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## THE GLOBE AND MAIL

April 9, 2010

### Review: The Authenticity Hoax, by Andrew Potter

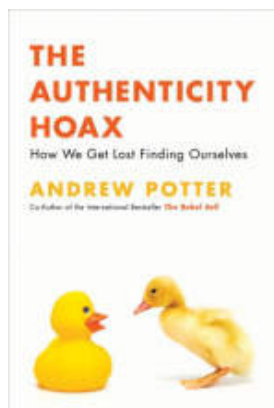
By Reviewed by Susan Pinker  
Globe and Mail Update

*For Andrew Potter, our modern mania for authenticity is just another form of old-fashioned status-seeking*

Quick: Which is more authentic? Living in a renovated industrial loft or in a four-bedroom house in the suburbs? Eating eggs laid by the two heritage chickens in your Berkeley (or Haliburton) yard, or the cheaper-by-the-dozen ones from the organic farm that supplies your local supermarket? Wearing Levi's acid-washed "vintage" jeans bought at Wal-Mart, or Prps, woven on "vintage looms ... and inspired by the denim worn by actual workers" (\$275-\$400 a pair)?

Or how about a vacation to EU-regulated Spain versus a trip to Buddhist Bhutan, a country that favours its Gross National Happiness index over its Gross National Product, and that also has the lowest rates of literacy and life expectancy in Asia?

If you've chosen the rarefied option in every case, the good (well, sort of good) news is that you're not exactly alone. In his romp through the roots of our keep-it-real, be-yourself and tell-it-all habits, Maclean's columnist Andrew Potter shows how modern culture has become obsessed with the experience of authenticity at any cost. We are willing to pay through the nose for the feeling that our lives have meaning - whether through "natural" foods, bikram yoga or Restoration Hardware bathroom taps.



The Authenticity Hoax: How We Get Lost Finding Ourselves, by Andrew Potter, McClelland & Stewart, 308 pages,

\$32.99

Given this commitment to being true to ourselves (oops, I mean true to our tastes), our wallets are not just getting thinner, our capacity for independent thinking is shrinking, too. Because ultimately, there is no such thing as authenticity, Potter writes, "not in the way it needs to exist for the widespread search to make sense."

What there is instead is a phenomenon baby boomers might remember from the "fight the power" rebellions of their youth: old-fashioned status-seeking. Their parents and grandparents "made it" through buying houses in safe neighbourhoods, club memberships and the latest Chrysler gas guzzler. Now, their aging kids and hipster grandkids are out to show they've made it too, but their markers of success are a little different. The new form of one-upmanship is proving your individualism and authenticity through ecotourism, competitive environmentalism, eating organic and fetishizing anything considered to be non-Western (think quinoa, sacred crop of the Incas, "natural" remedies or dining-room fixtures made out of antlers).

"Potter seldom fails to entertain"

The irony, of course, is that this counter-culture stance is now the mainstream. The more people who seek fulfilment via the so-called "anti-corporate" subculture among their panoply of options (the skater-urban punk aesthetic, the \$6 carton of organic milk, the political identification with the pre-modern cultural underdog), the more competitive and commercial these choices become. Thinking of adopting the 100-mile diet? There's now a 50-mile diet that creates a smaller footprint. Or, better still, spend a year eating only what you've grown in your back garden, like novelist Barbara Kingsolver or writer Laura Ingalls Wilder, of *Little House on the Prairie* fame. She baked the bread, churned the butter, fed the woodstove, tended the apple orchard and raised the chickens that provided the food her family ate.

Sound familiar? If this lifestyle sounds like a Michael Pollan-style idyll, it's also a form of slavery your ancestors worked their butts off to leave behind.

Paradoxically (and this book is full of paradoxes), Potter shows us that it's precisely the largesse and the freedoms engendered by free-market, industrialized democracies that allow us to scoff at the excesses of these societies and romanticize everything that came before.

"My argument is not that once upon a time we lived authentic lives - that we used to live in authentic communities and listen to authentic music and eat authentic food and participate in authentic culture - and now that authenticity is gone," Potter writes. No, his argument is that now that we've rejected the religious practices, social mores and hopeful belief in progress of our parents, we make do with Oprah's Book Club and Real Simple magazine, and call it authenticity instead.

One of the delights of this book is discovering how the pervasive search for authenticity makes for strange political bedfellows. In his pitiless juxtapositions, Potter connects the dots between Sarah Palin-style authenticity ("Mother ... Moose hunter ... Maverick"), Reverend Al Sharpton's questioning whether Obama is authentically black ("Just because you're our colour, doesn't make you our kind") and *Beauty Myth* author Naomi Wolf's description of an "authentic" female individuality, one that weirdly endorses the requirement that Muslim women cover up.

Pulling on the traditional dress and head-scarf while travelling in Morocco, Potter says, Wolf described how, in making her body and her long flowing hair invisible, "I felt a novel sense of calm and serenity. I felt, yes, in certain ways, free." Potter gleefully calls this "authenticity tourism," and riffs that Wolf's cloaked jaunt through a Moroccan bazaar is like a Western visitor to the Lithuanian theme park called Survival Drama in a Soviet Bunker; by trying on "authentic" Muslim dress, Wolf learns about as much about the strictures of a Muslim woman as tourists learn about being a prisoner of the KGB.

Whether lampooning Prince Charles's loopy "principles of harmony," yuppie food fetishes or what anti-globalists conceive of as the virtuous life (eschewing light bulbs but not their laptops), Potter seldom fails to entertain. His wide-ranging history of authenticity is nothing short of the greatest hits of modernity.

And in showcasing the precursors of our new obsession with the primitive, he shows us that, philosophically speaking,

our 21st-century notions of authenticity are nothing new at all. Not only had "the stupendously vain and egotistical" Jean-Jacques Rousseau said it all before, but authentic ways of talking, making judgments or artistic preferences are simply the latest fashion statements, earnest attempts to fill an intellectual and spiritual vacuum that don't pick out any real properties in the world.

But in meandering through the false distinctions between what's really fake, and what's really real, this book sometimes felt like an unplanned road trip. En route, I rediscovered cool factoids and grimaced in self-recognition when Potter poked holes in "dopey nostalgia" that I hadn't realized I'd signed on to. But I often didn't know where I was and how I got there. You might say that sometimes I got lost finding what it all had to do with authenticity. But hey, it was real, and I sure had some fun times along the way.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist, a Globe and Mail columnist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*.*

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