectual strand in Crispin Sartwell's facile and eclectic mind...it is a delight to share in his vast learning...and to be spoken to in crisp, contemporary language. The meaning of beauty is in our reaction to it, and the opportunity to share in Sartwell's reactions is an aesthetic holiday.

27 of 40 people found the following review helpful.

Be sure to browse before you buy

By Bob Fancher

You may find this to your liking, but I wish I hadn't wasted my money. I tried for a couple of hours to get into this, but I simply could not read it.

Not that it's hard to understand. Quite the contrary. But I found it precious, affected, and silly. Not to mention self-indulgent. Other than that, though . . .

Sartwell defines beauty as "the object of longing." He tells us he is "less concerned to defend that as a definition than to use it as a basis for trying to find something common to certain kinds of human experiences and relations to things." Since we long for many things that are not beautiful, and commonalities

between experiences and objects of longing may therefore have little to do with beauty, I find this approach less than promising.

And indeed, Sartwell stretches the idea of beauty beyond any normal meaning, and he makes it useless as a category of discernment. For instance, Picasso's Guernica is not-and is not supposed to be-beautiful. It's a horror, and in its horror lies its grandeur-it's supposed to horrify us. To call it beautiful because it illustrates the satisfaction of the longing for power is to corrupt the term "beauty" and miss the point of the artwork.

As for the self-indulgence, Sartwell has merely collected snippets of his reflections. He says this is "a book of moments, and can be dipped into rather than read straight through, though I also hope that the accumulation of moments displays a kind of structure that could yield a coherent set of experiences." Well, if you invite someone to dip into your moments, you'd better be a genius, if they are to find such visits worthwhile. Sartwell isn't. One wonders whether he didn't bother to use his many moments to generate a coherent set of thoughts because that task was beyond him, or because he just couldn't be bothered. Either way, Sartwell's belief that his fragments of reflection are worth our while betrays a self-confidence that the twenty-five pages or so I pondered do not justify.

And frankly, you have to puzzle over the perceptiveness of anyone anyone who refers to "the beauty of Jennifer Lopez" as "the skinniest common denominator of nubile beauty."

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