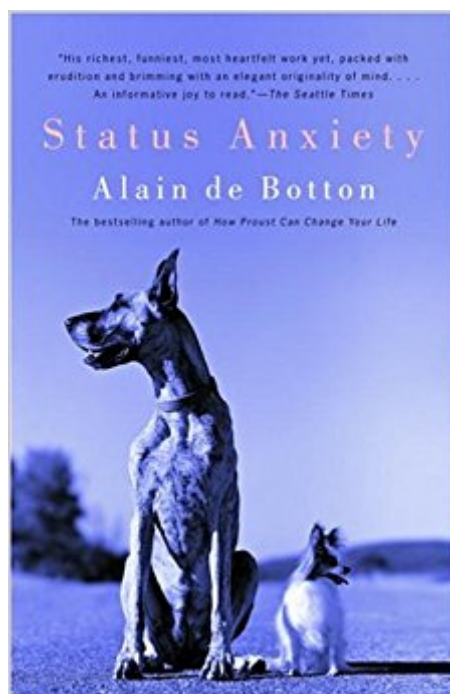


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Status Anxiety



Synopsis

Anyone who's ever lost sleep over an unreturned phone call or the neighbor's Lexus had better read Alain de Botton's irresistibly clear-headed new book, immediately. For in its pages, a master explicator of our civilization and its discontents turns his attention to the insatiable quest for status, a quest that has less to do with material comfort than with love. To demonstrate his thesis, de Botton ranges through Western history and thought from St. Augustine to Andrew Carnegie and Machiavelli to Anthony Robbins. Whether it's assessing the class-consciousness of Christianity or the convulsions of consumer capitalism, dueling or home-furnishing, Status Anxiety is infallibly entertaining. And when it examines the virtues of informed misanthropy, art appreciation, or walking a lobster on a leash, it is not only wise but helpful.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Alain de Botton (AdB) has written another book in his trademark witty, erudite style, kind of like a Woody Allen with a classical education. This time, his topic is the quest for social status. He probes the causes, and explores various prescriptions taken from philosophy, art, politics, religion, and bohemia to sooth our fears. He uses historical examples, from Tocqueville to Tony Robbins, to help us keep perspective and to sooth our anxieties. I thought this was enjoyable summer reading, though not profound or complete by any means - although it was not meant to be. Also, some of AdB's other books are slightly better, so if this is the first book by AdB you want to read, I'd recommend "How Proust can Change your Life" first. But if the topic intrigues you, as it did me, then

by all means give this book a try. A summary of the topics covered is below: First, AdB begins by claiming that it's human nature that we want to be a "somebody" rather than a "nobody," and to rise rather than fall or remain at too modest a rung on the social ladder. This hunger for status can indeed drive us to achieve - but it also leads to a kind of restlessness characteristic of free, meritocratic societies. In contrast, there was no such anxiety in the Medieval caste system, because one's social status was fixed for life. One root cause of our anxiety, AdB claims, is that our egos are forever leaky balloons forever requiring helium of recognition and love, but always vulnerable to pinpricks. The prescription: Don't take others' evaluation too seriously - after all, "does an emerald become worse if it isn't praised?" Also, remember that the views of the masses are often perforated with confusion and error, relying on intuition, emotion, and custom rather than rationality.

Turn on the tv or pick up a magazine, and chances are you'll experience a well-crafted exercise in status envy, the stock-in-trade of our highly inventive advertising industry. Commercials are designed to create a need where none exists, and in many instances, where none should exist. It's this latter that is really the subject of de Botton's book. The text amounts to a learned yet oddly remote treatment of how we judge others and ourselves through the prism of status, a very serious and messy subject. The book's first half, is informative and helpful, furnishing needed analytic and historical perspective, particularly the chapter on the self-defeating nature of expectation. However, the text would have been stronger and less remote had the author updated his account to current times instead of inexplicably trailing off in the 19th century. He really needs more research on the 20th century, when the problem of status anxiety exploded with the advent of the "level playing field". It's this literary-style approach that limits itself to previous centuries that separates his account from our current climate, and underlies much reader dissatisfaction. The book's second half is given over to proposed remedies. From a merchandising point of view, this half amounts to an erudite guide for those seeking relief from the problem of is-my-standing-in-society-good-enough. Philosophy, art, and religion-- all share the capacity to reorient life's values away from social status to those transcendent values pointing toward the eternal. Of course, there's nothing like a view from eternity for stripping away petty concerns like status envy-- and everything else, for that matter.

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