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## Virginia Postrel Muses About Glamour

Monday, February 3, 2014 06:43 AM

**By: Robert Feinberg**

On Jan. 29, Virginia Postrel appeared at the Cato Institute to present her new book, *The Power of Glamour: Persuasion, Longing and Individual Aspiration*.

I have long admired Postrel's work and wondered why she would pick such a fluffy topic. Evidently the book itself is fairly glamorous, based on the cover picture.

Postrel was introduced by Walter Olson, a senior fellow at Cato, and the presentation was followed by comments from Tyler Cowen, an economics professor at George Mason University, and noted culture critic Sam Tanenhaus.

The main body of Postrel's speech sought to dispel "five myths about glamour," perhaps ready to spill the weekly space in the Opinion section of *The Washington Post*:

1. Glamour is a style. She said it's a form of communication.
2. Glamour is intrinsically feminine. Postrel cited the cult of "battle" as evidence that virile males, as opposed to those Tanenhaus describes as "vaguely homosexual," can be captivated by the glamour of war. Another example is the enduring cult of James Bond.
3. Glamour is a form of commercial manipulation. Why deny this? Postrel tried by noting cult figures like Woodward and Bernstein who would not fit this description. Another example is the 2008 Obama campaign, which succeeded in attracting voters to his story.
4. Glamour is trivial. Postrel pointed to the cultural influence of the 1939 World's Fair, and she might also have mentioned the Columbian Exposition of 1892 as evidence that ideas presented in a glamorous setting can have great commercial impact. Perhaps this is evidence to support myth number 3.
5. Glamour doesn't affect people like me. She didn't get around to talking about this one, but maybe this is the one that really isn't a myth.

Cowen tried to say something about glamour by relating his impressions of which backward countries have the most glamorous women and then by trying to make a point based on the fact that sometimes value stocks outperform stocks that are seen as glamour vehicles.

Tanenhaus talked about glamorous films and argued that charisma is the opposite of glamour, whereas on the surface they would seem not to be mutually exclusive. He also referred to actors he considers glamorous in their androgyny, mentioning Gary Cooper, Clark Gable and Greta Garbo, but somehow omitting Marlene Dietrich.

As her clinching argument for the power of glamour to inspire people to seek a better, more meaningful life, Postrel told of an orphan girl in Africa who spotted a picture in a magazine that has been picked up by the wind and blown against a fence. When she was adopted and brought to this country, she remembered the picture, started taking ballet lessons and became a professional ballet dancer, all because she wanted as a child to be the dancer in the picture.

For me, it was interesting to hear Postrel's thoughts about glamour, but I was left unconvinced and wondering whether glamour might go off track and end up as narcissism.