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Reading Group Guide

# BEAUTY

A novel by

BRIAN D'AMATO

## A CONVERSATION WITH BRIAN D'AMATO

*It's been twenty years since Beauty was first published. What was it like to revisit Beauty after all these years? With the expansion of the cosmetic surgery industry, do you feel Beauty is more relevant today?*

It's like watching a tree grow. The Cosmetic Surgery Tree was like a sapling in 1992, and now it's a very big and visible tree indeed. It doesn't look like the tree is going to fall down anytime soon—but what with “surgery” moving to the genetic level, and with commercial “art” becoming more and more a subindustry of user-response marketing, the tree is now changing shape in radical and unpredictable ways.

*What inspired you to write Beauty? How did you come up with the idea of an operation that changes a person's face entirely?*

Well, this brings up kind of a vexed issue. When the book first came out, my editor wanted to call it “a contemporary *Frankenstein*” on the flap copy. I dug my heels in and said no because when you say “Frankenstein” people think of that ridiculous (although great) Jack Pierce flattop crème-de-menthe makeup job

on Boris Karloff and Fred Gwynne. But of course Mary Shelley did pretty much make the idea possible, and I've been a big fan of hers since I was a preteen—not just of *Frankenstein* but of *The Last Man* and other stories that basically created science fiction.

*Jamie is such a wonderfully unique (and sometimes disturbing) character. How did you construct him? Who were your influences in creating his voice?*

*Lolita* was my *Harry Potter* when I was eleven or so, and so for me Humbert Humbert set the pattern for the unreliable or self-deluding first-person narrative voice. But of course that device goes back a long way before Nabokov, Thackeray's *Barry Lyndon* being a prime example. And then of course all writers today who use a candid and anti-authoritarian voice owe something to the voice of Holden Caulfield—whether or not they really care for Salinger on principle. Other than that, I think one basically allows one's worst characteristics to take over and gets them down as unvarnishedly as possible.

*You worked primarily as an artist before you wrote Beauty. You have had sculptures and installations at galleries and museums, including the Whitney Museum, the Wexner Center for the Arts, and the New Museum of Contemporary Art. How did your experience as an artist and your conception of art and the art world influence Beauty? Are Jamie's musings and interpretations of art and the art world reflections of your own?*

My visual work was just starting to get shown at the time I wrote *Beauty*, and I still had a day job—well, more of a very-late-morning-to-well-into-the-night job—working for the art deal-

ers Leo Castelli and Larry Gagosian, at a gallery they owned together in SoHo. I was amazed at the time by how much money was involved, and what lengths artists could get people to go to—in creating elaborate installations, for instance. Richard Serra could basically make the world come to a halt for a while to get his sculptures into position. I was also thinking a lot about something my mentor in art history, Robert Pincus-Witten, had said about the avant-garde—that, so far as he knew, in order to be radical a new work of art had to be ugly. I’m still not entirely sure this is true, but it seems true. It also seemed at the time that most large moves in traditional painting or sculptural media had been made, and that to be formally radical, art would have to move into the new interactive media that were just coming out. And even though I still do paintings and ink drawings and whatever, this also still seems true to me. In *Beauty*, of course, the medium becomes real living tissue—something that’s still in its infancy, but definitely a reality. There are several “imaginary” art works in *Beauty* that reflect or parody these developments.

Right now I’m working on a fairly long animated video that’s directly related to *Beauty*, the novel. It’s something I’ve been visualizing for a long time but I’ve just lately gotten the technical pieces in place to finish it.

*What is your conception of “beauty”? Have your thoughts on “beauty” and on art changed since you wrote Beauty?*

One conflict that was big at the time, and which is if anything bigger now, is “you say nature, and I say nurture.” Beauty, especially the beauty of a human face or body, is not, as many well-intentioned people would have it, an entirely culturally determined concept. This was obviously ridiculous even in 1992.

One can handwave at Surma Ethiopian lip plates all day, but the fact is that even those girls, labrets aside, look quite mainstreamly lissome, alluring, and hot to trot. In the game of displaying one's reproductive fitness, there are—unfortunately for many—universals. Today they usually call this issue “evolutionary psychology,” and there's a whole cottage industry of lite-science e-journalism reassuring people that it's not really so bad, that culture can still count for a lot, and so on. In *Beauty* I tried to look as steadily as possible at the unfairness without making up self-esteem fantasies.

So my guess—and it's always a guess—as to what beauty is hasn't changed much, unless you count the fact that beauty is always shifting, a little off to the edge, unmarkdownable and unmeasurable. And the explosion of information and interactive technology has just made this so much clearer... but for that matter, the very first scene in *Beauty* happens on a computer, so it was clear even then that the monster was already slouching toward Babylon-on-the-Hudson.

*Beauty is filled with references and musings on pre-Columbian art and culture and your more recent work (In the Courts of the Sun and The Sacrifice Game) even takes place in ancient Maya. What sparked your interest in pre-Columbia? How is pre-Columbian culture relevant to today's world?*

It's great to be asked about this. The pre-Columbian civilizations are as distinct from, and as uninfluenced by, the old world as it is possible to get. What started me in on them was the stylization in their artwork—how it had, maybe, a different focus for its beauty, but not an entirely different conception of beauty. One comes for the differences and stays for the universals. The

Maya did a lot of cosmetic surgery, including cranial deformation that had an almost Greek effect, eliminating the cleft between the nasal bones and the glabella. And of course the Maya are very interested in time, and the process in *Beauty* intends to stop time.

*If you had to pick one favorite scene or moment from Beauty, what would it be?*

Stephen King said the scariest parts of a scary book are when you first just begin to feel that something might be going a little bit flaky. I have to agree. So, for instance, when Jamie sees Penny Penn on *Letterman* and thinks she doesn't look quite the same, but can't tell how, that's one of the fulcra of the novel. It's the little things that you almost don't notice at the time—the clues, if it were a mystery novel—that really make the narrative.

*Your mother, Barbara D'Amato, is a mystery novelist and Beauty is dedicated to her. How has she been an influence on your writing?*

One evening I was in the Castelli/Gagosian space without much to do, and I was on the phone with Mom and telling her how I'd been writing down all this crazy art-world dialogue on Post-its, and how I now had enough of it to use as a verbal setting for a novel. And I said I wanted to do something about art but, just because it was me, something creepy. She said, "What about a story about plastic surgery?" and it took me about six seconds to figure out the basic shape of the novel.

So, Mom really came up with the initial idea. Her own work is often very much in the tradition of Agatha Christie, and over the years she impressed on me how fair Christie is to the reader—she never has a clue come out of nowhere at the end.

Mom is a very professional writer who comes out with a book at least every couple of years, and I never felt that I could be that professional. I'm more of a dilettante, I hope in a good sense, but still a dilettante. It sounds more than a bit pretentious, but when I'm feeling smug I say that I'm using fiction as one component of a cross-media investigation.

I think that people who have a parent who writes—and my dad also writes a lot of books, on philosophy and law—naturally have a foot in the door, but even more important they know two things about getting books out: first, that it's possible, and second, that it isn't quick or easy.

*After Beauty was published in 1992, you did not publish another novel until In the Courts of the Sun in 2009. Why did you turn away from writing novels and why did you return to it after such a long period of time?*

Actually I started working on my Maya trilogy a few months before *Beauty* came out. I thought I'd be done with the project in three years but instead it took around twenty. Maya civilization had depths that I hadn't known were there, and I kept going on trips through Central America or reading up on their hieroglyphics or whatever. And then I didn't want the novels to read like term papers, so eventually I cut out a lot of the most research-heavy passages. Still, I think you can feel that there's research there, as a kind of underpainting. Also I was doing other things at the same time, like writing a computer column for *Artforum*. And the Softworlds collective put together our largest interactive installation, at the Wexner Center in Columbus, Ohio, in 1994. And naturally I do a lot of tinkering with visual art and game models, some related to the novels and some not. For this next

year I'm planning to focus on visual and interactive work while the third Maya novel is simmering on the back cortex.

*You've said elsewhere that "the novel is a nineteenth-century achievement." Could you elaborate on this? What does this mean for you as a writer in the twenty-first century?*

Actually those exact words belong to my mentor in the field of art criticism and history, Robert Pincus-Witten. He sees it a little differently, but personally I'd figure that painting reached its peak in the sixteenth century, and music peaked in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These days it seems like there isn't much for painters to do, and there don't seem to be many melodies left to discover—although there's still interesting post-peak work being done in both fields. With novels, I'd figure, very roughly, that *Anna Karenina* was about the peak of realism, and then *Ulysses* was the peak of modernism, and nobody's made such an important move since then. A lot of people in the arts like to imagine that the arts don't progress in history the way the sciences do, that you can keep on doing realism (which, especially, still captures the aspirational middlebrow lack of imagination) or whatever style seems transcendent to you, and that it's just fine to keep on grinding it out. Robert convinced me that not only is this naive, but not the best way to honor one's predecessors.

Right now, of course, the most forward motion is in the new medium of computer games, and I'm slowly getting back into this field. It moves terribly fast—the games I did in 1992, which were close to state-of-the-technology at the time, now look awfully basic, and you could make them on an iPad. Still, that's one of the interesting things about the field—you can keep constantly upgrading your work, maybe indefinitely.



*I've heard that you have large collections of fragrances and animal skulls. Why did you start these collections? How do they influence or contribute to your art and/or your writing?*

Well, when I was learning to paint I used to draw the animal skulls a lot. Lately I've been drawing a fetal human skull, but not for something I'd exhibit. They're just nice to have around. The other collection I work on most seriously is pre-Columbian art—not just Maya pieces, but also Taino and South American objects. I also collect game boards, maps, and drawings by illustrators I like, like Vergil Finlay and Jack Kirby, and old illustrated books. And there are some other, secret, collections that I might unveil sometime. When I was about nine I was much impressed by the Poe line in “The Raven” about how he “pondered, weak and weary, / Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore.” And I was like, yeah, I'm going to get me some of those quaint and curious volumes of forgotten lore! And I have. I didn't realize I'd be quite so weak and weary, though.

Regarding perfume—well, it's amazing that there's an art form, or near art form, that's so silent and invisible as perfume and still so multivalent. And it is high-tech without yet being digital—it's still chemicals messing with your nose and not some kind of subcutaneous 'trodes or whatever. There's a lot of forward movement in the field, and a lot of representation—for instance, there's this chemical called “calone” that they only started using in the 1980s, and which makes you think of the ocean, even though it doesn't come from the ocean and there's nothing obviously oceanic about it. And I'm astounded at how one can get so good at it, being able to identify hundreds and eventually thousands of fragrances. Chandler Burr is the writer who's lately done the most to introduce people to the form, and he blogs a

lot. Incidentally, it's better to buy perfume in small phials from independent decanters than it is to go bankrupt getting full bottles. When they say on a perfume blot that a scent is "FBW," that means it's "Full-Bottle Worthy"—good enough to merit getting a whole flask.

*What books, art, and music inspire you? What are you reading now?*

Regarding music, one band I mention in *Beauty* is the Cocteau Twins, and one of the things I liked about them was that you could almost make sense out of what she was saying, but not quite. Like a lot of people who write fiction, I listen to a certain amount of current rap music just to hear what people are saying lately, but I don't really have a favorite. My friend David Rimanelli, the art critic, has gotten me listening to a lot of Ligetti lately, and I especially like the ones that are basically just a single chord, like the chorus Kubrick used in *2001*. But music is not really my metier.

There's so much visual art going on in my head right now that I could go on for pages. But as far as living artists go I've become fairly knowledgeable about Carl Andre, especially since a friend of mine, James Meyer, is the best current expert on his work. Peter Halley has been a big influence on me. One of the most interesting experiences I had when I was in the art sales business was working with Dan Flavin. Regarding classical artists—well, I've got pages and pages written about Nicholas Poussin, and maybe sometime I'll put them into a book. Poussin is very much "art about art," almost postmodernism *avant la lettre*.

Regarding fiction, it's pretentious to write great names on the same page as one's own. But one will do it anyway. As far as earlier fiction goes, I'm a big fan of Flaubert's *Salammbô*, and of

Melville, Hawthorne, Rabelais, and Lady Murasaki. My more personal or less-Pantheon-placed favorites are Agatha Christie (still the greatest plotter, even though plot is usually considered fiction's most masculine element), Franz Kafka, Ian Fleming, H. P. Lovecraft, Edgar Saltus, Edgar Allan Poe, H. G. Wells, James Joyce, Jorge Luis Borges, Phillip Dick, and Arthur C. Clarke. My parents met in Vladimir Nabokov's class at Cornell, and his books were prominent in the house, so when I was still a little kid I'd read *The Defense* and *Invitation to a Beheading* and all these fairly obscure expatriate-period novels that had been published in the 1950s by New Directions.

Lately I read less contemporary fiction and a lot more science. And I think this is true of a lot of fiction writers. One of the reasons is sheer ease—these days you can get professional journals online, which is a huge change from when you had to go not just to the library, but to the science library, which was usually a different building as far away from the main stacks as possible.

And the classics don't disappoint. Lately I've been listening to the Dryden *Aeneid*—I like the old rhyming translations the best—and marveling at how much creepier it is than Homer. It's almost a horror fantasy in places. And I've been working more seriously on Dante, at least to the extent of going through the "Purgatorio" and "Paradiso" in the Italian. Robert Pincus-Witten told me my fiction had a Dantean gruesomeness, which is great. But now I'm thinking more about moving into a neoclassical sort of beauty, and about Dante's beauty.

## QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. There's a lot of historic and (often fictional) contemporary art described in *Beauty*. Are art-historical themes such as post-modernism the book's primary subtexts?
2. Is *Beauty* science fiction? If so, would it be in the microgenre of "Biopunk"?
3. To what extent does *Beauty* mark an era—especially, the height of the supermodel boom of the early 1990s and the beginning of the swell of popular interest in cosmetic surgery?
4. Brian D'Amato has written elsewhere that  

...even in this day and age novelists are expected to cover a pretty narrow range of subjects. You're supposed to be interested in certain things, things like, say, emotion, motivation, self-expression, relationships, families, love, loss, love and loss, gender, race, redemption, women, men, women and men, identity,

politics, identity politics, writers, Brooklyn, writers who live in Brooklyn, readers who wish they were writers who live in Brooklyn, the Self, the Other, the Self versus the Other, academia, postcolonialism, growing up, the suburbs, the 1970s, the 1980s, the 1990s, growing up in the suburbs in the 1970s, 1980s, or 1990s, personhood, places, people, people who need people, character, characters, the inner lives of the characters, life, death, society, the human condition, and probably Ireland. And of course, I have exactly zero interest in any of these things.

Given the quotation above, is *Beauty* an example of post-humanism? Or even anti-humanism?

5. Wikipedia defines “transhumanism” as “an international intellectual and cultural movement that affirms the possibility and desirability of fundamentally transforming the human condition by developing and making widely available technologies to eliminate aging and to greatly enhance human intellectual, physical, and psychological capacities.” Is *Beauty* a transhumanist novel?
6. Is Jamie, the narrator of *Beauty*, an unreliable one? Is he an example of a narrator like Thackeray’s Barry Lyndon, or Nabokov’s Humbert Humbert—that is, a narrator who realizes less about himself than does the reader?
7. How does the pre-Columbian material in *Beauty* relate to the rest of the book? How does it compare with D’Amato’s later fiction about the ancient Maya?

8. Did you like Jamie at all, or just hate him?
9. If *Beauty* were a “Choose Your Own Adventure”-style book with multiple endings, what alternate ending would be your favorite?

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