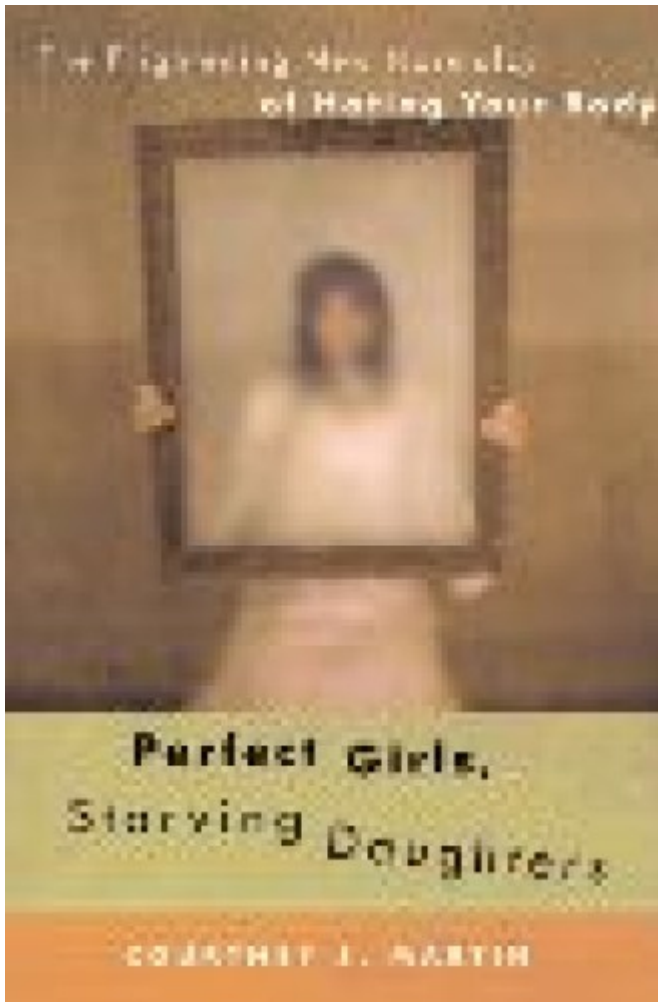


Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters

reviewed by [Shelli Yoder](#) in the [January 15, 2008](#) issue

In Review



Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters: The Frightening New Normalcy of Hating Your Body

Courtney E. Martin
Free Press

Most of us are sick and tired of hearing about eating disorders and the girls who obsess over food and fitness. It's impossible to purchase a sack of groceries without passing a magazine asking which celebrities are anorexic while offering to help you shed seven pounds in seven days. We internalize these messages and images and move along, rarely contemplating how such magazines create and reflect our culture.

In *Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters*, 25-year-old writer, filmmaker and teacher Courtney Martin spends no time trying to convince us to care. She doesn't have to. The statistics speak for themselves: 11 million Americans (and 70 million people worldwide) suffer from eating disorders, which have the highest mortality rate of any psychological disease; furthermore, fear of being overweight is the most common motivator for teenage girls considering suicide.

This disease does not affect only teenagers, and certainly not only rich, white adolescent girls. Hispanic, Asian American and Native American girls also report concern over the size of their bodies, and they engage in eating disorder-like behavior at least as much as their white peers do. Moreover, the number of middle-aged women seeking treatment for eating disorders has recently increased by 400 percent.

Despite the arduous work of first- and second-wave feminists and the continuing efforts of today's third-wave contingent, body hatred, obsession with weight and exercise, and a destructive self-identity are the new rites of passage for girls emerging into womanhood. Detailing this journey, Martin beautifully builds on Joan Jacobs Brumberg's 1998 book *The Body Project*. Brumberg argues that women and girls are too often seen as unfinished business, as not enough, as lacking in some (typically) physical dimension. The dominant cultural messages say that our worth lies in our willingness to be tweaked, tuned up, changed, improved and nipped and tucked.

Of course, this emphasis on the female body is rooted in the pervasive message that girls are objects of pleasure to be enjoyed and gifts to be given. Consider the common phrase "She's the total package." Not only are such messages demoralizing and demeaning, they encourage girls down a path where, as Martin suggests, there is never enough: never enough accomplishment, never enough control, never enough perfection. Hence our "perfect" girls are our starving

daughters.

Martin brilliantly and convincingly gives faces to statistics that overwhelm. Writing from a raw and vulnerable vantage point, relating her own history with disordered eating tendencies and an insatiable drive toward perfection, she moves the evidence of research from our heads to our hearts. Amplifying Martin's fresh and profoundly honest voice are the voices of the hundreds of girls she interviewed for this project. Perhaps for the first time since Sara Shandler's *Ophelia Speaks*, we hear from girls about girls.

When body hatred becomes normal, girls begin to expect and demand it of their peers. It becomes a community identifier, an element of girl-bonding. A girl without a certain amount of body hatred risks being ostracized or called a bitch or someone who "thinks she's all that." When questions of identity are coupled with body shame, warped self-image and disordered eating behaviors soon follow.

It's not easy to wrap one's mind around the notion that a girl could have a pathological fear of fat so severe that she runs hard enough to break her feet—and then continues running. Who can relate to the girl who holds her breath when she smells food until she passes out because she fears the aroma alone will put pounds on her? Well, I can. I know firsthand. I survived anorexia, and now I work in the field of eating disorders.

People often tell me that they could never do what I do. Such confessions of inability are not about the daily challenges of running a nonprofit organization. Rather, it is difficult for them to show compassion toward people who suffer from an illness they do not understand. A reaction that Martin recounts and that I have personally heard goes something like this: "It makes me sick to see really skinny girls. I don't understand why they do this to themselves. It is a disease, I know. But it is hard to feel sorry for them. I want to say to them, 'Just eat already!'"

It is tempting to roll our eyes and think that there are bigger, more important problems to solve. Spending a second of our busy lives on a girl's obsession with her thighs while we are in the middle of an unjustified war, a burgeoning immigration debacle and a global ecological crisis seems like a waste of our collective time. Our uninformed instincts suggest that the obsession that leads to anorexia or the need for control that leads to bulimia is the fault of the person with the disease. Such blame, however, ignores the role played by our culture and our communities.

The Christian belief that we are made in the image of God has power to reframe our understanding. Use of female imagery for the Divine—not just on special occasions but on an everyday basis—has particular potential to curb culturally induced body hatred among women and girls because it can encourage them to believe that they are indeed fearfully and wonderfully made.

We must refuse to be silent about body hatred; we must address it from the pulpit and during Sunday school, Bible studies and fellowship hours. As Martin points out, “For an adolescent, an adult’s inaction is an action. Silence is speech.” While we take a stand against body hatred, we can also learn to speak kindly about our own bodies. When we verbalize the amazing ways our bodies show up for us each day and refuse to criticize our own and others’ appearance, we can be a conduit of change, honoring the image of God in ourselves and others.

Courtney Martin’s fresh and profoundly honest perspective is a clarion call to help women and girls understand their bodies in relation to the *imago Dei* and to give them the love and support they need as they journey toward health and wholeness.