

## Book

## Face, identity, and culture

Fay Bound-Alberti, writer and Professor in Modern History at King's College London, UK, was 5 years into an ambitious research project examining the interdisciplinary meanings of the face when she suddenly realised she had been suffering all her life from a rare condition called prosopagnosia, or face blindness. A poignant passage in her new book *The Face: A Cultural History* describes how she went to collect her daughter from nursery only to discover she could not distinguish her among the crowd of other toddlers. "There is nothing quite as humbling, as destabilizing, as failing to recognize your own child", she writes movingly. It is a vulnerability that only serves to enrich this impressive and deeply intellectual book that tracks shifting ideas about the face.

Facehood, the term Bound-Alberti coins to describe our association of a person's face with their individuality, is explored in a fascinating account of the history of portraiture that charts the evolution of the face, from its almost blank representation in Palaeolithic art, through the emergence of facial features in the "severe" style of Greek sculpture by around 450 BCE, to the portraits of the Renaissance which feel distinctly modern in their concern, not just with the anatomical structure of the face but its facility for expressing emotion. Bound-Alberti never resorts to cold descriptions though. For too long, she asserts, we have interpreted faces as if they exist outside of culture, whereas in fact they "are products of belief systems, languages and environments as much as they are skin, bone and muscle".

In subsequent chapters, whose pithy titles—Captured, Mirrored, Perfected, Grown, Reconstructed—offer thematic ways of looking at the face, she builds a case for why "treating the face as something unchanging and ahistorical", which amounts in her view to a kind of cultural face-blindness, has been

so damaging. Photography may have democratised portraiture, but biometric classification and surveillance are also oppressive instruments, used to perpetuate gender and racial bias. An obsession with a narrowly Eurocentric facial beauty is costly in ways that go far beyond the extortionate amount spent globally on plastic surgery, including stigma for those who live with facial difference. And even fetal imaging technology designed to help prospective parents see their unborn child's face is generating as much anxiety as reassurance in a society which places good looks right up there with good health. With each fresh

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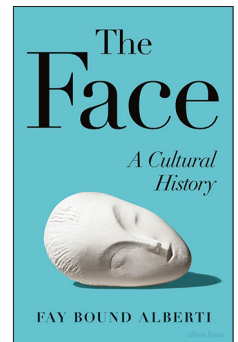
perspective, Bound-Alberti dissects new layers of meaning to reveal how faces are embedded in all the problematic nuances of our culture. "The story of facial expression" she tells us "is ultimately a story about power—who gets to define what the face is saying, whose expression is considered normal or abnormal, whose face is read as trustworthy or dangerous." And understanding the assumptions we make about the face is the necessary first step towards changing the status quo.

Readers of *The Face* should buckle up for an unapologetically scholarly ride. What makes the journey so enjoyable are those informal moments when we feel the author right beside us—I particularly loved her indignant reaction to the male researcher who turned on her when her interview became too probing, asking if she would like him to scientifically itemise why her face was not truly beautiful—and the sheer, sustained elegance of her argument.

All the different strands are woven together in Bound-Alberti's extraordinary chapter on face transplants that includes interviews with surgeons and recipients of face transplants and their families. She discusses the surgical and immunological risks, the many "unresolved ethical challenges", and contrasts the cautionary approach in the UK with other countries. The first face transplant was done in France in 2005 and around 50 have been performed since, including in Europe, China, and the USA. While recognising the pioneering work of surgeons in pushing the boundary of what is surgically possible, she examines in detail how potentially devastating physical and emotional consequences—for patients, donors, and recipient families—are too easily overlooked. The face may have been defined as an organ by the USA in 2014, "a perfect example of how language shapes reality". But this culturally laden, identity-bound part of our bodies will never be straightforwardly replaceable, she concludes, and it is a mistake to think otherwise. "Leaving aside the medical challenges, the success of a face transplant cannot be evaluated as a purely surgical act, as if achieved in a vacuum. Any meaningful measurement needs to consider how the transplant affects a person's body and their world."

Bound-Alberti may struggle to recognise certain faces. But with this weighty, political, and beautifully written book, she illuminates changing conceptions of the face. By the end, I couldn't help seeing her prosopagnosia as a kind of superpower, protecting her against the dangerous cultural determinism which begins, I now realise, with dangerous presumptuousness and a lazy tendency—in our interactions with others—to take too much at face value.

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Gabriel Weston is a surgeon, writer, and broadcaster. Her third book *ALIVE: An Alternative Anatomy* (Vintage, 2026) is now out in paperback.