

# Nip and Tuck

Alex Kuczynski's report on plastic surgery is part memoir, part investigation.



Debby Morello/The New York Times

## BEAUTY JUNKIES

Inside Our \$15 Billion Obsession With Cosmetic Surgery.

By Alex Kuczynski.

290 pp. Doubleday. \$24.95.

By TONI BENTLEY

“‘I’TS only liposuction’ are the three most dangerous words in the English language,” screams an outraged former patient played by Jill Clayburgh. She’s standing on a street corner in a business suit, shoving fliers at alarmed pedestrians. Each flier features a gruesome photograph of her botched stomach liposuction. It looks as if a pit bull was the doctor.

This scene appears in “Nip/Tuck,” the subversive television drama that, in the words of its creator, is “anti-plastic-surgery” because “for the most part, plastic surgery does not solve your problems.” The word seems to be getting around. Now we have Alex Kuczynski’s “Beauty Junkies: Inside Our \$15 Billion Obsession With Cosmetic Surgery,” just in time to protect a few other bellies from butchery.

But it may well be a losing battle. Cosmetic surgery is now so prevalent that it could qualify as a national epidemic. And under all that Botox — the gateway procedure — as well as the face-lifts and tummy tucks, lies a sinister story, as deep as it is shallow. In exploring it, Kuczynski, a former reporter for The New York Times who now contributes the Critical Shopper column to Thursday Styles, has performed a real service. She gives you everything you need to know — the menu of procedures (right down to toe liposuction), the price tags, the names of doctors and dentists, the drugs, the implements and implants,

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the celebrity patients. She also lays out the dangers, the disasters and the deaths.

Along with the reporting, Kuczynski provides delicious tidbits for the cocktail-party circuit: that, for example, the synthetic collagen called Cosmoplast is manufactured from fetal foreskin stem cells harvested from a single baby boy, who would now be a teenager. (It’s probably a good thing, she notes, that he doesn’t know that cells from his penis are filling “the lips of hundreds of thousands of men and women around the planet.” He might need as many therapists.)

Kuczynski manages to sustain that light tone, and doesn’t spoil the illusion inherent in her subject by looking very far below the surface for the “why” of it all. She neglects, for example, to mention the sobering recent studies suggesting that women who have had cosmetic surgery are three times as likely as their sagging peers to kill themselves. In other words, depressed women are the most common beauty junkies.

Make that depressed women with extra cash. Cosmetic surgery is still mostly an elitist preoccupation, though some plucky girls take up collections on the Internet,

promising their benefactors pictures of their new breasts. Indulging in just a few of the procedures outlined in Kuczynski’s book can cost more than \$50,000.

How did this practice of self-mutilation, masquerading as a search for beauty, become not only a society-sanctioned addiction but a \$15 billion industry? Economic greed and insecure women are such a potent combination that plastic surgery now rivals, economically, the far less disingenuous, much-criticized pornography industry. Which one, you have to wonder, hurts women more? Kuczynski connects the two, proposing that the desire to look like a porn star is one of the most prevalent motivations for the society ladies who indulge in the most cosmetic surgery. “Beauty Junkies” documents, in morbid detail, an obsession that represents a failure in the 150-year battle of American feminism to empower women. One of the faces of so-called third wave feminism may be the literally paralyzed mask of the surgically remastered woman.

Kuczynski is well equipped, given her own surgical dabbling, for her subject. Her book is, in fact, a curious hybrid — half investigation, half memoir. “I was myself a beauty junkie,” she has admitted in an interview, adding: “I think of myself as a method journalist. ... I couldn’t have written this book without knowing intimately the experience of the cosmetic surgery patient. I don’t think anybody at The Times would say, She’s shallow because she had puffy upper eyelids and had them fixed. The extent of the procedures that I subjected myself to was not so over-the-top that it invites ridicule.”

This is debatable. Two-thirds of the way into her book, Kuczynski takes a detailed detour into an account of her own adventures, lasting almost a decade, with “what we refer to in New York as maintenance.” This personal story — in which she moves from microdermabrasion to collagen treatments to Bo-

tox injections to liposuction, eyelid surgery and Restylane-plumped lips — may sell more books, enliven the gossip columns and provide a necessary pre-emptive strike against her critics. But Kuczynski’s objective-subjective straddle can be compromising; at the very least, it argues against the supposition, in this age of the memoir, that one’s vanity is expiated by self-exposure. This bright, well-employed, sophisticated woman confesses to being “honest and brutal and bitchy” and then proves her claim while cruelly assessing the sewn-up skin flaps on a formerly obese lawyer, a doctor’s “prize patient” at a medical conference in New York. This vulnerable and brave woman is, in fact, one of the few truly poignant characters in the book, but Kuczynski demonstrates no compassion for her.

In addition to the story of the \$6,000 she spent to suction fat “out of my rear,” Kuczynski tells a tale of her two eyelids. She had them lifted — the “puffy” problem — though she displays, with admirable humility, one of her pretty blue “before” eyes on her book’s jacket. Sixteen times. At nearly 40, she has now sworn off surgery and informs us not only that aging is inevitable — “time’s winged chariot will catch up to you and march all over your face” — but that she gets “smarter every year.” Her surgical obsession, she confesses, did not achieve “its ultimate goal: happiness and satisfaction.”

Kuczynski’s book is most interesting when she switches from the confessional to the informative, as in her brief but fascinating chapter on the history of plastic surgery. In the second half of the 16th century, an ingenious method of rhinoplasty was devised by an Italian doctor, Gaspare Tagliacozzi, for a Knight of Malta whose nose had been mangled in a duel. Tagliacozzi cut two parallel incisions in one of the man’s upper arms, encouraging the wound to heal with the flap hanging loose. Two weeks later, he secured the flap onto the man’s face, holding the arm in place with a sling. After several weeks of this inconvenience, when the arm tissue had grown into the remaining nose tissue, the arm was cut free. Thus began the first of six surgeries to shape the lump of scar tissue into something resembling a nose. (This elaborate procedure was admittedly imperfect. A sneeze could blow the whole thing right off your face and across the dinner table.)

Kuczynski’s story of the beauty regimen of Mrs. X, the wife of a film-industry executive, demonstrates just how far we’ve come since the knight’s battle of honor — although there’s very little honor here. The compulsive activities of this “Hollywood housewife,” suggest a kind of cosmetic Münchausen syndrome. Her basic maintenance routine involves hair coloring and styling (twice a week), facials (once a week) and full-body waxing (once a week), as well as periodic use of tanners, regular manicures, teeth cleaning and whitening. Her face and body are slathered with expensive creams made from caviar, 24-karat gold, human growth hormone or wild yam extract. For keeping her muscles toned, there’s Pilates, tennis and Roling. Mrs. X also visits two or three plastic surgeons about three times a year to discuss what needs fixing. She has been injected with Gore-Tex, Botox and Artecoll, and is a member of a Restylane frequent-user awards program. (How many miles of Restylane gets you a freebie?) She has had liposuction and breast augmentation — in, out, then in again, but big-

You have to wonder: which big business hurts American women more — cosmetic surgery or pornography?

ger — and has “done” her eyes and brows. “She is,” Kuczynski notes, “among her peer group, considered the norm.”

Last year, Mrs. X crossed the final frontier with labiaplasty — getting that whole mess down there cleaned up, tightened up and, as it were, re-virginized. Genital cosmetic surgery is, according to Kuczynski, one of the most rapidly growing “areas in the field.” Finally, the doctors have located the original sin and defanged the vagina dentata. This creation of an alternate surface through surgery — the Jungian shadow side taking a walk on the outside — raises interesting spiritual questions. At the pearly gates — and many Americans claim to believe in heaven — will St. Peter turn a blind eye to your body and see your soul? Or will he fail to recognize your reconstructed self and direct you to the unknown-persons department for all eternity?

At its most extreme, this craze for plastic surgery is more than a display of culturally conditioned self-hatred. It is, rather, a current manifestation of female masochism — a sister compulsion to anorexia, bulimia, cutting and excessive tattooing and piercing. Here ritual, aesthetics, theatrics and exhibitionism are ceremonious enactments of self-annihilation in the hope of transcendence (if you’re a romantic) or escape (if you’re a realist). These are death and resurrection exercises. Self-loathing, on the other hand, keeps you firmly in the eternal hell of the here and now.

But unlike religious or sexual masochism, which is free (except for the occasional dominatrix), plastic surgery is expensive — even if, as more and more people do, you put it on a credit card. It has become a perversion of a perversion, thanks to the cynicism of the pharmaceutical and medical industries, dynamo publicists and doctors who on occasion perform what one of Kuczynski’s sources calls a “P.W.B.” or “positive wallet biopsy.” How paradoxical that in our society masochism is considered a pathology to be cured, while cosmetic surgery is celebrated and encouraged, especially in popular women’s magazines.

**D**ARE one note that this particular form of self-mortification intimates a kind of subcutaneous eroticism? Perhaps unwittingly, Kuczynski titles her own confessional chapter “My Love Affair With Dr. Michelle.” After all, the doctor is an authority figure (whether male or female) who inserts various instruments into the body in order to implant “injectable fillers.” It’s difficult not to recall that in the late 19th century, doctors were the first to offer the vibrator cure for hysterical women. That too was once considered a legitimate “medical” practice.

Kuczynski finishes her book having sworn off surgery herself — after her Restylane “large yam” lip debacle. “By the time this book comes out,” she writes proudly, “I won’t have had a Botox shot or a collagen shot for a year.” You go, girl! However, her simplistic admonishment to “stop and think. And think and stop,” will deter no one intent on surgical self-improvement. It doesn’t even begin to confront the hunger being assuaged by external alteration.

Asked if she ever considered a career, Mrs. X, the film-colony wife, replies: “No, because I was never going to be that good at anything. Or at least I was never going to be so good at anything that I would have made a difference.” The disguise of a woman who has sewn, injected and scraped her surface into a masked carapace is only a distraction from her profound, perhaps unconscious sadness. Here the pathos in the Bride of Frankenstein’s agonized cinematic scream finds a brand-new face. □

# Feast or Famine

*Chronicling two centuries of predictions about the food supply.*

## MEALS TO COME

*A History of the Future of Food.*

By Warren Belasco.

Illustrated. 358 pp. University of California Press. Cloth, \$55; paper, \$21.95.

By MATT LEE AND TED LEE

**I**F you choose a bag of organic tortilla chips over a conventional one as a vote for saner farming, you are unwittingly taking a position in a centuries-old, three-way debate about the earth’s future. By attempting to shift demand to a form of agriculture that uses the environment less intensively, you would appear to share the view of the English radical William Godwin (1756-1836), who thought that only a smarter allocation of the earth’s resources could ensure a livable future.

The pessimist Thomas Malthus (1766-1834) might not have cared, either way. Which ever chip he chose, he foresaw disaster in rampant population growth. His “Essay on the Principle of Population as It Affects the Future Improvement of Society” (1798) was published as a retort to both Godwin and the Marquis de Condorcet, a French mathematician whose faith in scientific ingenuity allowed him to envision a cornucopian future of infinite agricultural bounty. (Condorcet might have eaten both chips, with equal gusto.)

In “Meals to Come” Warren Belasco establishes this tripartite framework for the debate, and chronicles two centuries of Western futurism as it relates to consumption, examining the forces that have shaped predictions of famine and bounty: inflation, imperialism, racism, sexism and power struggles, to name a few. We learn right away that the various seers — sociologists, filmmakers, Food and Drug Administration scientists, demographers, philosophers and chemical salesmen — can’t seem to shake contemporary circumstances when making their forecasts. The future is always a projection of their present, as it was in the late 1960’s, when William and Paul Paddock titled their alarmist book “Famine 1975!”

Belasco’s subject isn’t food as much as it is the earth’s energy and mineral resources, and the populations that consume them. Still, readers interested primarily in the aesthetics and practice of food should find the author’s approach to macroeconomics, demographics and cultural studies appetizing enough.

Those of us who took some delight in the utter normalcy of life after Jan. 1, 2000, — in part because the continuity refuted millennial doomsayers — will discover similar treats throughout “Meals to Come.” The early chapters follow the debate chronologically, as it surges alternately alarmist (the Malthusian view) and romantic (Condorcet’s). Those espousing Godwin’s nuanced middle ground rarely reach attention-getting levels of pique.

The gems at the extreme, like Egon Glesinger’s book “The Coming Age of Wood” (1949), which made a case for the earth-saving potential of high-protein torula yeast cultured in fermented sawdust, or Winston Churchill’s 1932 vision of self-replicating meat — “We shall escape the absurdity of growing a whole chicken in order to eat the breast or wing, by grow-

ing these parts separately under a suitable medium” — are fascinating, and Belasco’s prose is easygoing and professorially humane.

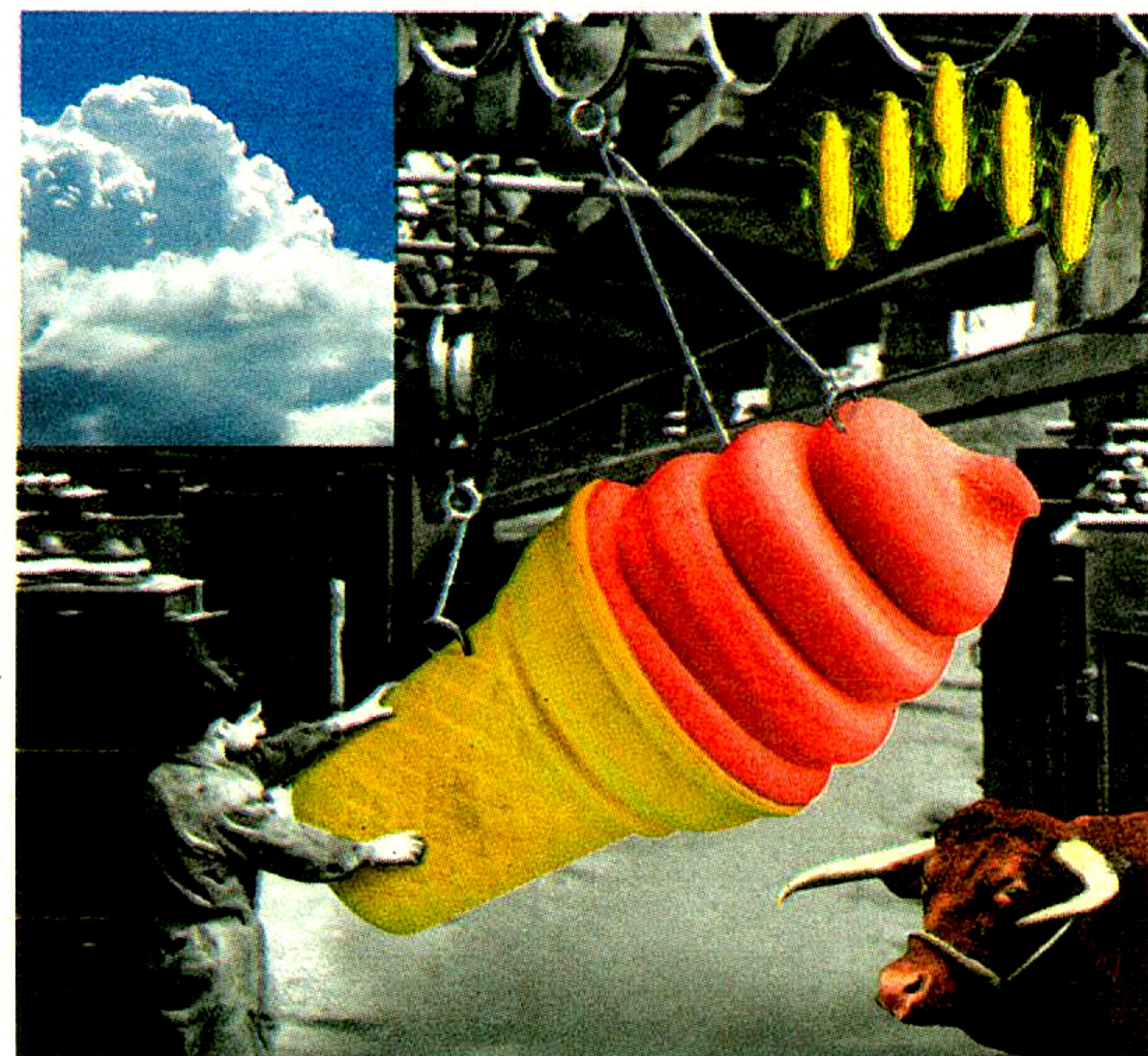
But rapidly seesawing between accounts of anxiety (Worldwatch comes to mind) and bullishness (Monsanto) can devalue the exercise. Once the point is made that the prognosticators are almost always wrong, and prejudiced too, and that their predictions are rarely original, you begin to question why we should continue to examine this crowd any further.

The deeper accounts of the modernist obsession with algae as a potential food source and of ebullient, cornucopian 1930’s World’s Fairs redeem the exercise, and true relief comes midway, in the section that looks at the futurism advanced by popular culture, from Mary Shelley’s “Frankenstein” (1818) to Ridley Scott’s “Blade Runner” (1982). This material would seem to offer even wackier predictions — e.g., extraterrestrials — and it does, but the shocker here is that these utopian and dystopian fantasies actually ring truer than those of the think-tankers and academics. Miracle slurries that provide all the nutrients of a three-course dinner? Those have been on the shelf for decades now.

Aside from these satisfactions, the book reminds us about the interconnectedness of the world’s environment, industry, agriculture, populations and reproductive health. Those concerned about world hunger, women’s rights, resource management and experimental agriculture will be comfortable in this territory, as will connoisseurs of Populuxe — those “Jetsons”-like midcentury fantasies of fully automated kitchens and the like.

The author is a mostly impartial guide, revealing himself only in the beginning (acknowledging his earlier vegetarianism) and in the postscript, where he dabbles in relativism (“There are many futures available for each of us”) before giving it up for a plea against a pragmatist, incrementalist approach to dealing with the earth’s environmental challenges and in favor of “quantum leaps” and “impassioned wake-up calls.” □

**In 1932, Churchill predicted we’d no longer need whole chickens. We could grow the parts ‘separately under a suitable medium.’**



Lou Beach

Matt Lee and Ted Lee write the Times Magazine column The Industry. “The Lee Bros. Southern Cookbook” has just been published.