

## Life

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## WHAT IS IT REALLY LIKE BEING BEAUTIFUL?

**B**eauty is essentially a trait that some are born with, like an ability to add up numbers fast or to jump high. But beauty, somehow, attracts more attention, derision and ambivalence than any other attribute. "Beauty is defining," says Susan Johnson, author of *On Beauty*. "It's impossible to escape it. If you're born beautiful by some accident of birth, you're equal to your beauty your whole life. It's hard to not become an actress or a model."

Johnson also says those born beautiful are constantly made aware of their beauty (people stare and comment on it) and have to justify themselves. "You have to prove you're smart or that you're a nice person, as well as beautiful; you have to apologise for the beauty or deny it." The maths boffin, on the other hand, is at absolute liberty to boast widely about his or her genetic quirk.

And the animosity towards beautiful people is worse these days because of the pressure on the average person to meet them at their level, says Johnson. "We greet beauty with awe and astonishment, but also with envy, distrust and resentment. It's a paradox in every direction."

Body language expert Allan Pease says while all eyes are on beautiful people, we also ignore them. He explains this through a mating rating system. "If you're a 10 on the beauty scale,

someone who's a six isn't going to approach you because it demands too much. To make up the four points, they have to pull out all resources – humour, intelligence and so on." In short beautiful people require too much effort from us. "Which is why beautiful women often feign a lower rating," he says. By that I guess he means play stupid or self-deprecate.

But back to the staring. Anyone who knows a beautiful person has seen it. A packed restaurant will almost get up and follow a beautiful person when they leave the table to go to the bathroom, while they, in turn, act as if they haven't noticed a thing. To grow up with that kind of constant attention must be suffocating. "It pins you down, you're not free to move," says Johnson. And the only reaction available is that vacant, disaffected stare that beautiful people worldwide seem to affect. Worse, it forces you to be incredibly self-conscious. It's the beauty equivalent of everyone analysing the quality of your quadratic equations all day every day. You'd start to doubt your accuracy, wouldn't you?

All of this comes to the fore when you ask a beautiful person to describe what it feels like to be beautiful, as *Sunday Life* has for this story. They often struggle to answer, because beauty is not something they're really allowed to own.



Marti Keefer, 32, author and model.

"I don't feel beautiful in the external sense. I didn't grow up with family telling me I was. They emphasised other things in me and in life. Whether you feel beautiful has a lot to do with whether you're told this as a kid. I know I'm objectively beautiful, but that doesn't feel like anything special.

I remember being asked by a guy on a plane what it feels like to be beautiful, and I realised how much it fascinates other people and how much is projected on to beauty. It's like assuming that rich people are happy; beautiful people don't necessarily feel blessed.

I had an epiphany in a casting once – I thought, if you think the fact you're beautiful makes you better than anyone else, then you will attract people who make you feel small. If you think beauty can define you, then it will.

I've had doors opened and even had a guy in the supermarket not let me pay for my groceries. But that could've been because he thought I was down-to-earth. But isn't it funny that good-looking people are congratulated for being nice or real, as though somehow it's a surprise?"



Gail Elliott, 42, one of the top 20 original supermodels, and co-founder and designer of clothing label Little Joe.

"[In the early '90s] Versace started us all off by signing us up to big money to do his shows. There were the big five – Linda, Christy, Cindy, Naomi and Claudia – and about another 20 of us who got all the major campaigns and shows. It's not like today, where beauty is so much broader and you have to do all kinds of things to stand out. We were just declared beautiful. We didn't have to have facials or pedicures. We turned up and it was business.

Airports and restaurants are where you notice you're beautiful; it's where people feel comfortable staring. It always felt weird and every time it happened I'd be convinced it was because my zip was undone. Even now. People comfortable with their beauty are those who've been told they're beautiful all their lives, and they can shut out the staring and be themselves in spite of it. I look at girls today who are not certain of their beauty and they struggle. They're the ones who sob backstage at shows. There's always one who sobs."



Deborah Hutton, 47, former model, now the "face" of Qantas and Olay.

"Until I was 14, I had bad skin and was gangly. I thought I was ugly. I remember the very first time I got the indication I was beautiful was at a Chinese restaurant with Mum. Men stared at me as I walked in and I became aware of myself as something to be looked at. Suddenly I was on the cover of *Cosmopolitan*; I was in shock. I liked the attention, but I was also self-conscious.

With beautiful women, there's a perception you don't have a brain. It's like good-looking men – they don't always make great lovers because they haven't had to work as hard to impress. I tend to take the mickey out of myself and I spend a lot of energy dispelling the pedestal I'm meant to be on.

I want to be on the same level as everyone else. It's almost like it's the job of a beautiful person to apologise and make others feel comfortable."