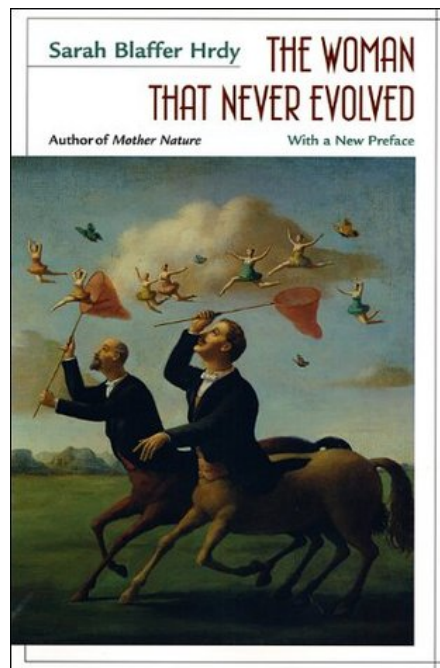




The Woman That Never Evolved

Sarah Blaffer Hrdy

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What does it mean to be female? Sarah Blaffer Hrdy — a sociobiologist and a feminist — believes that evolutionary biology can provide some surprising answers. Surprising to those feminists who mistakenly think that biology can only work against women. And surprising to those biologists who incorrectly believe that natural selection operates only on males.

In *The Woman That Never Evolved* we are introduced to our nearest female relatives competitive, independent, sexually assertive primates who have every bit as much at stake in the evolutionary game as their male counterparts do. These females compete among themselves for rank and resources, but will bond together for mutual defense. They risk their lives to protect their young, yet consort with the very male who murdered their offspring when successful reproduction depends upon it. They tolerate other breeding females if food is plentiful, but chase them away when monogamy is the optimal strategy. When "promiscuity" is an advantage, female primates — like their human cousins — exhibit a sexual appetite that ensures a range of breeding partners. From case after case we are led to the conclusion that the sexually passive, noncompetitive, all-nurturing woman of prevailing myth never could have evolved within the primate order.

Yet males are almost universally dominant over females in primate species, and *Homo sapiens* is no exception. As we see from this book, women are in some ways the most oppressed of all female primates. Sarah Blaffer Hrdy is convinced that to redress sexual inequality in human societies, we must first understand its evolutionary origins. We cannot travel back in time to meet our own remote ancestors, but we can study those surrogates we have — the other living primates. If women — and not biology — are to control their own destiny, they must understand the past and, as this book shows us, the biological legacy they have inherited.

The Woman That Never Evolved Details

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Martine says

This book brings the focus of evolutionary theory on women in stead of men, which, seeing the results, it desperately needed. There is a lot that can be gleamed on women and against stereotypes about women by looking at other primate females and using Darwin. That is hasn't been done before is a severe oversight. My only wish is that it focussed a little bit less on monkeys - at some point I can't even keep them apart - and a little bit more on the implications for women. But even so, good book.

Clare says

This is a fantastic book! Takes on the big questions not only of sociobiology but also of feminism: why male domination everywhere?, why women not bonding together?, why we look the way we do?, who's taking care of the kids?, what's going on with our supposed monogamy?, etc., etc.

Filled with about as much research data on primates as you can take, but beautifully curated with humor, drawings, and wisdom. I highly recommend this book for all: looking through a summative lens of our primate family, it will change the way you see yourself at the deepest levels. And likely enhance your sex life. :)

eliza says

the cover alone made me want to read this book.

Roslyn says

I am sure this book was revolutionary back in the 80's, so people didn't mind that it's not that well-written, slow moving, and repetitive. Since pretty much none of these ideas were revolutionary to me (OMG women care about status and are actually quite hierarchical just in a different way than men?!) it was pretty boring.

On that note: When men ruled the world they fought wars honestly. You always knew who the winner was. Today's wars are secretive and sneaky and the masses never know what's really going on. This is a much more "female" way of fighting. I did like it when Hrdy points out that it is a total myth that women are nice and would create a peaceful world. Women are "competitive, strategizing creatures" and their relations are "never what they seem on the surface." I mean, duh, but it's nice to hear someone say that explicitly.

The (only) revolutionary idea I got from this book was that the most successful and long-lived monkey dynasties are matrilineal. This makes perfect sense: Women raise the kids. Whatever percent nurture is in the nature/nurture debate, a successful dynasty is far more dependent on the woman than the man. (FYI European royal families - that's where you messed up.)

An idea that entertained me is that it is so hard to determine when women ovulate because those women who knew when they were ovulating chose not to copulate during those times to limit their number of offspring ... and therefore died out.

Important quote: "For years it was assumed that allomothers were simply helpers in a communal child-rearing system. Indeed, allomothers probably are helping the mother to some extent. But the recurrent observations of abuse suggest that not all females who borrow infants are doing so merely to care for them. Most allomothers are also exploiting their charges in some way, using them as pawns in social interactions or as props to practice maternal skills." Conclusion: Never trust anyone with your children. No one will care for them like their mom. Raise your own kids. I cannot say this enough. Homeschool them and do not rely heavily on nannies.

I almost downgraded this book to two stars for its socialist vomit - Evolution isn't to be trusted. 90% of species that ever existed have gone extinct, guys!!! It's a tragedy! We have got to get control of mother nature! And did you know that more successful monkeys leave behind more babies?!!! It's SO unfair, we have GOT to stop them from "oppressing" the less successful monkeys!!!

I would expect a BIOLOGIST to be more interested in knowing what the most successful monkeys and humans are doing. Who cares what percent of human societies are monogamous and polygamous? How are the most successful human societies structured? And even in those societies, knowing what the masses are doing is a lot less helpful than knowing what the most successful 1% are doing. I mean, from a biological perspective....

Question: Could the fight against female circumcision be better fought with paternity tests? Marry an uncircumcised woman and our charity will give you unlimited free paternity tests to make sure those kids are yours! Just a thought. Why are we so hard on these guys for wanting to make sure they are investing in offspring that are genuinely theirs? Yeah, it's cruel to circumcise the women, but can we entertain the idea for a minute that both people's needs matter? The women who doesn't want to be hurt AND the man who doesn't want to be cuckolded?

Diana Michele says

Anything and everything by Hrdy is worth reading. Excellent research!

M says

This is a beautiful way to understand feminism and female sexuality. It is a comprehensive study of our closest primate relatives. It is honest and rational and beautiful and I admire Hrdy immensely. It gives voice to the kind of feminism that I feel

Katie says

More challenging than Mother Nature in two important ways: (1) technically, in that the vast bulk of the text focuses on (then) current primatological research, and (2) ideologically, in that it places the onus for feminist

progress entirely on political/social reform by contemporary feminists (this she demonstrates is possible, pointing to status competition and other pre-political conduct by female primates), by showing that no pre-modern feminist paradise ever evolved. (The book is a little dated in this latter respect--I am at least not aware of any current feminists whose ideology depends on the historical existence of such a feminist utopia, but apparently this was an idea that had traction in the 1970's-80's.) Hrdy argues that female primate sexuality evolved to confuse paternity, thereby minimizing the risk of infanticide by non-paternal males and maximizing the prospect of male support for infants who were potentially their offspring. Human cognitive capacity, however, has responded to this biological state of affairs by creating institutions designed specifically to combat this strategy among women, by sequestering and oppressing women (utilizing both sophisticated newly-evolved social institutions and long-existing masculine strength [a product of the energetic tradeoff between reproduction and size in females, as well as male competition for access to females]) in order to guarantee certainty as to paternity. This development has been enabled or at least exacerbated by the division of labor among humans, which eliminates the pre-existing tradeoff between male ability to invest in offspring and number of "wives"--unlike polygynous monkey, polygynous men are frequently those best able to invest in the survival of infants. A new take on the fruit of the tree of knowledge.

Reyhan says

Uzun zamandır okumayı planladım bir kitap. Dişilerin toy ve pasif olduğu fikrine karşı, dişilerin rekabetçi ve girişken olduklarını primatlar üzerinden anlatması çok değerli. Türler arası karşılaştırmaları yaparken, türleri yaşıtları çevre üzerinden değerlendirerek sosyobiyoloji, primatoloji ve davranışsal ekoloji konularında bilgi veriyor. Yaaymamız anlamakta oldukça önemli bir kitap olduğunu düşünüyorum. Smuts'ın Evolutionary Origins of Patriarchy (1995) isimli makalesi ile de tamamlayıcı olduğunu düşünüyorum. Sonrasında, feminist evrimciler ve evrimsel psikoloji arasındaki tartışmayı daha iyi anlamak için Liesen'in (2007) Women, Behavior, and Evolution: Understanding the Debate between Feminist Evolutionists and Evolutionary Psychologists adlı makalesini okudum. Kitabın yazım tarihi bu tartışmanın yeni yeni başladığı zamanlar olduğu için sonrasında öğrenmek resmi tamamlayıcı oldu.

Kallie says

This book is fascinating, well-written and -argued. Hrdy discusses female behavior in many species of primates and finds competition among them an important component of evolution. She argues that this quality forms a part of human character and should not be ignored in favor of the unfounded notion that women are essentially more cooperative than men. She concludes that women's very recently achieved social equality is fragile and should not be taken for granted, and that is for sure given recent political attacks on female autonomy. I recommend this work to all feminists, female and male, as a good reminder of what we have gained and what could be lost.

Kimi says

Mungkin saja saya bacanya sedang tidak fokus jadi buku ini rasanya... tidak menarik. Kebanyakan penjelasan tentang hewan-hewan primata ketimbang manusianya. Masuk akal sih kenapa lebih banyak membahas primata, tapi ya... bosan juga. :P

Misty says

I first read this book as an undergrad but to my dismay lost my copy in my many roommate shuffles and moves. I looked several times over the years for it and was overjoyed to snap up a new edition of it some years ago when it came back into print. I have re-read this book multiple times and it sparks new avenues of thought and understanding for me to this day.

A word of caution: Dr. Hrdy is a serious primatologist and this book is dense with facts. It is not a breezy, bedtime read. This book helped overturn an academic field's paradigm, which can only be done through the overwhelming application of rigorous, fact-based logic. That is what Dr. Hrdy did: she made a convincing, biology-based argument for evolutionary anthropologists to look at how females and evolution interacted.

This book marshals an intimate knowledge of primate behavior across a breathtaking number of species to demonstrate that evolutionary pressures shape female behaviors, that female behaviors influence the evolution of a species, and to draw the inescapable conclusion that the same must be true in humans, too. This seems intuitively obvious now but in the 1980s it was revolutionary.

Previously, the Just So stories of human evolution were the Just So stories of Men: humans developed tools to help men hunt, humans became bipedal so that men could use their hands to carry food back to their passive (apparently sessile!) mates and offspring, humans became bipedal because men had to stand up to look out over savannah grasses to see the herds they were hunting, men's sexual preferences led women to develop permanently enlarged breasts, etc. Women were hardly ever mentioned, dragged along the human evolutionary track blazed by the needs and desires of men.

This book was influential in demonstrating how blinkered that limiting view was and why it necessarily led to a fundamental misunderstanding of evolution and humanity.

Caren says

Great incite into our odd behavior (especially regarding our teenage girls need to be socially dominant).

Jennifer says

I'm so spoiled by Natalie Angier. Hrdy's writing isn't at all the saucy romp that Angier's is, but it is due to scientists like Hrdy that Angier is able to write about topics like primate filandering in the first place. The Woman That Never Evolved is a great look into some of the social-sexual workings of our near and dear primate cousins, and while the writing itself didn't have me in stitches, the content was more than sustainably fascinating.

Fun fact: Bird species are 90% monogamous, while mammals can only boast a whopping 4% monogamy rate.

Amy says

I can't believe I'd never run across Hrdy until now. A feminist sensibility + evolutionary thinking grounded in actual science as opposed to speculation and surveys of American college undergrads=serious science win.

Camille says

I read this book on the recommendation of a colleague at work. She had read it in one of her anthropology courses during college. I therefore enjoyed reading it as much as I did partly because I knew there would be no exam at the end!

I was confused about the title until the very end of the book. Mostly, it is a discussion of various primate societies and the different sex roles they exhibit. The hope is that by studying our nearest genetic relations that we can begin to understand the development and evolution of gender roles in humans. The author concludes with some very interesting ideas about women and their past, current, and future situations in society.

I am definitely going to read more on this subject. I noticed that there is an updated version of the text available that I will pick up if I ever see it in a book store. All in all this was a very good introduction to a topic I knew little about.
