

## Book Review

# Touch in Times of Skin Hunger: With Captivating Stories From and for Young and Old (Els Messelis, 2021)

[Aanraking in tijden van huidhonger:  
Met beklijvende verhalen van en voor jong en oud]

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Touch deprivation and skin hunger are two topics that in general are rarely discussed. From the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the urgency of these topics has become more apparent. First, the lack of touch was perceived as a luxury problem, later social touch was seen as a nice bonus to have in times of the pandemic but not yet as an essential must-have. But the pandemic persisted and only then did it really become evident what a 'one-and-a-half-meter society' means. Els Messelis, a gerontologist and expert on the topics of sexuality and intimacy wrote a very important and beautiful book on skin hunger, defined by Tjew-A-Sin (2021) and Messelis (2021) as a lack of affective touch that does not need to be intimate or sexual. In her book, Messelis succeeds in demonstrating the importance of social touch for us humans by sharing several heartwarming true stories.

The book consists of three parts, where the readers learn about skin hunger through different perspectives. The first part explains the term skin hunger, what is it about? Through an interview between Messelis and Dr. Mandy Tjew-A-Sin, the reader learns about various theoretical and scientific insights on the topic of skin hunger. The second part tells real life stories from people who are experiencing skin hunger in different ways. The third part focuses on the narrative of care professionals. How can they recognize skin hunger in the people they care for, and how do they themselves experience the need of others? This part provides a very useful source of inspiration for care

professionals to become more aware of the importance of people being touched. Lastly, the book touches upon professionals who provide sexual care, a special profession that could help in releasing someone's need for being touched.

By looking at the topic of skin hunger through these three perspectives, the book is of interest to a large public: elderly persons themselves, the people close to them such as partners, family and friends, and care professionals. The confessions described in the second part of the book are quite moving. It is impressive to read how open-hearted people were to Messelis, sharing their feelings and needs with her. It was the first time that Messelis conducted a research study following such a narrative approach. But this approach is the only way to really uncover and to understand what it means for people to have skin hunger. When discussing skin hunger, every story is valuable. This value has been emphasized in the book by the drawings. The different stories have been brought to life by illustrations made by Kim Pi Lee.

Another valuable aspect of the book is that it shares the experience of people both before as well as during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the lockdown Messelis contacted the interviewees to see how they coped with the lack of contact during the different lockdowns. Their experiences are quoted in the form of an e-mail, which provides a nice and personal touch. As a reader you can feel throughout the book that the topic of skin hunger touched the author; it is evident that she is very involved with the stories she heard and wrote about.

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### References

- Messelis, E. (2021) *Aanraking in tijden van huidhonger. Met beklijvende verhalen van en voor jong en oud* [Touch in times of skin hunger: With captivating stories from and for young and old]. Antwerpen-Apeldoorn: Cyclus. ISBN: 978-90-8575-091-8. 227 pages, List Price: € 32.

Tjew-A-Sin, M. M. (2020). Contact comfort. Psychological effects of actual and stimulated affectionate touch. [PhD Thesis - Research and graduation internal, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam].