

Book Review - Healthy At 100 By John Robbins

I thought this was going to be a book about nutrition but I was wrong. That's only half of the story. The real message of this book is about love, and caring for each other. John Robbins didn't disappoint me. He cares deeply. About people, about the planet and about our relationship with each other. The book looks for inspiration at the healthiest traditional cultures we know of, the Abkhasians, Vilcabambans, Hunzas and Okinawans. These cultures are well known for producing very old healthy people so it makes perfect sense to study them, find out what they can teach us...The teachings go way beyond nutrition and exercise though. They go further into cultural attitudes and beliefs that have powerful outcomes when it comes to the health of the people. It turns out for example, that all these cultures placed tremendous value on the elderly. Old folks enjoyed the very highest status in these societies. So much so, that often we see the elderly exaggerating their real age. These special places certainly didn't have the youth and beauty obsessions of modern Western society. Young, old and very very old lived together, worked together and played together. We also see 'inclusive' mind-sets. Very rarely if ever were people shunned or discarded by these communities because of disability or infirmity. All were respected for their special gifts whatever abilities they may or may not have. The focus on love in this book goes further though, than looking at how people interact and care for each other in the long-lived cultures. It shows us just how important loving relationships are to our health and well-being. 'Loneliness will kill you faster than cigarettes' we're told and there's solid science to back it up. It's something I've felt deeply in my own reflections on life. How the modern world puts so much pressure on the individual, instead of people supporting each other. Once you're old enough to work in Western society, it's all down to you. You must compete with your peers for the best jobs, study harder, work harder to get on and up. It's all about ME against the world. That's how it feels. I have to WIN at life and if that means doing my fellow man down so be it! There's got to be a better way. These traditional cultures do show us a different way but it's difficult to see how these ideas could be applied to modern life in a massive way. It's going to be up to individuals to try and create communities and I'm sure there are many alternative communities out there run by forward thinking people. The big message is 'get support', get loving relationships and close human bonds in your life or else your health will suffer. If we don't have this in our lives, then surely we don't feel safe. It's a big world out there to be alone in. If you've got kids, you'll know how deeply you feel the need to protect them and surround them with a loving, nurturing environment so they can feel safe and grow in confidence. So, let's start caring for each other! Diet-wise the message was no big surprise. All these cultures ate whole foods and ate a whole load of plant-based stuff. Fruits, vegetables, wholegrains, nuts and seeds. Only the Abkhasians and Okinawans ate significant amounts of animal foods in their diet – The Abkhasians 10% and the Okinawans 16% (by weight). The other two cultures ate 1% only but John Robbins notes in the book that all traditional cultures include some animal foods. To my mind this is extremely telling. I believe that traditional wisdom is gained over a long, long time. Practices that are observed to work are passed on from generation to generation. There's probably a very good reason why we don't see any traditional cultures that are purely vegan. The macronutrient ratios of the first 3 cultures turned out to be very similar: Carbohydrate 69-74%, Protein 10-13%, Fat 15-18% of calories. I was a little disappointed that the Okinawan figures weren't included with the other 3 cultures in the table giving us overall statistics on these diets, based on percentage of calories. I can only imagine that the Okinawan diet didn't quite fit in as well with the overall message of the book, which is heavily focused on plant-based diets. Giving the percentages by weight isn't really very meaningful. I was also disappointed that there is no nitty-gritty in this book. A distinct lack of information on how to apply this to everyday life. What should I eat for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and how much? We are left to work it out for ourselves. Some will be able to do that but I feel most will not do it. I think you've got to make things simple for people to follow, tell them exactly what to do. It's just too confusing otherwise. Maybe it will be in a follow-up book :). In terms of these kind of diets being optimal, I think to get rid of all animal foods is throwing the baby out with the bath water. Of course, all four of these cultures do include some animal foods but John Robbins tends to extrapolate this into the realms of vegan diets which they clearly aren't. John even talks about the benefits of fish in the diet and the importance of omega-3 which seems confusing and off-track with his main message of veganism? Also of course, these diets contain quite large amounts of grains which are not natural foods for humans. If you compare these overall diets with what most people are doing they are clearly a million miles ahead... All whole foods, mega portions of fruits and vegetables and so-on. In my view as I said, and as the Okinawans and Abkhasians shows, it's entirely possible to be very healthy with small amounts of animal products — they may even be vital. I believe that if you're going to follow a dietary model, then you should follow all of it and not pick out the bits that suit your ethical philosophy. Or at least acknowledge the risk you take by doing so. Grains in the modern world can be a double edged sword. They aren't without their uses despite being unnatural for humans to eat. You may have noticed me referring to the healthiest of societies in the past tense. It's very sad that in all of the ancient traditions, the modern Western values and ways of life are slowly but surely encroaching and only the oldest maintain the traditional ways and values. Don't let my minor protestations put you off this book. This is a hugely positive and life-affirming book. It had me wet-eyed on more than one occasion with very moving stories and anecdotes. The main message is a beautiful and timely one. We need to return to a simpler way of life that does less damage to both ourselves, our fellow humans and the whole of the natural world. If you like a bet and you want a sure-fire win with little risk then this diet is for you (as long as you can tolerate grains!). The facts speak for themselves and this book is a diamond as a reference source alone with hundreds of scientific studies listed and quoted. I do think that improvements are possible by means of less grain and food combining and so-on but like I say... you pay your money and take your choice. The Verdict 4.5 / 5 This is a safe bet with a good chance of seeing 100 if you follow the advice but may not give the absolute best results. Whatever you decide to bet on, this book is visionary — a must read. Well done JR!

About the Author

Diet and exercise are an integral part of staying fit and healthy. Proper nutrition along with exercise will help keep you in shape and keep you healthy.

