

Your Body Is Not Your Soul

Book Three in The Momentum Series

By Naomi Shiels

Wild Hearts Publishing

Sample Chapters

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DISCLAIMER

This book is not medical advice, psychological treatment, or a substitute for professional support.

It will not:

Cure body dysmorphia.

Erase decades of internalised messaging.

Solve the cultural machinery that created the problem in the first place.

It may, however:

Separate your worth from your appearance in a way that actually sticks.

Reduce the energy spent managing other people's perceptions.

Give you language for something you have felt your entire life but never quite named.

Make you slightly less patient with packaging-first thinking, in yourself and others.

If you are experiencing significant mental health distress or a diagnosed body image condition, please seek appropriate professional care.

If you are simply exhausted by being evaluated, assessed, and found wanting, and ready to be done with organising your life around other people's opinions of your body, you are in exactly the right place.

Foreword

By Professor Cecily Drummond-Harte Chair of Unsolicited Opinion Studies, Eastern Institute for the Documentation of Things Nobody Asked For

I want to begin by telling you about my field.

Unsolicited Opinion Studies is, to be precise, the systematic academic examination of the phenomenon by which one person looks at another person's body and decides, without invitation, to comment on it. Out loud. To their face. Often with the cheerful confidence of someone performing a public service.

It is, in short, the study of people who were not asked.

I have published fourteen peer-reviewed papers in this field. I have presented at eleven international conferences, including one in Bruges where I delivered a keynote to forty-six academics and one extremely confused delegate who had wandered in from a dental hygiene summit in the adjoining ballroom.

He stayed for the full ninety minutes.

He told me afterward that he found it deeply relevant to his work. I gave him my card. He has since cited me twice. The dental community, it turns out, has its own considerable relationship with unsolicited opinions about people's bodies, which I found both unsurprising and clarifying.

I mention the fourteen papers not to impress you. I mention them because I want you to understand that by the time this book arrived on my desk, I had already spent three decades studying the thing it is about. I had the data. I had the frameworks. I had a filing system for the literature that my colleague Professor Hardwicke once described as 'aggressive,' which, from a man whose own filing system has been the subject of concerned corridor conversation at two separate institutions, I considered a compliment.

And yet.

I was twelve years old when a woman in a swimwear shop looked at me, then looked at my mother, and said: 'She's going to need to watch herself.'

She was referring to my body. I was standing right there. She spoke as though I were a weather forecast requiring monitoring, not a child attempting to purchase bathers for a school swimming carnival on a Wednesday afternoon in regional Victoria.

My body had become the subject of a conversation I had not been invited to join, delivered by someone who believed, with warm authority, that she was being helpful. My mother produced an expression I can only describe as the face of a person who has just been handed something they did not order and cannot return. And I was standing there in a swimsuit, holding the ticket, waiting to be told if we were buying it.

We did not buy it.

I have been receiving assessments with something resembling grace for thirty-nine years since. I have also spent thirty-one of those years researching exactly why that moment happens, why it persists, and precisely what it costs the people it is applied to. I have turned the thing that happened in that changing room into fourteen papers, eleven conference presentations, and a professional reputation that is, I am told, quite formidable.

The irony is not lost on me.

You can study a cage your entire career and still be standing inside it. You can know exactly how the lock works, have published the definitive paper on its mechanism, and still spend twenty minutes every morning deciding whether today is a day you are allowed to wear the thing you actually want to wear.

I say this not to confess a failing. I say it because it is the truth, and this book has made me considerably less interested in pretending otherwise.

I have spent thirty-one years trying to understand exactly why the woman in the swimwear shop said what she said, why someone who believed herself to be kind could deliver an assessment like that with such cheerful authority, and what it does to a child to receive it.

I had the data.

What I did not have, until this book arrived on my desk, was the argument I did not know I had been waiting for someone to make.

I am not going to tell you what it is.

That is the book's job.

I am aware that a colleague of mine, Professor Hardwicke, Chair of Applied Follow-Through Studies, The Institute, wrote the foreword for Book Two in this series. He forwarded me his notes from the book he read. They were extensive. They were written in four different coloured pens with no discernible organisational logic, which is, from a man who has dedicated his career to the study of follow-through, a level of irony I have chosen to appreciate rather than comment on.

Hardwicke is not an effusive person. He has described precisely two pieces of work in my professional acquaintance as 'genuinely important': the first was a 2019 paper on habit dissolution by a postdoc in Copenhagen, and the second was this series.

I took note.

Hardwicke's enthusiasm is a limited and therefore reliable resource.

He was right, as it turns out.

Though I would not be telling him that in writing.

I will not summarise what follows. It does not need my summary and frankly, after thirty-one years of academic preamble, I have developed a considerable respect for books that simply get on with it. This is one of those books. Let it.

What I will say is this: the woman in the swimwear shop was wrong. Not just unkind. Wrong. The thing she was looking at was never the story. The twelve-year-old standing in the fluorescent light of that changing room, absorbing the assessment with something resembling grace, was the story. The mind behind those eyes. The person who would spend three decades turning that moment into data and then, eventually, into the ability to recognise it for what it was: someone else's problem that she had been carrying around as though it were hers.

That child was always the story.

So were you.

Whatever room you were standing in when someone first delivered their verdict on your packaging, whatever age you were, whatever the specific fluorescent light of that particular moment, the same thing was true.

The assessment was never about you.

You were always the story.

*Professor Cecily Drummond-Harte Eastern Institute for the Documentation of Things
Nobody Asked For Year Three of not standing in the cage.*

Introduction

This book has one argument.

You are not the packaging. You are the soul inside it. The world has spent so long commenting on the wrapping that you forgot the two were different things. And somewhere along the way, you handed other people the authority to write the story of who you are based entirely on what they could see from four seconds across a room.

That ends here.

This book is about reclaiming the narrative from people who were never qualified to write it.

What This Book Is Not

It is not a guide to loving your body.

No mirror affirmations. No gratitude lists about your thighs. No power poses in the bathroom at 6 am while telling your reflection that you are enough. Not because those things are wrong, exactly, but because they are still making the body the subject of the conversation, which is precisely what has exhausted you, and we are not going to do that here.

This book is also not a before-and-after.

There is no transformation arc in which you begin the book hating yourself and end it as someone who has done the internal work and now radiates a calm, hard-won acceptance while drinking green juice in soft lighting. You might end it differently. But the change is not in how you feel about your body. The change is in how much real estate your body gets in your decision-making. Which, currently, is probably an enormous amount. More than it deserves. More than it has earned.

The cultural conversation about bodies has been going on for decades. Well-resourced, well-intentioned, thoroughly exhausting. Body positivity. Self-acceptance. A thousand different ways of asking you to update your feelings about the packaging. And yes, there are books about the soul, the spirit, the inner life, the deeper self. Shelves of them. Some of them are extraordinary.

But most of them live at altitude.

This book lives at ground level. In the changing room. At the Christmas table. On the morning when you are standing in front of the mirror doing the arithmetic before you've even had coffee. This is the argument made practical, daily, and completely devoid of the kind of serene spiritual detachment that sounds lovely and is available to approximately nobody at 7 am on a Wednesday.

It puts the packaging down and asks the more interesting question: who is inside it?

Who This Is For

This book is for the person who knows exactly what they want to do and cannot make themselves do it. Not because they lack courage. Not because the opportunity isn't there. But because somewhere between the wanting and the doing, the tribunal convenes. The internal one and the external one. The voices that ask, "But what will they think?" What will they say? What will they see when they look at me walking into that room?

The person who has been waiting, not for the right moment, but for the right body. The one that finally passes the assessment. The one that stops attracting commentary. The one who earns the right to take up space without apology.

It is also for the person who moves through the world just fine, thank you, who has never considered themselves particularly held back by body image concerns, but who has a tribunal running in the background, assembling verdicts about their packaging, and spending energy that could go literally anywhere else.

Drama Dave is for you, too.

You'll meet him in Chapter Four. He has prepared remarks. They are colour-coded.

The Thesis, Stated Plainly

Your body is the vehicle. Your soul is the point.

The vehicle matters enormously. It requires fuel, rest, movement, and care. It has been carrying you, without complaint, without a single day off, without once sending you an invoice for services rendered, through every single day of your life. It deserves your respect, your attention, and your gratitude.

But it is not the destination. It is not the story.

It is what makes the story possible.

And somewhere along the way, the vehicle became the entire conversation. The commentary became so loud, the assessments so constant, the before-and-afters so relentless, that you forgot something important: the commentary was never about you. It was never about your soul. It was about the packaging. The surface. The thing people could see from four seconds across a room.

Your soul was never even in that conversation.

It was standing just out of frame the entire time, going: that's not me. That's not me. THAT'S NOT ME.

This book is about putting the vehicle back in its lane, caring for it properly, and finally turning your attention to the thing that was always the point.

The soul in the packaging.

Yours specifically.

It has been waiting long enough.

How This Book Works

Ten chapters. Each one takes the central argument and examines it from a different angle, because the argument is simple and the wiring that runs counter to it is not, and dismantling that wiring takes time, repetition, and occasionally a very specific story about a pregnancy test in a Kuala Lumpur airport.

You will get to that story.

It earns its place.

At the end of every chapter, there is a chapter chat. It is a conversation, not a lecture, not a quiz, not a reflection prompt designed by someone who has never met you. It's just a friend, sitting across from you.

Access the audio via the link here:

www.themomentumrule.com/YourBodyIsNotYourSoul,

You will need to enter the access code the first time you access the page.

There is also a song for each chapter; most have one, one has two, written specifically for it, because some things land differently when they arrive as music rather than words on a page. You do not have to listen. But if you are the kind of person who has ever been undone by a song at exactly the right moment, which you probably are because you are reading this book, you might want to.

Just click on the link after the chapter or access the audio at

www.themomentumrule.com/YourBodyIsNotYourSoul. All songs are also available on Spotify, Apple Music, YouTube, and all other major music platforms.

Read the chapters in order if you can. The chapters build on each other in ways that are not always obvious until they are. But if you are reading this at 11 pm after a day with the specific texture that makes you need a book like this, start wherever the chapter title finds you. The book will hold.

One note: this is the third book in the Momentum Series, but it does not require the first two. If you have read *The Momentum Rule* and *The But I Will Era*, you will recognise some threads and some characters. If you haven't, those books will still be there when this one is done. Right now, this is the book you need.

The argument is simple.

The packaging was never the point.

You were always the point.

Let's go find you.

Chapter 1

You Were Never Quiet

You weren't hiding. You were screaming. You just kept looking at the wrong thing.

You already know the look.

The one that clocks you, calculates, and moves on. The one that happens before you've said a word, before you've had a chance to be anything to anyone in that room. The one that tells you, in under a second, that you've been weighed up and found wanting.

You've been getting that look your whole life.

The eyes that move past you to the next person. The conversation that doesn't quite include you. The expression that flickers before the smile arrives. The remark that was supposed to be a joke. The energy in the room that tells you, before anyone has asked you a single question, that you are not who they were hoping would walk through the door.

You know exactly what I'm talking about.

Because you have been reading that language your entire life.

And the thing that does the real damage isn't the look itself.

It's that you started to believe it was accurate.

That the disinterest was a verdict.

That being looked past meant there was nothing worth looking at.

Your body is not you.

Your body is not you. It is the vehicle you arrived in. It will get commentary your whole life, it will be assessed and compared and found wanting by people who are working entirely from the surface, and none of that commentary will ever once be about who you are. Because who you are is not visible from four seconds across a room. It never was. The people making the assessment were never looking at the right thing.

They were looking at the packaging.

You are what's inside it.

And because the commentary is never going to stop, the work that matters is the work you do on the inside. Look after your body, yes. Be healthy, move it, fuel it, respect it. But do that for you, not for them. Because the real work, the work this book is about, is building the version of yourself that is so grounded in who you are that the opinions of people who have never once looked past the surface become simply irrelevant. Not something to fight. Not something to defend against.

Just irrelevant.

That's what this book is for.

I was in a negotiation once. A room full of men, a table full of decisions, and I was the one who had done the work, knew the negotiation points back to front. I was the one asking the questions.

They answered my boss.

Not because he asked them. Not because he was more senior at that moment, or more prepared, or more across the details. But because in that room, in that country, the idea that the woman at the table was the one who mattered simply did not compute. So, they looked past me. Directly past me. And directed every answer to the man beside me, who had the grace to look uncomfortable about it.

You know that room.

The woman who disappears the moment a man walks in. The youngest person at the table who has to say the same thing twice before anyone writes it down. The man whose accent means his idea gets ignored until someone who sounds more like the room repeats it back. The person who doesn't look the part and has to be twice as good just to be considered half as credible.

Same look. Same calculation. Same verdict delivered before anyone opened their mouth.

The specifics change. The mechanism doesn't.

Four seconds of visual data. That is the entire basis of the assessment. That is all they had.

They had no idea who you were. They were working from four seconds of visual data and a lifetime of their own unexamined assumptions about what bodies mean and what they're worth. They weren't seeing you. They were seeing their own story, projected onto the first available surface. You just happened to be standing there when someone else's limitations were on display.

That's not a verdict. That's not even about you.

And it wasn't just that room. It was every room. Every size. Every season.

I have been a size 8, and I have been a size 16. I have been fit and athletic, and I have been the mother who was working full time and running on four hours sleep and hadn't seen the inside of a gym in two years, standing over the kitchen bench at 6 pm finishing whatever the kids left because that counted as dinner.

I got judged at every single size.

Not always out loud. Sometimes out loud. The comments that arrive are wrapped in concern. The looks that arrive without any wrapping at all. The way a room responds to you

differently depending on what you look like when you walk into it, and the way you feel that difference in your body, even when nobody says a word.

And when you came home, it wasn't necessarily safer.

My mother used to joke about my nose.

She called it my underpants nose. She had a school photo on the wall, and she would show people, covering the top half with her finger, that it looked exactly like a pair of underpants. She wasn't trying to cause damage. She was just doing what people do when they're uncomfortable with something they can't fix: making it into a joke so nobody must sit with the discomfort.

I sat with it for years anyway. Carried it into every room. Clocked it in every photo. Added it to the running inventory of reasons I might not be quite enough.

I don't do that anymore.

I genuinely, completely do not care about my nose.

Not because it changed. It didn't change. It is exactly the nose it has always been, the nose my mother joked about, the nose that is just part of the face I arrived in.

I just stopped letting it have a vote.

And now, when it comes up, because it still comes up, I say: God didn't give me this nose for nothing. I can smell trouble from three suburbs away.

That's not a coping mechanism.

That's what it looks like when something stops having power over you.

The people who love you can cut the deepest. And sometimes, without knowing it at all, they can also hand you the key.

My brother used to introduce me the same way every time.

To his friends, to people we met, to anyone who needed to know who I was. This is my sister. She has the brains; I have the good looks. Delivered with complete confidence, like it was simply a fact about the world. He wasn't being profound. He was a cheeky older brother, taking the wins that were available to him.

He just happened to be accidentally right.

The packaging and the person are different things. He knew it without ever having to think about it. It never occurred to him that the two were supposed to be the same.

He was handsome. He was funny. He was the kind of person rooms turned toward automatically, without trying.

And he struggled his whole life with what people thought of him.

Not what they thought of his face. What they thought of him. His soul. The interior of the person behind the packaging that everyone responded to so easily.

He died at twenty-four.

His soul continues, wherever he is now.

His body does not.

I have thought about that more times than I can count. The brother who had never once been penalised for how he looked, who never had to add his body to the list of reasons he might not be enough, still got undone by what people thought of him.

Just not his body.

Everything else.

Which is why the work must be on the inside. Not instead of looking after yourself on the outside. But because the outside was never the thing that was going to save you. The commentary doesn't stop when you lose the weight or change the hair or finally fit the room's idea of acceptable. It just finds something else.

The only thing that changes the equation is becoming so grounded in who you are that the assessment stops mattering. Not fighting it. Not defending against it. Just reaching a place where someone's opinion of your packaging is as relevant to your day as the weather in a country you've never visited.

Which is to say: not relevant at all.

I wrote a song about it once. It's called Irrelevant. It says everything this chapter just said, in three minutes and twenty seconds, and it ends with two words that took me longer than I care to admit meaning.

No hard feelings.

Just distance.

That's where you're going.

Pull up a chair.

End note: Your chapter chat is waiting. She was never quiet. Now she's been heard.

Follow link for audio: www.themomentumrule.com/YourBodyIsNotYourSoul

There is a song for this chapter too. "Irrelevant." No hard feelings. Just distance. That's where you're going. Follow the link or find it on the "Your Body Is Not Your Soul" Album on Spotify, Apple Music, YouTube, and wherever you listen.

Chapter 2

The Gift You Didn't Open

You've been the second gift your whole life. Sitting there. Screaming: open me. I'm the good one.

I want you to think about a gift.

Not a metaphorical gift.

An actual gift.

The kind with paper and ribbon and that aggressive amount of sticky tape that takes seven minutes to remove while everyone watches and someone's dad says 'just rip it!' and you absolutely will not because that is not how you open things.

Now imagine two of them, sitting side by side.

The first one is immaculate.

Thick, expensive paper. Perfectly sharp corners. A ribbon that curls exactly right. The kind of wrapping that makes you feel guilty opening it.

The second one is fine.

A little loved. The corners are not what a geometry teacher would call sharp. Someone tried very hard with the ribbon and the ribbon is aware of this and doing its best. It is wrapped with love, clearly, but nobody is going to photograph it for Instagram.

Which one do you reach for first?

We all know.

The beautiful one.

Every time.

Don't feel bad about it.

You are simply human, and humans are wired to respond to presentation. Centuries of evolution, thousands of years of cultural conditioning, and six months of scrolling curated content have all conspired to make that beautiful package feel like a promise.

Of course you reach for it first.

We all do.

This is not a character flaw. This is just the opening premise. Stay with me.

Now here's the part that matters.

You open the beautiful one.

Slowly, reverently, because surely something this carefully presented must be extraordinary.

And it is. For about thirty seconds.

Then you realise.

The gorgeous packaging contained something that made you feel small. That took more than it gave. That made you question yourself, shrink yourself, apologise for yourself. That was charming on the surface and quietly devastating underneath.

Beautiful to look at.

Exhausting to be around.

You know this gift. You have received it in various forms over the years. The friendship that was thrilling and then hollow. The relationship that looked extraordinary from the outside, the kind people commented on, the kind that photographed well, and felt from the inside like a slow leak. The workplace, the opportunity, the thing you pursued because it was impressive and discovered was impressive in the way that a very complicated piece of furniture is impressive: aesthetically correct and completely uncomfortable to actually be in.

You kept it, for a while. Because it looks so good on the shelf. Because people comment on it. Because you feel like you should be grateful. Because somewhere in the back of your mind a voice is saying: but it's so beautiful. Surely the problem is me.

The problem was never you.

Now here is the part I need you to sit with.

You have been the plain-wrapped gift your entire life.

Sitting there. At the table. While people reach past you to get to something with better ribbon.

You have watched this happen in rooms. In conversations. In opportunities. In the specific, demoralising physics of being the person everyone eventually gets around to, after the shinier options have been thoroughly explored and found to contain slightly less than expected.

You were there the whole time.

Exactly what was advertised.

More, actually.

But nobody checked.

And I already know what just happened in your head.

But I'm not plain packaging. I look fine. I'm a perfectly normal-looking person who just happens to have some complicated feelings about their body.

Good. Hold that feeling for a second. Notice how quickly it arrived. Notice how automatic it was to defend yourself against being called the less impressive package.

That defensiveness is the whole point.

The gift metaphor is not about how you look. It is not making a claim about your appearance in either direction. It is not calling you plain or beautiful or anything in between.

But the fact that being called plain-wrapped stings at all tells you exactly how deep the wiring runs. How thoroughly you have been trained to locate your value in the packaging. How reflexive the comparison is, even when you're being told the comparison is irrelevant.

The sting is the data.

Now. Back to the second gift.

Then you open it.

And holy hell.

It's everything.

The friend who answers at 2 am without making you feel like a burden. The relationship that makes you feel like the most interesting person in any room. The person who remembers the small things, laughs at your jokes, tells you the truth even when it's uncomfortable, and shows up, actually shows up, when everything goes wrong.

Full of light and warmth and the particular safety of being completely known.

The wrapping told you nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

Some part of you has always known this. You've felt the scream of it.

OPEN ME.

I'M THE GOOD ONE.

The people who matter? They always unwrap the second gift. Always. Every single person you would go to war for, every relationship that has changed you, every friendship that still makes you feel like yourself. They opened the second gift. They looked past the wrapping and found you.

And they were not surprised by what they found. They were not relieved that the plain wrapping concealed something decent after all. They were not faintly impressed, as though you had exceeded low expectations.

They were just delighted.

As if finding you was exactly what they had expected.

As if the wrapping had never even registered.

The question this book is asking, the only question that matters, is this:

When are you going to open yourself?

Not when you've lost the weight. Not when you're younger or older or more acceptable or less visible.

Now.

As you are.

Wrinkled ribbon and all.

The wrapping told you nothing. The gift is waiting. Let's talk about what's inside it.

Pull up a chair.

End note: Your chapter chat is waiting. The second gift. The one that was always the point.

Follow link for audio: www.themomentumrule.com/YourBodyIsNotYourSoul

And there's a song for this chapter too. "The Chair." Pull up a chair. You've been the second gift your whole life. Time to open yourself. Follow the link or find it on the "Your Body Is Not Your Soul" Album on Spotify, Apple Music, YouTube, and wherever you listen.

