

The new voice of naturals rising in the bookshelves: a movement you should be aware of

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“As painful and humiliating as it is to be a human, being subhuman or superhuman is far worse.” (Samuel Wilson Fussell)

Natural bodybuilders constantly face defending their choice to be drugfree. At the same time, they are faced with a glut of images in the media depicting seemingly happy, healthy, obviously drug-enhanced builders with results. There is a quiet but forceful new movement growing in books and other media, a rising body of work poignantly depicting the dangers of drug and steroid use in bodybuilding in very real and personal terms.

Natural bodybuilding can be extremely healthy when done right. But the line between natural and unnatural is always there, and once tempted builders succumb into a Faustian deal for faster, unnatural results, resorting to illegal and questionable drug, insulin and hormone supplementation, there is a price to pay. Since it can be difficult to find good information about the consequences, exploring them vicariously through someone else’s story can be immensely valuable. We do not have to make mistakes in order to learn. We can learn from others, when they are brave enough to offer their confessions. These books educate, entertain and bolster the choice to be natural.

Most books and films about bodybuilding are published and distributed by those with a vested marketing interest in the sport, so such exposes are not written with the support of the Daddy Warbucks of the industry. Writing them is risky. Samuel Fussell writes, "Although the following account is true, the names of certain persons and places have been changed in the interest of preserving their anonymity and protecting my own life." Even works labeled unequivocally as fiction find friction. Feisty pro bodybuilder Lisa Bavington represents many when she says Chemical Pink is “a gross misrepresentation of female bodybuilders, touted as fiction, represented as truth.” Criticism often stems from builders in the pro-drug camp who feel that if authors are representing them, they should do so a certain way. But these are not unauthorized biographies, documentaries, nor are they public service messages from the government. They are personal creations in the art of writing, therefore no one has a right to their content but their authors.

THE BOOKS

This body of literature is in its infancy, but it is healthy and growing. Note the rapid succession of recent publication years.

- Samuel Wilson Fussell's Muscle: Confessions of an Unlikely Bodybuilder, in its third edition since 2001. This very well-written expose is billed as a true story. His publisher says it perfectly: This is the harrowing, often hilarious chronicle of Fussell's divine obsession, his search for identity in a bizarre, eccentric world of "health fascists," "gym bunnies" and "muscleheads"- and his devout, single-minded acceptance of illness, pain, nausea, and steroid-induced rage in his quest for the holy grail of physical perfection.
- The Los Angeles Times bestseller Chemical Pink (2002) by Katie Arnoldi is a controversial story written in the tradition of Gonzo Journalism. The female version of Fussell's expose, this is the expose of a drug-enhanced bodybuilder's rise to the top, including the sordid sexual lifestyle she agrees to in return for her sponsor's financial support. Crisply written, this fictitious tale gives graphic insight into the sordid underbelly of the sport gone wrong.
- Kristin Kaye's Iron Maidens: The Celebration of the Most Awesome Female Muscle in the World, was just published in September, 2005. This is arguably the most solid and up-to-date overview of female bodybuilding history, controversies, and seedy underbelly, including the bizarre underworld of private female wrestling that supplements many professional builders' incomes. There is a whole chapter entitled, "What it's like to take steroids."
- Gorilla Suit (1997) is the autobiography of Bob Paris, the first openly gay Mr. Universe. It is particularly significant because it was the first major expose on the politics, policies and procedures of the flawed capitalist megalomaniac structure of professional bodybuilding, and what is expected of its stars.
- Achilles' Choice (1991) is futuristic science fiction co-authored by Larry Niven and Steven Barnes. The theme behind the plot is the ethical dilemma of natural strength vs. synthetic enhancement. A female athlete bucks the trend and goes head-to-head against her souped-up competitors. Thought this setting is not bodybuilding, it certainly speaks to it.

This list is particular. There are other well-known books considered essential reads in the field, but these do not hit the seediness of the sport gone wrong. Autobiographies like Arnold, the Education of a Bodybuilder read more like propaganda than truth, omitting any discussion of drugs, steroids and insulin. "Maybe American builders had better drugs," Schwarzenegger muses, in his only mention of drugs in his book. Conversely, Paris spends pages describing how friends of his buckled and died from the sport, Arnoldi shows us Aurora's deteriorating mental state inside her steroid-inflated body over the course of her book, Fussell devotes a chapter to the horrific effects of his macabre competition diet, Kaye presents a pro who quit competing for fear of "turning into something that was a cross between a man and a woman," and all draw attention to associated skin afflictions (acne, boils) and emotional fall-out, Schwarzenegger blithely speaks of the roar of the audiences and his certain victories.

TRANSFORMATION: The JUICE

We'll call them "survivor stories." The survivor stories are appealing on two fronts - they are exposes and stories of extreme transformation. Not only are the protagonists undergoing physical transformation, they undergo transformations on the deepest levels of their characters. The fascinating paradox is that while the physical transformations are those they intend, the changes to their character and perspective are out of their control and surprise even themselves. These books are overshadowed with doom yet delivered with black humor, so reading them is a sensation between a thriller and watching a wicked, ruthless comedy.

The engrossing part of these books is the horror in the descriptions of the sordid underbelly beneath physical transformation - the drug use, the hormones, extreme dieting and exercise. And they are all delivered with shock and style; when Aurora suddenly feels ill and her sponsor tells her it's because she missed a meal after an insulin injection and could die, and later that she cannot quit her steroid cycle because she could permanently damage her metabolism, the reader's own heart skips a beat.

The shocking and fascinating passages of these works are designed to do something - lift the reader by his lapels and shake a moral reaction out of him. It is the unified voice of a child in a strange new world, hardly believing his eyes and begging for the world to see the amazing things he sees – both compelling and dark.

Fussell describes the effects of the extreme diet and drug regimen during prep week,

By Wednesday, the decrease of carbohydrates left me with so little energy that I stopped training altogether. No longer was the gym the focus of my life. Now it was the sofa. After I rose each morning, I lingered over my abbreviated breakfast, then weaved my way to the sofa,

where I spent the remainder of the day, hallucinating and sleeping. Vinnie and Nimrod and Bamm Bamm to make me practice my posing, but I was far too weak. Even standing was excruciatingly painful. The soles of my feet, without their padding of fat, couldn't take my body weight. (216)

Paris describes serious cramping brought on by dehydration and mineral depletion:

While driving home along the Santa Monica Freeway, a bolt of lightning hit me as my abdominal muscles suddenly and unexpectedly cramped up so hard they turned inside out on themselves. It seemed that muscles were going to rip away from the bone. Unbearable pain volted through me as I straightened up to stretch my abs, only to have my lower back seize up just as tight. Rod, my boyfriend. . . . started to cry because I was in such obviously intense pain and he didn't know what to do. "Water and salt," I tried to tell him through clenched teeth. I gotta get some water and salt. (84)

Arnoldi's Aurora begins to hit bottom on her drug cycle when her body suddenly inflates like an overweight sedentary person's, a true nightmare for any bodybuilder.

She hated this body and she hated what they'd done to her. "I feel sick all the time, I'm never hungry. I'm always tired. Forget it." . . . "Look at what you've done to my," she said to Hendrik, her voice hard and even. She could kill him now if she had a weapon. "You're turning me into a freak." . . . Charles put his hands on Aurora's shoulders and looked into her eyes. "If you stop this now your metabolism will be ruined, maybe for the rest of your life. You can't just walk away." He dropped his hands to his sides. "This is a twenty-four week program and you're too far into it now. You can't stop." Aurora started to cry. She wiped the tears with her pudgy, swollen fingers and tried to control herself, but soon the sobbing racked her body and she stood shaking in her misery. (Arnoldi 146-147)

It is a matter of life and death. Paris walks us through the death of Mohammed Benaziza, a competitor whose autopsy showed that the overuse of diuretics caused his death. He describes the wakening of many competitors to the dangers of bodybuilding alchemy as they watch veteran competitor Harold Struther's two near-death experiences during contests, which sent him into convulsions and unrelievable head-to-toe body cramps from severe diabetic shock, caused by overmanipulating his insulin levels.

Paris hones some of his brightest writing in the fevered passages where he drives this point home.

Renel Javier did succeed in winning his light-heavyweight class at the 1988 NPC USA Championships, but the price was severe. In prejudging,

thanks to the rigors of his diet, he fainted. Carted off in an ambulance and hooked to an IV through the course of the day at a local hospital, he returned, still sliced and diced, to win his class that night. . . . Death has come to more than one bodybuilder seeking the ultimate “shrink-wrap” diet, and, in 1988, it nearly claimed IFBB pro Albert Beckles. On the European Grand Prix circuit, Beckles ended up convulsing on the floor of a bodybuilding banquet in Munich, Germany. The sauna, the diuretics, the denial of sufficient food and even water – all took their toll. (215).

These passages are riveting because they are so unusual and extreme, and because they are key to all the transformations the characters are undergoing. Like the Phoenix, they are consumed entirely, and rising from the ashes springs the roc - a transformation that leaves nothing of the old self behind. Their bodies change from each injection, but the characters also must reckon each instance by altering their conscience and perspective.

The psychological transformations are just as engrossing as the physical. All of them understand their transformations on some level, but not on all levels.

While Aurora and Fussell succeed in changing their bodies, their old relationships deteriorate. Aurora does not notice until it is too late that her daughter Amy is involved with a potentially dangerous man, and then reacts so fiercely that she indirectly causes his death, completely alienating an already estranged Amy. Because of Aurora’s obsessive bodybuilding, her daughter Amy suffers so keenly from neglect in their new California home that Aurora doesn’t even object Amy is taken away from her.

Colleene Colley tells Kaye how much more aggressive she feels with testosterone in her system. “Women are usually so guilt-ridden and worried about fairness, and society tries to write that off as being weaker. We aren’t weaker. We’re just negotiating our emotions better. Whereas on testosterone you’re not dealing with emotions so much. You’re just taking action.”

All of the characters in the books definitely take action when they’re “juiced up” – and from the descriptions, it’s a wonder they didn’t end up in jail.

Fussell writes, “My transformation was complete, outside and in. The builder persona was no longer a role – it was actually me.” When his father no longer speaks to him, Fussell’s mother visits in a final effort to bring him back into the fold, and is anguished to find her son has completely changed. We know this a significant moment; Fussell writes, “I had done my job well. My own mother was crying on my breast and I didn’t feel a thing. There wasn’t a chink in my armament.”

Fussell turns around at the end of his adventure and sees his academic career path, his relationships with his parents and friends, and even his homestate literally thousands of miles away. Aurora finally revolts by attacking her sponsor in a brutal scene and walking out the door, symbolically leaving all that he represented forever.

Sublime is the quest for a transcendence of limits. To an extent, these are classic hero tales. Like Achilles, their pride leads to their downfall. Greatness is the common goal of all the protagonists, as is it the goal most casually

acknowledged by bodybuilder in real life: to be great is to develop one's body to perfection and win at competitions. That is why the survivor stories appeal: at their simplest, they are stories of people overcoming obstacles in their lives to rise to greatness in their chosen field. The survivors are blinded for a time, but they are succeeding, and seem to be getting so close to greatness that we can only watch, as passengers on a roller coaster gripping the edges of the car, wondering whether the ride will be worth it or whether we'll crash to death at any instant.

The reason that these mostly horrible stories are ultimately inspirational is because the heroes overcome their tragic, fatal flaw. They have gone to hell and come back, stronger than ever, to fight the good fight, and we can all take heart in their righteous humbling, human triumph.