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'It's OK to be ugly': One woman's crusade against 'looksism'

By David Foster, Associated Press writer

There once lived a girl who was rather ugly -- or at least that's what people told her.

She had pale, thin lips and a long, crooked nose. Over her right eye sat a blotchy, purple birthmark.

Lynn Romer was her name, but kids called her Pinocchio and Wicked Witch.

Grown-ups just stared.

For some reason, she was very shy. When strangers knocked, she hid in a closet. In high school, when other kids were dating, she stayed home.

Oh, she tried to look prettier. She dabbed on heavy makeup and grew her bangs long. She went to a doctor, who tried something new called laser surgery. It faded her birthmark some, but left a permanent scar.

In fairy tales, the ugly duckling grows into a lovely swan. But this was real life. The rather ugly girl became a rather ugly woman -- or at least that's what people told her.

One night at a bus stop, a stranger walked up. He pointed to a child and said, "He's the beauty." Then he said to Ms. Romer, "You're the beast."

A carful of teen-age boys once pulled alongside her. One boy stuck a megaphone out the window. "WE SEE YOUR BIG NOSE!" he said.

When she was 28, Ms. Romer fell in love. He was a good man, a religious man, and she thought that they might marry. Then he called it off.

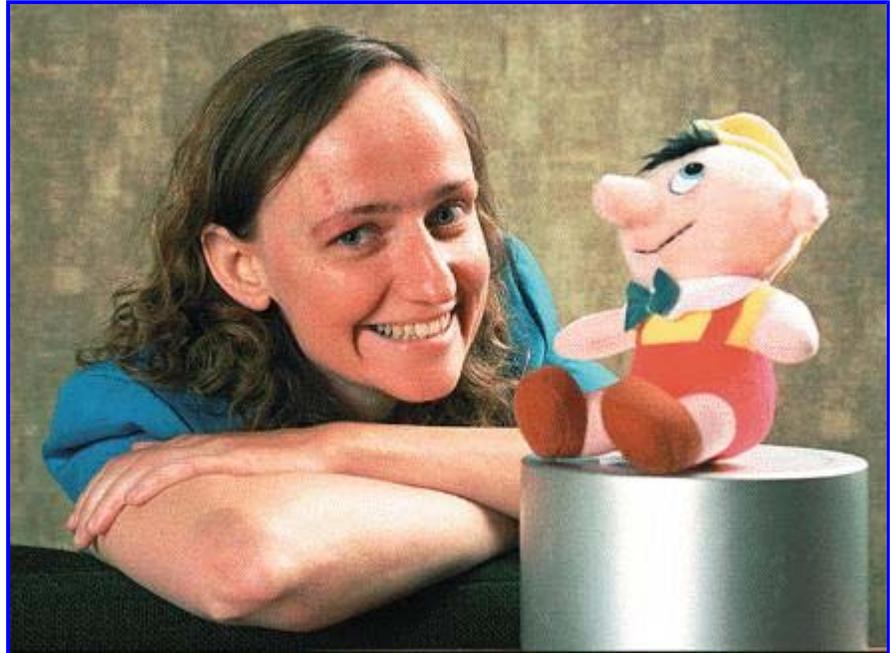
She asked if it had to do with her looks, and he answered that, well, he hated to say it, may God heal his illness, but yes -- he couldn't fall in love with an ugly woman.

Eight years later, Lynn Romer sits in a restaurant, talking faster than a reporter can write. No more hiding. No more makeup. No more trying to change herself into someone she is not.

She'd rather change the world.

"I'm ugly," Ms. Romer says. "What's wrong with that? I'm ugly, and please don't try to tell me I'm not, because if you do, then I'm going to think there's something wrong with being ugly. It's OK to be ugly. I think I have a beautiful soul, and that's all that matters."

From her Ogden, Utah, home, Ms. Romer leads a very personal crusade against what she calls "looksism," the judging of people's character by their physical appearance.



Such discrimination is everywhere, Ms. Romer says, but she singles out a chief culprit -- an entertainment industry fond of stereotypes equating beauty with virtue and ugliness with evil.

Ms. Romer has founded a group called The Pinocchio Plot, after the boy whose lies made his nose grow long. She has a new kind of fairy tale in mind. The wicked stepmother doesn't have to have warts. Prince Charming might be short, fat and bald.

Such role models would show youngsters they can be worthy and capable even if they don't fit society's ideal of beauty, Ms. Romer believes.

"The lessons we learn as children are the ones that stick with us the rest of our lives," she says. "Those lessons are hard to undo."

Some might say impossible. What Ms. Romer labels looksism, social researchers say is a fact of modern life. Studies have shown that attractive people get better jobs and are considered nicer, smarter and sexier than their plain counterparts.

Other studies go further, suggesting beauty is not so much cultural as biological, an evolutionary device ensuring that the fittest humans date, mate and procreate.

But Ms. Romer, hoping humanity has evolved to value more than just a person's breeding potential, wants to move beyond stereotypes that magnify and condemn the physical flaws that sooner or later mark us all.

Even Snow White got wrinkles, she notes.

Bucking America's obsession with beauty is a battle more easily joined than won, but Ms. Romer is undeterred. More philosophical than shrill, she tilts at her windmills with good-humored optimism.

"I have a lot of faith in humanity," she says. "I just constantly prod and nudge people along. You've got to start somewhere."

Actually, Lynn Romer starts everywhere. A lot of things bug her, and in conversation she darts from one to the next at a dizzying 200 words a minute.

On weight discrimination: "People think that if a person is happy being fat, there's something wrong with that person. But who is it the problem for? Is it because people don't like to look at fat people?"

On sexy evening gowns: "When people get dressed for fancy occasions, women bare their breasts while men put on more clothes."

On Disney movies: "They really punch my buttons," Ms. Romer says, taking personal offense at "The Lion King," in which the villainous Scar is named for a scar over his eye.

The Pinocchio Plotters number just a dozen or so, mostly women from Ogden and Salt Lake City, but Ms. Romer is reaching out. A newsletter is planned, and the group sponsors a contest inviting authors to submit children's books with positive portrayals of "appearance-impaired" characters.

Ms. Romer also writes hundreds of letters a year to newspapers, magazines and others. Last summer, she wrote to Leonard Horn, head of the Miss America Pageant, chastising him for calling it a scholarship contest while requiring women to strip down to swimsuits. He didn't write back.

Her complaints of looksism elicit groans of "Get a life" from those who fear that yet another politically correct "ism" will only create a new and unnecessary class of victims.

On the other hand, a letter of Ms. Romer's published this spring in Mothering magazine drew more than 120 supportive responses.

"Thank you for expressing exactly what I've been thinking for years," wrote a mother worried about her two young daughters. "I'm sick and tired of seeing their heroines big-eyed, big-busted, small-waisted and impossibly long, lean-legged!"

Lynn Romer doesn't really have to do this. She is not grotesquely disfigured, not someone you'd stare at on the street while hating yourself for staring.

In the right light, at the right angle, her faded birthmark and long nose aren't obvious. What you do notice are searching, blue eyes and a quick, confident smile.

For years, she did what many people do, measuring her own worth in the reactions of others.

The breakup with her boyfriend started her down a different road. It left her crying, angry and searching for answers. Are men really that shallow, she wondered? Is the world really that cruel?

A counselor helped. So did a plastic surgeon, though not in the way he intended. As he explained

how he could trim Ms. Romer's nose, she couldn't help staring at the doctor's own bulbous snout.

"He was totally secure with himself," she recalls. "And I thought, 'What am I doing? Why have I been brainwashed into thinking there's something wrong with my nose? His looks really ugly, and he's OK with it. I'm certainly not going to pay him money to fix mine.' "

Today, her anger and hurt have faded, supplanted by a determination to help others. She quit her job as a writer of closed-captions for TV programs and now lives mostly off savings, hoping to make a living as a writer.

Her curiosity remains.

She knows looksism is not a regional or class thing, having seen it in all walks of life and wherever she has lived -- in rural Missouri growing up, in Southern California and Boston as an adult, in Utah since 1992.

A male-female thing? Ah, now that's getting closer, Ms. Romer suspects.

She notices it at her drugstore, where 200 feet of aisle space is reserved for women's beauty products, compared to 16 feet for men. She sees it in checkout-stand magazines with gorgeous models on the covers and headlines that proclaim, "Beautiful Skin Starts Here" and "Spring Cleaning: Scrubbing, Waxing, Wrapping, Polishing, Snipping, Shaping and Buffing Your Body."

The message to women, she says, is clear and constant: Whatever you look like, you're not good enough.

To which she responds with a message of her own. It's the moral of her story, one in which Lynn Romer -- unwaxed and unsnipped -- is determined to live happily ever after.

"Looks fade fast," she says, "but character lasts."



The Pinocchio Plot's address is P.O. Box 10116, Ogden, UT 84409.



Photo by The Associated Press

Lynn Romer is leading a very personal crusade against judging people by their looks

Ugly is OK: A reading list , *By The Associated Press*

Lynn Romer's group, The Pinocchio Plot, suggests these alternatives to "looksist" literature:

For children:

"**Sleeping Ugly**," by Jane Yolen (Coward-McCann)

"**Monster Mama**," by Liz Rosenberg (Trumpet Club)

"**The Biggest Nose**," by Kathy Caple (Houghton Mifflin)

"**Lily's Story**," by Erin Flanagan (Avon)

"**Eggbert, The Slightly Cracked Egg**," by Tom Ross (G.P. Putnam's Sons)

"**Born Different: Amazing Stories of Very Special People**," by Frederick Drimmer (Bantam

Skylark)

"**Arthur's Nose**" and "**Arthur's Eyes**," by Marc Brown (Little, Brown)

For older readers:

"**Road Song**," by Natalie Kusz (Farrar Straus Giroux)

"**Dreamsnake**," by Vonda McIntyre (Gollancz)

"**So Much To Tell You**," by John Marsden (Little, Brown)

Background reading:

"**Mirror, Mirror: The Importance of Looks in Everyday Life**," by Elaine Hatfield (Suny Press)

"**Beauty is the Beast: The Trials of Appearance-Impaired Children in America**," by Ann Hill-Beuf (University of Pennsylvania Press)

"**Physical Appearance and Gender: Sociobiological & Sociocultural Perspectives**," by Linda A.

Jackson (Suny Press)

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