

Can't fight that feeling

The Book of Emotions

Edited by Edgar Gerrard Hughes
Redstone Press, £25, pp176

There is a sense in which we are all books of emotions: we flip through our pages and think we know how to name what we are feeling. What makes this book so fresh and fascinating is that it takes nothing for granted and raises new questions at every turn. It reminds us that the language we use to nail emotions is provisional. In Marina Warner's superb foreword, she mentions that "the word emotion only emerges in English in the 17th century". I read this with sudden insecurity. Without the containment of the word, what might emotion mean?

"For something so powerful and fundamental, emotion is a slippery concept," the book's editor, Edgar Gerrard Hughes, suggests, before asking us to consider whether hope, curiosity, thoughtfulness, aggression and concentration count as emotions. But the main question is whether the concept of emotion is "too vague and multivalent to be of real use". What follows is a selection of serious and playful contributions that include blushing, the pre-history of emojis and disgust. There is a brilliant fictional piece, *After the Party*, by Natalie Hume, in which a woman writes a note to the father of her children in the sweetest tone to explain why she no longer wants to live with him.

We are encouraged to investigate our own emotions, with many opportunities to put ourselves to the test. I took the book on holiday and tried its intriguing questionnaires out on my husband and grownup sons. We were charmed, alarmed and entertained by turns. You might think yourself expert at reading the expression of human faces but it was startling to realise how limited our ability to translate that knowledge is when it comes to animal countenances. A scarlet chameleon



that, in my judgment, looked gloomy, was revealed to be excited. A chimp that looked outspoken turned out to be in distress. And so on. There is a thought-provoking section in which you choose a landscape painting from a selection of seven to gauge your emotional state. In the grand tradition of Redstone publications, this book is eclectically illustrated (see picture).

There is an amusingly conceived questionnaire that attempts to gauge levels of intolerance. Which of the following irritate? "Parents discussing their children's virtues and achievements/Dentists who ask questions when it is impossible to answer/A person who asks for, and then instantly ignores, your advice." A brilliant later section identifies words for emotions in different languages (for which there is no English equivalent). *Iktsuarpok* is an Inuit word I'd like to adopt, meaning

the state of waiting restlessly for company to show up.

A word of caution, though, about the falling in love section. A benign questionnaire to enhance love is followed by a sequel calculated to demolish it. My husband and I decided against advancing beyond the first question: "If you could burn one possession of mine, what would it be?" Without drawing breath, my husband looked at me and said: "That jumper [of which I'm especially fond] you are wearing."

Read *The Book of Emotions* with bookmarks to hand – there is much you will want to reflect upon. It is tremendous company and leads to great conversations, providing you can avoid divorcing over it.

Kate Kellaway

To order *The Book of Emotions* for £21.75 go to guardianbookshop.com or call 020-3176 3837