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THE BOOK OF

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HUMAN

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EMOTIONS

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An Encyclopedia of Feeling  
from Anger to Wanderlust

TIFFANY WATT SMITH

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## Introduction

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Look up. Look up at the clouds. Are they grey and solemn in a windless sky? Or wisps floating carelessly on a breeze? Is the horizon drenched in a hot red sunset, angry with desire?

To the painter John Constable, the sky was full of emotion. He called it, in a letter written in 1821, the ‘key note’ and ‘chief organ of sentiment in painting’. It is for this reason that he dedicated much of his time to collecting and classifying the clouds. Walking out from his house in Hampstead – at that time a village near London – with a bundle of papers, and a pocket full of brushes, he would sit for hours on the heath rapidly painting the changing shapes above him, the wind rustling his papers, rain drops pooling the colours. Once home, he arranged his sketches according to the latest meteorological classifications, noting the date, time and weather conditions.

Constable wanted to master the language of the sky – and when you look at his paintings, it’s clear that he did. But he also lived in an age obsessed with the desire to label and put into categories, a passion for taxonomy that would always sit uneasily with the melting, drifting skies. Clouds are so hard to fix. Arranging them into groups, as the art critic John Ruskin discovered forty years later, was always a matter ‘more of convenience than true description’. The clouds fold into one another and drift away. They switch allegiances until it’s hard to tell them apart.

Look at the clouds, and you might see an emotion colour everything for an instant – but then the skies will rearrange themselves and it'll be gone.

Recognising and naming our emotional weather can be just as peculiar a task. Try to describe exactly how you feel right now. Is your heart fluttering excitedly for the person who'll be waiting when you step off the train? Or your stomach tight at the thought of tomorrow's deadline? Perhaps it was curiosity which nudged you towards this book. Or reluctance, studded with giddy defiance, that is making you linger over its pages in the shop rather than returning home. Are you feeling hopeful? Surprised? (Are you bored?)

Some emotions really do wash the world in a single colour, like the terror felt as the car skids, or the euphoria of falling in love. Others, like clouds, are harder to grasp. Plan a surprise for a loved one and you might feel anticipation crinkled with glee and creased at the edges with a faint terror – what if they hate it? Storm off during an argument and it might be hard to tell the precise moment at which your indignation ends and your clammy self-loathing begins. There are some emotions which are so quiet that they slip past before we've even had a chance to spot them, like that momentary sense of comfort which makes your hand reach out for a familiar brand at the supermarket. And then there are those that brood on the horizon, the ones we hurry away from, fearing they will burst upon us: the jealousy which makes our fingers itch to search a loved one's pockets, or the shame that can goad us into self-destruction.

Sometimes it feels more like we belong to our emotions, than they to us.

But perhaps it's only by paying attention to our feelings, by trying to capture them as Constable did the clouds, that we can truly understand ourselves.

## What is an emotion?

Deep inside each of our temporal lobes is a tear-shaped structure called the amygdala. Neuroscientists call this the ‘command centre’ of our emotions. It assesses stimuli from the outside world, deciding whether to avoid or approach. It triggers a clatter of responses, raising the heartbeat, instructing the glands to secrete hormones, contracting the limbs or making an eyelid twitch. Recall a sad story or look at a picture of your newborn baby while lying in a brain scanner and the amygdala will be one of the areas that will appear to ‘light up’ on the resulting computer-generated image.

With their glowing tapestries of magenta and emerald, studies of the brain can be seductive. They can even seem like the final word on how and why we feel the way we do. But to think of our emotions purely as biochemical fireworks in the brain is, in the words of the writer Siri Hustvedt, ‘rather like saying that Vermeer’s *Girl Pouring Milk* is a canvas with paint on it or that Alice herself is words on a page. These are facts, but they don’t explain my subjective experience of either of them or what the two girls mean to me.’

More than that, I think, approaching emotions as first and foremost biological facts misrepresents what an emotion actually is.

## The invention of emotions

No one really felt emotions before about 1830. Instead, they felt other things – ‘passions’, ‘accidents of the soul’, ‘moral sentiments’ – and explained them very differently from how we understand emotions today.

Some ancient Greeks believed a defiant rage was carried on an ill wind. Desert-dwelling early Christians thought boredom could be implanted in the soul by malignant demons. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, passions were not exclusive to humans, but could work their strange effects on other bodies too, so that palm trees could fall in love and yearn for one another, and cats become melancholic. But alongside this intangible realm of souls and supernatural forces, doctors also developed a complex approach to understanding the body’s influence on the passions. Their insights were based on a

theory of humoral medicine from the ancient Greek physician Hippocrates, which spread via the physicians of the medieval Islamic world, and flourished ultimately in the writings of the court doctors of the European Renaissance. The theory held that each person had a balance of four elemental substances in their bodies – blood, yellow bile, black bile and phlegm. These humours were thought to shape personality and mood: those with more blood in their veins were quick tempered, but also brave, while a dominance of phlegm made one peaceful but lugubrious. Physicians believed strong passions disrupted this delicate ecosystem by moving heat around the body and rousing the humours in turn. Rage sent blood rushing from the heart to the limbs, readying a person to launch an attack. Once black bile was heated, by contrast, it sent poisonous vapours curling up to the brain and crowded it with terrifying visions. Traces of these ideas still linger: it's why we speak of people being phlegmatic or in an ill-humour, or say their blood is boiling.

The origin of our modern concept of emotion can be traced to the birth of empirical science in the mid-seventeenth century. Thomas Willis, a London anatomist who dissected hanged criminals, proposed that a surge of joy or a nervous tremble was not the work of strange liquids and fumes, but of the delicate lattice of the nervous system at the centre of which was a single organ: the brain. A hundred or so years later, physiologists studying reflex responses in animals went further and claimed that bodies recoiled in fright or twitched in delight because of purely mechanical processes – no immaterial soul substance was necessary at all. In a draughty Edinburgh lecture hall in the early nineteenth century, the philosopher Thomas Brown suggested this new way of understanding the body required a new vocabulary, and proposed using the word 'emotion'. Though already in use in English (from the French *émotion*), the term was imprecise, describing any movements of bodies and objects, from the swaying of a tree to a hot blush spreading across the cheeks. The coinage indicated a novel approach to the life of feelings, one which used

experiments and anatomical investigations to focus on observable phenomena: clenched teeth; rolling tears; shudders; wide eyes.

This provoked a flurry of interest among Victorian men of science in understanding how the body's smiles and frowns expressed – and even stimulated – internal emotions. One man in particular stands out: Charles Darwin. As early as the 1830s, Darwin was treating emotions as a topic worthy of serious scientific attention. He sent out questionnaires to missionaries and explorers across the globe asking how grief or excitement was expressed by the indigenous people they encountered. He experimented on himself, trying to isolate the muscles used when he shuddered or smiled. He even studied his infant son, William, meticulously charting his responses: 'at his 8th day he frowned much ... when little under five weeks old, smiled'.\* In 1872 Darwin published his findings in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, and made the audacious claim that our emotions were not fixed responses, but the result of millions of years of evolutionary processes which were still ongoing. As basic and important as breathing or digestion, as much animal as human, our emotions were there because they had helped us survive – preventing us from ingesting poisons, as in disgust, or helping us form bonds and cooperate, like love or compassion. By the 1880s, the view that emotions were inherited reflexes was so established among scientists that the philosopher William James could argue that the bodily responses *were* the emotion, and the subjective feeling just followed. While 'common sense says ... we meet a bear, are frightened, and run,' he wrote, it was more rational to say that we feel 'afraid because we tremble'. He thought the physical response came first, the subjective quality, a by-product – he called it an 'epiphenomenon' – a split second later.

Not everyone approached emotions in this way. The year after Darwin published his theories on the evolution of emotional

\*There is some evidence that the Darwin household was not altogether supportive of his investigations. While they were still engaged, his fiancée, Emma Wedgwood, expressed her concern: 'You will be forming theories about me & if I am cross or out of temper you will only consider "What does that prove?"'

expressions, Sigmund Freud began his medical training in Vienna. By the early 1890s, however, Freud had abandoned his career as a neurologist, believing that it wasn't enough to talk about prolonged sorrow or excessive suspicion in terms only of the brain and body: 'it is not easy to treat feelings scientifically,' he wrote. One had also to consider the far more elusive and complex influence of the mind, or psyche. Although he never set out a comprehensive theory of what he considered emotions to be – he spoke of them, poetically, as 'feeling-tones' – Freud's work added depth and complexity to the vision of emotions as biological twitches and jerks. It's through his work that many of us have come to think of emotions as things which either can be repressed, or else build up and require venting. And that some – particularly those urgent terrors and furious desires of childhood – can sink down and hide in the deepest recesses of our minds only to emerge years later in dreams, or compulsions, or even physical symptoms like an aching head or cramping stomach. It's also from Freud that we have inherited the idea that we might not even recognise some of our emotions, but that our anger or jealousy might be 'subconscious', springing up like a jack-in-the-box accidentally ('Freudian slips'), or in the jokes we tell, or in habits such as persistent unpunctuality. Although many of the technical details of Freud's theories have long since been discredited, the idea that our emotions take circuitous routes through our minds as well as our bodies has been of profound therapeutic importance and left traces on today's emotional language. In this way, the Victorians are responsible for two of the most influential ideas about our feelings today: that our emotions are evolved physical responses, and that they are affected by the play of our unconscious minds.

## **Emotional cultures**

In fact, the answer to the question 'what is an emotion?' lies not only in our biology or private psychological histories. The way we feel is also enmeshed in the expectations and ideas of the cultures in which we live. Hate, anger or desire can seem to come from the most

untamed, animal parts of ourselves. Yet they can also be aroused by those things which make us distinctly human: our language and the concepts we use to understand our bodies; our religious convictions and moral judgements; the fashions, even the politics and economics, of the times we live in. The seventeenth-century nobleman François de La Rochefoucauld recognised that even our most ardent urges can be conjured by the need to keep up with conventions: ‘Some people,’ he quipped, ‘would never fall in love if they hadn’t heard love talked about.’ And just as talking, watching and reading can incite emotions in our bodies, they can quieten our feelings too. The Baining people of Papua New Guinea leave a bowl of water out overnight to absorb *awumbuk*, the gloom and inertia which descend when a much-loved guest departs. The ritual is reported to work every time. The influence of our ideas can be so powerful that they can sometimes shape those biological responses we think of as the most natural. How else is it possible that in the eleventh century, knights could faint in dismay or yawn for love? Or that 400 years ago people could die of nostalgia?

The idea that emotions might be shaped by our cultures, as well as by our bodies and minds, was enthusiastically taken up in the 1960s and 70s. Western anthropologists living in remote communities became interested in the emotional vocabulary of different languages. For instance *song* – the outrage felt on receiving a less than fair share – is held in high esteem in the cooperative culture of the Pacific islanders of Ifaluk. It became clear that some cultures take very seriously certain feelings which in English-speaking cultures might seem petty. What’s more, some emotions seemed to be so significant that people were fluent in its many subtle tastes and textures, like the fifteen distinct sorts of fear the Pintupi of Western Australia are able to feel. Other emotions which might seem fundamental to English-speakers were missing in some languages: there is, for instance, no word which precisely captures the meaning of ‘worry’ among the Machiguenga of Peru. This interest in emotional languages was intriguing: if different people have different ways of conceptualising their emotions, might they *feel* them differently too?

Historians had long suspected the importance of passions to understanding the mindsets of the past. However, a decade or so after these initial anthropological studies, they began excavating long-dead emotional cultures in earnest. Of course, they couldn't interview Roman slaves or medieval lovers about their feelings. But they could uncover the ways people of the past had understood their passions or sentiments by looking at diaries and letters, conduct manuals and medical regimens, even legal documents and political speeches. They began to ask the questions which have become so familiar to those who work in this field today. Was boredom invented by the Victorians? What made American presidents start smiling in their official portraits? Why did self-help authors in the sixteenth century encourage people to be sad, where today they'd exhort us to be happy? Why, in the eighteenth century, did artists want to broadcast the fact that they'd felt shocked? How could some emotions disappear – such as the combination of listlessness and despair the early Christians called 'acedia' – and others like 'ringxiety' suddenly pop into existence? To study the emotions of the past wasn't only to understand how rituals of love and grief had changed over time, or why in different historical periods some emotions could be publicly expressed, while others were hidden, or restrained through penance or prayer. The new field of study asked how these cultural values imprinted themselves on our private experiences. It asked whether our emotions were entirely our own.

Even accounts of those emotions which are sometimes thought to be 'basic' or 'universal', such as fear or disgust, vary across times and places. The idea that some emotions are more fundamental than others is a very old one. The *Li Chi*, a Confucian collection of precepts and rituals which can be dated back to at least the first century BCE, identifies seven inherent feelings (joy, anger, sadness, fear, love, dislike and fondness). The philosopher René Descartes thought there were six 'primitive passions' (wonder, love, hatred, desire, joy and sadness). In our own time, some evolutionary psychologists argue

that between six and eight ‘basic’ emotions are expressed in the same way by all people.\* The list usually includes disgust, fear, surprise, anger, happiness and sadness – though not ‘love’, whose displays we expect to be tangled up in the rituals of different cultures. These ‘basic’ emotional expressions are thought to be evolved responses to universal predicaments: a disgusted grimace ejects poisons from our mouths when we stick out our tongues; the rush of energy which comes when we are enraged may help us fight off a rival. But does it really follow that these emotions must *feel* the same way to all people in all places? Imagine a New York trader on the stock-exchange floor with sweating palms, a thumping heart and a prickling scalp. Then think of the same sensations experienced by a thirteenth-century Christian kneeling in a cold chapel in prayer, or by a Pintupi in Australia on waking in the dead of night with a stomach pain. The trader might call those feelings ‘an adrenaline rush’ or ‘good fear’ (or, on a bad day, ‘stress’). The second might view them as ‘wondrous fear’, an awestruck terror alerting them to the presence of God. The third might feel *ngulu*, a particular sort of dread the Pintupi experience when they suspect another person is seeking revenge. The meanings we charge an emotion with change our experience of it. They determine whether we greet a feeling with delight or trepidation, whether we savour it or feel ashamed. Ignore these differences and we’ll lose most of what makes our emotional experiences what they are.

It comes down to what you think an emotion is. When we talk about emotions, I think we need what the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz in the 1970s called ‘thick description’. Geertz asked

\* Emotionologists – those of us who study emotions from different fields – argue about this ‘basic emotions’ theory a lot. The most well-known recent advocate of the idea that there are universal and basic emotions is the psychologist Paul Ekman. Recent researchers have disputed his claims, arguing that the facial expressions he has identified as universal in fact reflect a Western bias. Being suspicious about the universal emotions theory is not to say that we don’t express and feel some emotions in very similar ways, or that we can’t understand emotions from other cultures. After all, imagining the emotions of other people from past cultures is the most enjoyable part of being a historian of emotions. But saying something is very similar is not the same as saying it is identical in every way.

an elegant question: what is the difference between a blink and a wink? If we answer in purely physiological terms – speak of a chain of muscular contractions of the eyelids – then a blink and a wink are more or less the same. But you need to understand the cultural context to appreciate what a wink is. You need to understand playing and jokes, and teasing and sex, and learnt conventions like irony and camp. Love, hate, desire, fear, anger and the rest are like this too. Without context, you only get a ‘thin description’ of what’s going on, not the whole story – and it’s this whole story which is what an emotion *is*.

This book is about these stories, and how they change. It’s about the different ways emotions have been perceived and performed – from the weeping jurors in Greek courts to the brave, bearded women of the Renaissance; from the vibrating heartstrings of eighteenth-century doctors to Darwin’s self-experiments at London Zoo; from the shell-shocked soldiers of the First World War to our own culture of neuroscience and brain imaging. It’s about the different ways our sorrowful, frowning, wincing, joyous bodies inhabit the world. And how the human world, with its moral values and political hierarchies, its assumptions about gender, sexuality, race and class, its philosophical views and scientific theories, inhabits us in return.

### **Emotion-spotting: a field guide**

Today, emotional health, and the necessity of recognising and understanding our feelings to achieve it, is a stated goal of public policy in many countries, from Bhutan to the UK. Turn on a TV or open a newspaper, and there’ll be, somewhere, tips on how to achieve lasting happiness, or why crying can be good for us. The idea that it’s important to pay attention to our emotions is not new. The Stoics of ancient Greece taught that noticing the first stirrings of a passion gave you the best chance of controlling it. Catch the precise moment the hairs on the nape of your neck began to tingle, they thought, and you could remind yourself not to let blind panic set in. In the seventeenth century the scholar and great anatomist of