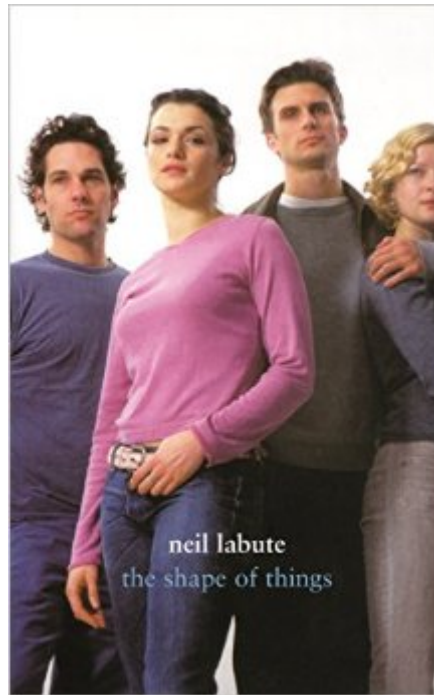


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The Shape Of Things



Synopsis

A startling dissection of cruelty and artistic creation from the author of *In the Company of Men* and *Your Friends and Neighbors*. In a modern version of Adam's seduction by Eve, *The Shape of Things* pits gentle, awkward, overweight Adam against experienced, analytical, amoral Evelyn, a graduate student in art. After a chance meeting at a museum, Evelyn and Adam embark on an intense relationship that causes shy and principled Adam to go to extraordinary lengths, including cosmetic surgery, and a betrayal of his best friend, to improve his appearance and character. In the process, Evelyn's subtle and insistent coaching results in a reconstruction of Adam's fundamental moral character. Only in a final and shocking exhibition does Evelyn reveal the nature of her interest in Adam, of her detached artist's perspective and sense of authority--to her, Adam is no more than "flesh.... one of the most perfect materials on earth. Natural, beautiful, and malleable." Labute's latest work is an intense and disturbing study not only of the uses of power within human relationships, but also of the ethics involved in the relationship of art and life. To what extent is an artist licensed to shape and change her medium or to alter the work of another artist? What is acceptable artistic material? At what point does creation become manipulation, and at what point does creation destroy? Or, is the new Adam, handsome and confident if heart broken, an admirable result of the most challenging artistic endeavor? *The Shape of Things* challenges society's most deeply entrenched ideas about art, manipulation, and love.

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Several years ago, PBS distributed to subscribers a particularly annoying, idiotic button announcing that with-it people "Fear No Art." Even though such heralded types as Plato and Tolstoy had worried about the artist's frightening power to create as well as to wreak havoc on the social order, PBS thought it knew better. Artists these days are basically nice people, it held, and thus they will necessarily use their powers of self-expression only to enrich the lives of everyone in society. Consequently, we must be open to and accepting of whatever an artist comes up with - even a crucifix in a bottle of urine - lest we be thought narrow-minded or indeed intolerant. Neil Labute looking at the current scene with wide open eyes challenges the complacency in this conventional thinking about the "nice" artist and life. In "The Shape Of Things," he vividly brings home to us the truth in Jonathan Swift's observation that "nice people are full of nasty ideas." Set among campus Me-First postmoderns who delve into art and engage in tangled "relationships," Labute's play gives its characters free rein to reveal themselves as both pathetically and hilariously stunted human specimens. Their seeming one-dimensionality is by satiric design, as are those hints of rage and clueless meanness which occasionally ooze out from beneath their laid-back surfaces to enrich the key moments of dramatic encounter. Like many of the sardonic Ibsen's characters, Labute's too have snarling trolls lurking just beneath their "nice," ever so tolerant, "non-judgmental" public selves. Most significantly, his charismatic, rebellious central female figure, her inner person reduced wholly and subhumanly to warped aesthetic concerns, emerges as a satiric embodiment of the postmodern artist as essentially destructive creator.

Adam is an amiable and literate loser and virtual virgin who needs two jobs to pay for his student loans. Working as a security guard at a gallery, he tries to dissuade Evelyn, an Art postgraduate, from defacing one of the exhibits, and ends up going out with her. Not only does he start enjoying 'great' sex for the first time, but, under Evelyn's supervision, he begins eating and dressing better, working out, even getting a nose job, to the point where the former scruffy prole becomes what his best friend's fiancée calls a 'babe'. Adam had been too shy to ask the latter out before, but now they kiss and go for a 'drive' in the 'woods'. Meanwhile Evelyn has her thesis showcase to organise. For all its appeals to modernity and student culture - post-modern art; makeovers; facial surgery; college; swearing; studenty soundtrack - 'The Shape Of Things' is surprisingly traditional fare, not too removed from the well-made plays of Terence Rattigan, or Shaw's dramas of ideas (Evelyn becomes Higgins to Adam's Eliza Doolittle), in which every element and loose end is neatly tied up. Each character represents a particular point-of-view (check out, for a start, those names), which is

modified or developed as the thesis continues - each vignette proceeds intellectually, leading to a climax in which the leads declaim their positions at wordy length. This means that the character interplay, though present and involving, lacks the true forcefulness of a work like 'Your Friends And Neighbours'. Behind the players are projected images from Western civilisation's visual treatment of the human body, from antiquity to anatomy to Magritte.

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