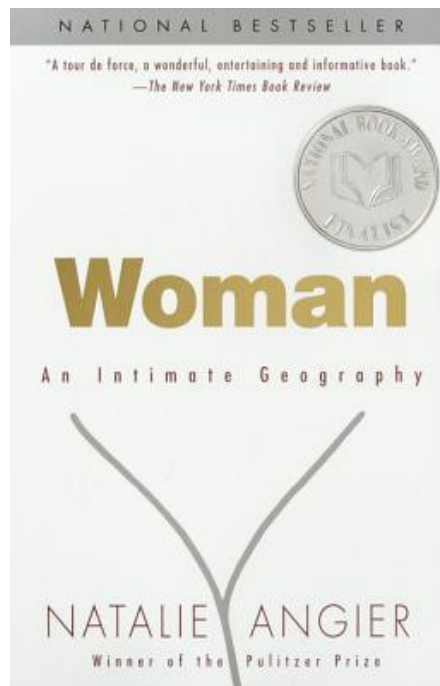




## Woman: An Intimate Geography

*Natalie Angier*

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# Woman: An Intimate Geography

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## Woman: An Intimate Geography Natalie Angier

With the clarity, insight, and sheer exuberance of language that make her one of *The New York Times*'s premier stylists, Pulitzer Prize-winner Natalie Angier lifts the veil of secrecy from that most enigmatic of evolutionary masterpieces, the female body. Angier takes readers on a mesmerizing tour of female anatomy and physiology that explores everything from organs to orgasm, and delves into topics such as exercise, menopause, and the mysterious properties of breast milk.

A self-proclaimed "scientific fantasia of womanhood." **Woman** ultimately challenges widely accepted Darwinian-based gender stereotypes. Angier shows how cultural biases have influenced research in evolutionary psychology (the study of the biological bases of behavior) and consequently lead to dubious conclusions about "female nature." such as the idea that women are innately monogamous while men are natural philanderers.

But Angier doesn't just point fingers; she offers optimistic alternatives and transcends feminist polemics with an enlightened subversiveness that makes for a joyful, fresh vision of womanhood. **Woman** is a seminal work that will endure as an essential read for anyone intersted in how biology affects who we are as women, as men, and as human beings.

## Woman: An Intimate Geography Details

Date : Published February 15th 2000 by Anchor (first published 1999)

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Author : Natalie Angier

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## From Reader Review Woman: An Intimate Geography for online ebook

### Kara says

When I first read this, I was enamored with it - so much so that I was about ready to drop my business major and start majoring in Women's Studies! Luckily my dad stepped in on that one. ;)

This book is great and is written with a witty tone to it that only a fellow woman could have. It's frustrating to go through life being told how your body *\*should\** act, by panels of men, no less. I felt like I could relate to this book because it was written by someone who not only cared enough to research its contents, but by someone who had a vested interest in the topic.

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### Chrissie says

Angier makes the "science of women" very accessible, although her writing is chock full of scientific and biological terms. She explains complicated things in a very simple manner, perhaps because she really does know what she is talking about. She is a very knowledgeable and witty teacher. She questions everything and usually finds scientific studies to illustrate her views. She keeps your attention. It is just that so much is turned topsy turvy that I began questioning her statements too. I began seeing divergent ways of looking on issues. Sometimes I became less sure of what I thought, at the end of a discussion than at the beginning. But is that bad? Isn't it good to understand how little we really understand?

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### Shaenon Garrity says

Angier is sometimes a little too in love with her own playful, punning prose style, but this is an eye-opening book with a wealth of information and ideas on human biology. A great antidote to simplistic "woman make many babies with alpha male" pop evo-psychology explanations of female instincts and behavior

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### Stormkpr says

An informative investigation into female physiology. I know I sound like a dunce when I say this, but I've never been into science. Didn't do well in it at school and never found it particularly interesting. This book has been on my "to read" list for a while -- I even bought a copy for a friend as a gift, at her request, years ago. I finally got around to reading it. It was a tough read for me in a couple of ways. I had to overcome my distaste for science, I am opposed to testing on animals and I don't like reading about the results of those tests even if some were enlightening (this may be partly why science turns me off), and then there's Angier's prose to deal with. Sometimes it's poetic and fascinating but more often than not, her writing style is just way over-the-top and even a bit silly. Then again, maybe that's unfair; she does do a good job making science accessible to non-scientists. When I could get past the book's roadblocks, the work was really fascinating. I learned a lot about women's biology from hormones to the uterus to breasts to the almighty clitoris to the sum of these parts. I also love when she directly states her opinions. Instead of hemming and

hawing on the subject of female genital mutilation (twice in my lifetime I've heard people actually defend the practice), she condemns it. Definitely a good read.

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### **Daniel Gallagher says**

This is an awesome book, loved learning all sorts of secrets about women (ha ha). Actually, this should be required reading for men and women. There is a lot of good information presented in a fun and engaging way. My only gripe was that the author heaps a ton of praise on old women, and basically dumps on old men as being useless. I think older men and women have a lot to offer younger generations.

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### **Erin says**

I have never read a more in depth book on "woman." I am talking everything from physiology, to biology, to psychology. Although the book is quite dense and at times chalk full with complicated medical jargon, it will answer all your burning questions and shed light on the history and reasons behind why and how women came to be.

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### **Emma says**

This was a weird one. On the one hand, the actual information contained in the book was fascinating and important. I learned a lot about ovulation, for example, and menopause, and breasts, and enjoyed the learning immensely.

But the prose. I suspect lines like, "by Hecate!" and, "the Grand Canyon, the world's grandest vagina," are meant to be a little tongue-in-cheek, but I just found them off-putting. Some of this is I think par for the course with feminists of a certain age (the book is PACKED with mom-jokes, the kind of thing my mom puts in her Facebook status and makes me facepalm--'she yam what she yam' and so forth).

But I think underlying problem was that the prose assumes a certain conception of "woman" that I find restrictive. Even when talking about the wide variation in female bodies and minds, it makes broad, sweeping statements about the desires and personalities of both women and men. It assumes that women are straight and cisgendered, for example, when in fact many women are neither. Mind you, the CONTENT of the book is generally inclusive and demonstrates variety, but the prose, the little throw-away lines and jokes, really don't.

That concept of "woman" is also philosophical, and leads to incredibly tedious pages and pages about, for example, which sex came first, which one is our 'default' setting? (Who cares! Does biology care?) So much talk about mothers and daughters and grandmothers, like being female-bodied makes you part of this grand sisterhood.

I'm a woman and a feminist, and I'm proud of both. I just wish that I'd been able to access the information in this book without having to wade through such a wall of over-lofty ideas and prose.

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## Tracy Rhodes says

This book taught me so much about what it means to be a woman from a physiological perspective. Angier writes in a witty, conversational style - not condescendingly, but in a way that keeps the reader willing to stick with her through some pretty hard-core biological science stuff. Just as importantly, she talks about the psychology of women and how we relate to our bodies and their sometimes mysterious ways. Every woman should read this book (and men who want to know more about what makes women tick under their skins should, too).

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## Ellen says

Seminal (or should I say ovular?) read in my personal formation as a feminist. Like the female body, Angier's prose is both tender and strong, and it's absolutely bursting with insight and information. Quite funny, too!

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## okyrhoe says

I expected less from this book. Or rather, I didn't expect that Angier would provide so much irrelevant material. This is an important book, certainly, but she could have said it in half the space/time it takes here.

Yet I still recommend it. Science still has a long way to go to understand women's bodies and psyches; many questions raised here are not discussed in other books concerning the female gender, body, & sexuality.

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## Chris says

Fascinating topic but I hate Natalie Angier's writing style: the forced metaphors, the whimsical nouns, the strained adverbs. I wish she'd put down the thesaurus and just tell us what she's learned from her reporting.

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## Genya says

This is such a great book. I just reread it. It is all about the biology of the female body, but it is funny, brilliant, totally accessible, and a little subversive. Her first paragraph reads, "This book is a celebration of the female body - its anatomy, its chemistry, its evolution, and its laughter. It is a personal book, my attempt to find a way to think about the biology of being female without falling into the sludge of biological determinism. It is a book about things that we traditionally associate with the image of woman - the womb, the egg, the breast the blood, the almighty clitoris - and things that we don't movement, strength, aggression, and fury."

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## Hallie says

Best book I read in 2011, by a long shot. Continues to resonate. My dad gave this to me as a present in 2000 or 2001 and naturally I refused to read it. An argument with a friend prompted me to look for an answer in one of its chapters, and I was riveted, started from the beginning and worked my way to the end, intrigued by subjects that had never held any interest at all for me, like menopause, and hormones, and ones I have never seen discussed with half the wit or dynamism, such as female aggression and monogamy. I am not of a remotely scientific bent, but Angier is such an elegant prose stylist, and an imaginative and spunky thinker that I swear I fell in love with her over a discussion of mosquito sperm or some such. The last two chapters, in which she stands evolutionary psychology on its head, pointing out its anti-feminist tendencies to boot, wooed me all over again, and I think I would go to great lengths for this woman if I got the chance. It is so refreshing also to read someone who takes her feminism for granted - that is, of course she is a feminist, how could she not be? I am so disgusted by the reluctance of many women I know to self-identify this way, but this rant I will leave for another space, as I want only to heap praise and gratitude on Ms. Angier. I don't have the book with me right now, but I might try to do it more justice in this forum when next I lay my hands on it.

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## Sidewalk\_Sotol says

I could see giving this book 3 stars. It really depends on what you're looking for. I tried to use this book as a supplement to my anatomy & physiology textbook. Not a good idea. I did not get to finish it, but since the organization of the book depends only a bit on linear reading, there is not too much lost by not getting to the conclusive chapter.

What Natalie Angier does well is pull together a lot of different perspectives of feminist or feminist sympathetic researchers into one volume that asks a lot of good questions about the androcentrism of most Western scientific writing about women and female bodies. Thus, if you are a layperson with an abiding curiosity in Western biology and contemporary cultural meanings of female bodies and read it primarily for this reason, it provides a lot to consider.

However, Angier also interjects word play and innuendo very frequently, making it a difficult book to use for consultative purposes without lots of underlining. Unfortunately, her interruptions and very-clever references rarely provide greater depth to her material, which is based upon scientific research with some anthropological and personal speculation here and there.

Also, while Angier provides a good deal of her own speculation, she never gets around to questioning the heteronormativity and cisgender assumptions of scientific research. This is particularly noticeable when she starts talking about individuals with intersex conditions and references such queer scientists as Anne-Fausto Sterling. Angier cherry picks the individuals who most support her specific arguments about how people with intersex conditions prove her points against clitoridectomy, are just like straight women except for anatomy, etc.

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## Verity Williams says

Wow, this book is clearly divisive. I capital L loved it. Angier writes with guts and energy, and throughout, I thought 'I wish she was my real life mentor who would fire me up whenever I need some confidence and

conviction'.

I found the content inspiring. She celebrates woman in all our honest glory, and she'll help me learn to do the same.

This book also taught me that many social assumptions explaining the female body are biased, socially laden, assumptions. And that taught me not to believe everything I hear and read, regardless of the confidence or authority of the person saying it.

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## **Ann says**

I wanted to like this book. Oh, how I wanted to. And I will say, it was packed with interesting information. I did learn a few things. I shared any anecdote or theory my husband would listen to.

But, I finally got fed up with her writing style. This writer cannot pass up any chance for wordplay, puns, double entendre, thesaurus-izing, or clever euphemism. Since I'm such a word-lover, you might think this was a good thing, but I couldn't get past it. I found it annoying, stupid, distracting, flippant, and not funny--sometimes all at the same time. She takes several major female body parts a chapter at a time. So, in the chapter on say, the uterus, you would think that she would use the word uterus a zillion times. No. She appears to be frightened to do so. Instead, she uses every alternate word, every slang term, known to man (or woman). It got old. It was confusing at times since I was sometimes not familiar with the slang terms (not ashamed to admit that). And it contributed to the overall tone of the book that was a little baffling. Here she is having spent untold hours researching and writing a book on a topic she obviously thinks is fascinatingly important, yet at times she talked about it like she was a 14-year-old boy in the locker room.

It's also interesting to me the kinds of questions she asked in order to write the book. Her "why did evolution do it this way?" approach wasn't my favorite, but I am certain I would have been able to hang with her on that if it hadn't been for her usage, as I discussed above.

I read about half of the book.

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## **Jessica says**

I loved this book but found it challenging and eventually had to assign myself 5-10 pages a day. Every paragraph of Angier's study of women's physiology is packed with enough scientific concepts and ideas to fuel a half-day discussion, and she is one of those writers who makes you use your dictionary, who makes you think, and who also makes you think "I could never write that." She starts with a study of the human egg cell and takes you into the operating room where a woman is donating her eggs. From there, Angier explores the uterus, menopause, breasts and breast milk, female hormones and the menstrual cycle. Throughout the book, she considers why nature made women the way they are, how much is evolution and how much is influenced by culture. She dips into chemistry, anthropology, literature and psychology in an attempt to explain biology.

You could pick up some of the science in this book in any number of places, and she quotes myriad studies and interviews scientists and researchers and ordinary women. But only here can you find Angier's stylized and stylish prose.

"We are all yeses. We are worthy enough, we passed inspection, we survived the great fetal oocyte extinctions. In that sense, at least— call it a mechanospiritual sense— we are meant to be. We are good eggs, every one of us."

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## Katie says

I loved this book.

Contrary to what others are saying, I loved the poetic way the book was written. If you're a real science buff, and just want the cold-hard-facts, this book is not for you. I, however, have always loathed reading about science but am fascinated by the actual wonder of what it creates-- which is why I like this book so much. This piece is crammed full with interesting information which helped me relate to my body and had me popping up with weird new facts to tell my friends: "Did you know your vagina is the cleanest part of your body?!" I really enjoyed this piece. It is important to note that although called "Woman", it is not particularly intersectional to the trans\* community. I feel a book about trans women's reproductive bodies would need a volume of its own, and therefore could not be encompassed on this text. There are moments when the author does make an effort to mention the community, and their inclusion or exclusion on the cause, but this book is by no means tailored to that demographic. Provided, I don't think it necessarily should be.

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## Michelle says

If you're looking for a comprehensive atlas of the embodied female, then you cannot do much better than *Woman: An Intimate Geography*. Even 18 years after its original publication, Natalie Angier's book remains relevant, provocative, and thoroughly educational. Women's bodies remain mysteries only to the extent our societal ignorance compels us, and that certain doctors and scientists continue to neglect it in favor of the supposed simplicity of the male form. Angier trods well-worn territory for know-thyself works such as periods and the female orgasm, but where her research truly excels is in debunking hormonal myths and the tired tropes of "evolutionary psychology" in explaining women's behavior. And if you aren't yet aware of X-inactivation and mosaicism, prepare to have your mind blown.

While *Woman* is an explicitly feminist work, it's hardly dogmatic; she's fair and thorough with the science. One memorable example is her treatment of competing theories to explain the robustness of human menstruation, which ends without a clear conclusion (but isn't the intellectual exploration so interesting?). An overarching theme of the book is the welcome story that women and men aren't so different after all, and that these pat stories we've been told about our hormones and genes sharply differentiating us are a vast oversimplification.

Some may find Angier's eccentric narrative and enthusiasm a bit much, but I mostly enjoyed it. If I had one criticism of this enduring work, I'd say it would be that queer and trans women are largely unacknowledged - but much has changed in recent years, and some inclusive updates would strengthen the book.

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## Andrea says

I recently re-read this book for a book club with female inmates. Direct quote from one of the women: "I didn't even know books like this existed!" I was reminded just how powerful information, particularly timely information, really is. Here is a book that looks in depth at the biology of the women's body and questions traditional assumptions about females as the "default" sex and more. Angier is a woman passionate about science and about women and the combination is inspiring, refreshing, and empowering. While the chapter on the clitoris seems to garner the most attention, I prefer the chapter entitled, "Cheap Meat," which is about muscle. Angier describes women's muscle as resilient and powerful -- muscle is our right. Just love it -- it's a chapter I read (and re-read) at the top of my lungs! This is a book I recommend highly to all women -- and girls.

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