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Hood (Object Lessons)



Synopsis

Object Lessons is a series of short, beautifully designed books about the hidden lives of ordinary things. We all wear hoods: the Grim Reaper, Red Riding Hood, torturers, executioners and the executed, athletes, laborers, anarchists, rappers, babies in onesies, and anyone who's ever grabbed a hoodie on a chilly day. Alison Kinney's Hood explores the material and symbolic vibrancy of this everyday garment and political semaphore, which often protects the powerful at the expense of the powerless-with deadly results. Kinney considers medieval clerics and the Klan, anti-hoodie campaigns and the Hooded Man of Abu Ghraib, the Inquisition and the murder of Trayvon Martin, uncovering both the hooded perpetrators of violence and the hooded victims in their sights. Object Lessons is published in partnership with an essay series in *The Atlantic*.

Book Information

Series: Object Lessons

Paperback: 176 pages

Publisher: Bloomsbury Academic (January 28, 2016)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1501307401

ISBN-13: 978-1501307409

Product Dimensions: 4.9 x 0.6 x 6.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars Â See all reviews Â (6 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #194,222 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #110 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Aesthetics #149 in Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Beauty, Grooming, & Style > Style & Clothing #1236 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Anthropology > Cultural

Customer Reviews

This is a thought provoking look at how hoods have been perceived throughout history. I liked how the author noted that hoods are often used to hide unjust behaviors (KKK, executions, etc.) and also used as an excuse for racist behavior. This is an interesting book that covers some very difficult concepts. I look forward to reading future books by this author.

Last semester, I taught a new course on Monster Movies. This was, of course, tremendous fun, but it was also serious work. We watched so many wonderful films, read great essays about them, and

had lively conversations each week. One of the leitmotifs of the course was "People are the worst." This was not really where I'd anticipated taking the course. We had vampires and zombies and artificially constructed horrors, but time and again, week after week, we found ourselves concluding that however bad the demons/dragons/revenants/Evil Dead were, it was the humans who really, really were just the worst. The overarching narrative of course crystalized on the day that we discussed George Romero's 1968 classic *Night of the Living Dead*, the film that reinvented the zombie and became the source for more or less all subsequent zombie narratives. It is a brilliant film. Really. If you don't believe me, you haven't seen it. Get a copy. You need to see this film. The last few minutes transform all that has come before, and it is all suddenly (according to Romero, unintentionally) a parable about the ways that we divide ourselves from one another, and in particular the ways that race, or racial thought, leads to wanton waste of life. There isn't a hood within it, not that I recall anyway, and yet I kept thinking of it as I read Alison Kinney's phenomenal new book, *Hood*, in Bloomsbury's innovative Object Lessons series. Each book in the series focuses on a single object type -- Shipping Container, Cigarette Lighter, Bookshelf. Hoods might seem the most innocuous of subjects, just nice bits of fabric to keep off the rain or the wind, but as Kinney traces their history from the Middle Ages forward, it becomes increasingly clear that this simple object is embedded in some of the most potent cultural currents. The book is small and slim, beautifully produced and a pleasure to hold. The writing is likewise beautiful, but the content is hard, harsh, startling, and necessary. Kinney starts with the hoods we all think were worn by executioners, but reveals that this is a modern fiction, that it was the executed who more often were (and are) made to wear the hood. Nineteenth-century writers reveal the reason: the condemned must wear a hood in order to protect "the witnesses, even the executioner himself ... the most vulnerable people at an execution, while the prisoner was a kind of Grim Reaper, even at the moment of his own death" (19). If you are tempted to argue that people being executed deserve what they get, read this book's accounts of lynchings of men, women (including a gut-wrenching account of the lynching of a pregnant woman), and, yes, children. The revelation of a process of inversion of blame, where the victim becomes the threat and his murderers become the endangered, runs throughout the book, and is one of many disturbing realities it reveals. This hoodwinking is a key part of what Kinney calls "[t]he minstrelsy of victimhood," a brilliant phrase I will be borrowing (with citation) for in my current book (50). Hood did something I wouldn't have thought possible: it made me realize that the Ku Klux Klan, which the Southern Poverty Law Center calls "the most infamous and oldest" of American hate groups" is worse than I thought it was. How could they be any worse? Read the book. They are even worse. The hoods are just the start. Ben, the African-American protagonist of

Night of the Living Dead, does not wear a hoodie. He dresses "just right." He is a preppy, Joe College type, wearing a cardigan through much of the film, even while driving a tire iron through the forehead of a zombie. He seems at pains to demonstrate that he is a good guy (even if, in a cathartic moment, he slugs the middle-aged white guy). I thought of this film at several points in my reading, but it seems most relevant toward the end. We all know, from the very image on the cover, where it is all tilting. He is mentioned in passing on page 98 but discussion of this most prominent case doesn't really happen until page 108. Indeed, when he is first introduced, Kinney is coy about it, knowing that we all know the name. She writes: On a drizzly evening, February 26, 2012, one teenager in a hoodie tried to make himself invisible, to keep his head down in a dangerous environment. 'That man's following me,' he told his friend over the phone. 'I'm going to run.' He never made it home. "He" is, of course, Trayvon Martin, the Black boy shot and murdered by George Zimmerman, an overzealous, self-appointed, apparently paranoiac, violence-seeking "neighborhood watch" member who was acquitted, in part, because the boy he shot was wearing a hood. What follows is a sorrowful, infuriating litany of names that runs for a couple of pages: Trayvon shouldn't have been one of the countless people wearing hoodies on that rainy night ... Michael Brown shouldn't have walked in the street. Nicholas Heyward (thirteen years old) and Tamir Rice (twelve) shouldn't have been playing ... Jonathan Ferrell and Renisha McBride shouldn't have needed help after car accidents ... (111-112) The list culminates a page later with, "Eric Garner shouldn't have stopped breathing" (113). These "errors" at first feel increasingly arbitrary, but they are not. They are all equally so. Wearing a hooding or walking in the street is, yes, a more conscious and deliberate act than stopping breathing, but they are not reasons to die, and not, despite court rulings that demonstrate no regard for Black lives, justifications for murder. The key is that it wasn't the hood. It was never the hood. The hood tells us nothing about Martin, and everything about Zimmerman, his defenders, the jury, the media. "The rhetorical uses of Martin's hoodie," Kinney writes, "revealed not his attributes, but those of the people who committed, rationalized, and exonerated the shooting of an unarmed teenager walking home" (109). Like the hooded prisoners being executed, this hooded boy was seen as somehow causing his own death by wearing a sweatshirt. Through the magic of the hood, victim is turned into the perpetrator, and the murderer becomes a victim. And we are all hoodwinked. [...]

Hood is a must-read Object Lesson for anyone interested in social and racial justice. Not merely an obscure object of clothing, the ubiquitous hood has been used to hide, shame, protect, embolden and subjugate its wearers. Kinney brilliantly weaves together different anecdotes in order to bring a

stunning portrait of the power and controversy that can surround such a simple piece of clothing. From hooded executioners, to hooded executioners, from the KKK to Trayvon Martin, she delves into what the Hood has come to symbolize in our society. The first two chapters are the most cohesive and tightly knit, though I also appreciated the looser format of the subsequent chapters. I was especially touched by the last chapter's review of the Trayvon Martin case and the Black Lives Matter movement. In particular, I was impacted by the contrast drawn between wearers of the hood (or in this case, the 'hoodie')--how it is often criminalized when people of color wear them, but gains no such notoriety when worn by white people. It's a powerful comparison that underscores our highly racialized society and the still-pervasive influence of white supremacy. As Kinney asserts near the end of the book: "The history of hoods is that of people going about their daily lives only to face pain and injustice. It's also the history of people determining whose lives do and don't count, who is or isn't human, what is or isn't an object....So long as we all wear hoods, so long as we experience privilege or precarity in them, we're forced into the struggle between the humanizers and the objectifiers, between vulnerable lives and the reduction of people to objects."

"The Hood" is a social history about the way we use hoods and what they have come to stand for. It's about the role hoods have played in justice and injustice and how hoods are used to define and control people. When looking at historical uses of hoods, it was usually to point out that they didn't actually use hoods or they didn't use the hoods they're depicted as wearing in later paintings or movies. The author looked at how hoods are used to dehumanize the victims in executions, terrorism, torture, and protests. She also examined how hoods are blamed for biased behavior toward blacks or peaceful protesters. I'd recommend this book to those interested in a closer look at relatively recent instances (Spanish Inquisition, KKK, Abu Ghraib, etc.) of injustice that involved hoods. I received an ebook review copy of this book from the publisher through NetGalley.

Stunning, highly informative, often hilarious, and very, very moving. Full of surprising facts, with a lot of original research. Great for people interested in clothing history (of course), visual arts (medieval to modern), feminism, and racial justice.

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