



Sex at Dawn: How We Mate, Why We Stray & What It Means for Modern Relationships

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“Sex at Dawn challenges conventional wisdom about sex in a big way. By examining the prehistoric origins of human sexual behavior the authors are able to expose the fallacies and weaknesses of standard theories proposed by most experts. This is a provocative, entertaining, and pioneering book. I learned a lot from it and recommend it highly.” — Andrew Weil, M.D.

“Sex at Dawn irrefutably shows that what is obvious—that human beings, both male and female, are lustful—is true, and has always been so.... The more dubious its evidentiary basis and lack of connection with current reality, the more ardently the scientific inevitability of monogamy is maintained—even as it falls away around us.” — Stanton Peele, Ph.D.

A controversial, idea-driven book that challenges everything you (think you) know about sex, monogamy, marriage, and family. In the words of Steve Taylor (*The Fall, Waking From Sleep*), *Sex at Dawn* is “a wonderfully provocative and well-written book which completely re-evaluates human sexual behavior and gets to the root of many of our social and psychological ills.”

Sex at Dawn: How We Mate, Why We Stray & What It Means for Modern Relationships Details

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From Reader Review Sex at Dawn: How We Mate, Why We Stray & What It Means for Modern Relationships for online ebook

g says

Interesting read and lots to think about.

What I loved:

- Less patriarchal approach to science/sexuality/evolution.
- Chapters on bonobos--so important.
- Chapters on sexuality as a bonding tool.

What I didn't love:

- While the argument that culture can poison scientific fact is a valid and awesome one, to rest your entire book on it is problematic. Who's to say that these hypothesis aren't subject to the same corruption? Of course, that's never addressed. I would be interested to hear whether these authors consider themselves poly and how that influences their ideas.
- To write a book like this, you have to believe your hypotheses fully. I think a lot of them were on point, but I found that many of them were WAY too narrow. Human sexuality is SO complex. To boil all our behaviors down the way they have is reductionist and really, just as silly as some of the other scientists/philosopher's the criticize.
- Almost exclusive focus on heterosexuality.

Overall a solid read with some good food for thought. But I think it all deserves to be viewed through a skeptical lens.

Taka says

Fantastic--

This is one of those paradigm-shifting books that pretty much changes your belief system. Having read Robin Baker's *Sperm Wars* and absorbing its grim interpretation of human sexuality, this book, *Sex at Dawn* came as a pleasant and generally kick-ass surprise.

With abundance of humor and compelling narrative, the authors posit that human beings, like their primate cousins, originally engaged in multiple mating for most of their existence on earth before the advent of agriculture. And "multiple mating" means both males and females having multiple sexual partners at any given time, and it doesn't mean "polygamy" where alpha males get all the girls (such as in the case of gorillas)

From the premise that hunter-gatherers shared everything, including food and mates, the authors draw surprising conclusions that pretty much blew my mind.

First, they make the question of "are humans inherently selfish?" moot by suggesting that of course human beings can be selfish, but it largely depends on the context, sort of like asking, "Is water gas, liquid, or solid?" They take on Hobbes's grim view that life without government is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" point by point and basically proves him dead wrong.

If anything, the life of prehistory humans, the authors claim, was the opposite: social, rich, healthy, cooperative, and long. They had plenty to eat, plenty of time to play and take naps, plenty of opportunities to have sex; they generally lived long, healthy, happy lives.

One serious--and to some, unsettling--implication of the multiple mating premise is that we weren't made for monogamy. Witness the soaring divorce rates in the Western countries and all the wrecked relationships everywhere you look. Fidelity, defined as being sexually faithful to one partner for one's entire life, is--so the authors say--unnatural.

The hardest question that arises from this interpretation of human sexuality is what to make of marriages? The authors' answers are anything but specific: find alternative, untraditional arrangements (e.g. two couples sharing mates and living together), or just stop taking sex so seriously.

But the alternatives are more discouraging: not getting married at all and live a solitary life, or get married with an unreasonable expectation of sexual fidelity, have kids, and leave them when you get involved with another man/woman, thus fucking up their lives forever.

Not very appealing.

This book makes you think about one of the most important aspects of your life, and it's worth it.

A must read.

Lucas says

I feel completely cheated...

This review is directed more towards people who have already read Sex at Dawn, and to the authors. But hopefully this will be of use to new readers as well.

I'll start by saying that when I first read Sex at Dawn I was blown away. This book completely changed my view of monogamy, sex, and relationships. It sparked this new openness and acceptance in me, and I will say had a very positive impact on my relationship. I thought here was the book that everyone NEEDS to read. I recommended it to everyone, talked about it with everyone, even called it my new bible (not that I put any stock in the old bible – being an Atheist, but you get my meaning).

Then I came across a book called Sex at DUSK, by Lynn Saxon, a sort of counter-argument to Sex at Dawn. So, being a 'seeker of truth', I figured I owed it to myself to read this book as well. I really expected (i.e. wanted) Sex at Dusk to be a bad book in that it made a poor case, being full of religious and/or political bias, and couldn't really negate Sex at Dawn. But what I found instead was a very objective, concise argument that pretty much laid waste to everything presented in Sex at Dawn.

Lynn Saxon drew on the exact same research that Sex at Dawn used as evidence. However she showed a much more complete view of the research, she removed the apparent cherry-picking and candy-coating that Ryan and Jetha used, and showed that almost every bit of 'evidence' they used has been taken out of context, and presented in a way that is completely misleading.

I am no expert in this field so I took the authors of Sex at Dawn for their word. I believed that the evidence they showed was honest and complete. Unfortunately it would seem that it isn't. I am truly disappointed by their dishonesty.

The other possibility is that the author of Sex at Dusk is being dishonest, but being that she is only showing more of the same research I would find it hard to make that argument, and I think anyone who reads it will also have a hard time making that argument. I highly recommend that any and all fans of Sex at Dawn read Sex at Dusk, and please if you come to a different conclusion than I did by all means comment here and explain.

I honestly feel like I was cheated or scammed by Ryan and Jetha. I sincerely hope that they read this review and read Sex at Dusk to address the issues it brings up.

Jason says

My friend found this book intriguing. *Couldn't put it down*, he says. I could've probably put it down, but I promised him I would read it and read it I did. In *Sex at Dawn*, Christopher Ryan lays down a slew of what he believes to be persuasive arguments for our prehistoric ancestors being sexually promiscuous. Considering that we are most closely related to the bonobo (a 'pygmy chimp') in the evolutionary sense, he draws parallels between the bonobo's behavior and anatomical particularities to those of humans in order to suggest that our two species are sociosexually similar, as well. (Not to give anything away, but apparently bonobos are insatiable whores!) The point of Ryan's point, I guess, is to point out that we humans—as a general rule—commit to monogamous relationships because doing so is socially accepted and expected, but that we may in fact be damaging ourselves and our loved ones by acting in discordance with our innate, biologically-programmed sexual needs.

There wasn't anything I inherently disliked about this book—though the casual language likely meant to foster a 'connection' with lay readers leaves something to be desired—I wasn't interested enough in the subject matter to be swayed by Ryan's arguments. Even if our prehistoric ancestors were polygamous, what does it matter? Somewhere along the line it became more worthwhile for humans to live in committed, monogamous relationships (whether for social, economic, or perhaps other reasons entirely), and as with any choice made by anyone anywhere ever, it will always be at the expense of something. Perhaps this does leave us more sexually frustrated at times than our ancestors were, but I'd like to believe that the return on this investment provides us a reward that is greater than the sum of our frustrations.

At least I fucking hope so.

Christopher Ryan says

Well, I wrote the damned thing. Can I give myself five stars? Everybody thinks their baby is beautiful, right?

Lightreads says

My girlfriend and I had one of those gradual comings-together where you're going along fine, life is good,

and then you look up one day and . . . wait . . . hang on . . . you're dating that person you thought you were just sleeping with. (For the record, some of us *cough* figured this out much sooner than others of us.) When it happens like that, it's hard to figure out what "counts," if you care about that sort of thing -- anniversaries, firsts, all those markers of 'real relationshipness.' Luckily, neither of us cares what counts. Just, sometime over the past five years, we got to The Thing -- The Real Thing -- and that's cool.

Except the part where it isn't cool is that there are a lot of other people who care about what counts. They care *a lot*. To a lot of people, we can't have The Real Thing, and not because we're both women. No, see, it doesn't matter how much our lives have glommed over the past five years, or how we collectively meet her cancer diagnosis and me conceiving a child to carry as my sister's surrogate. None of that counts because we occasionally sleep with other people, together and separately. Because if you do *that*, well, that's not a relationship at all.

Which has never made sense to me on a logical level, or an instinctive one. Monogamy might be nice for some people (some of my best friends are monogamists, dontcha know), though more often it looks to me like it makes everyone ashamed and unhappy. But for me . . . no. I mean, I've been in monogamous relationships for years at a time, once before I knew what I wanted, and once after I had started to suspect but couldn't experiment to find out, because if your partner is not down with it like mine wasn't, then obviously you respect that. And I just . . . it's not that I was unhappy. Or not *just* that I was unhappy. I did not feel like myself. I felt like the person I was being in the relationship was untrue on some fundamental level of existential being. That sort of thing wears you down from the inside over time. And I strongly suspect it's a bit like being a closeted gay person trapped in a heterosexual relationship.

Anyway. So this book (woo! I got there!). This book is all about how our cultural investment in monogamy doesn't make sense. Or at least how the narratives we're told about it are bullshit. You know this story: men don't want to be in relationships, but they need fidelity from women to be sure the children are really theirs (because otherwise why spend any resources raising them?), and so women trap men into relationships with their sneaky hidden ovulation, but what they're really doing is trading access to their vaginas for resource stability. It's the pigs and prostitutes model. The one that gets used to defend patriarchy, gender inequality, you name it, because it's biology, don't you know.

This book is about how it's crap, and how it doesn't make sense given what we know about pre-historic sexuality, about multiple partner procreation now and in the past, and our evolution. It's also a pretty snotty bitchslap to evolutionary psychology which, well, yes.

I totally dug it, because it made sense out of a lot of stuff that has never made sense to me. (And the last quarter in particular has some great stuff about different arousal patterns that just -- yes, *thank* you.) I just really *really* wish it was less pop and more science, because honestly the thing this book convinced me of the most is that the vast majority of anthropological work has all the scientific rigor of a wet noodle. And I wish this book supplied more of that rigor, since it demonstrated very clearly that the material is there. Also that it was a bit more careful not to continuously fall into the same stereotyped patterns of thinking about gendered behavior that it is chiding its readers for, but, you know, lack of rigor.

Myke Cole says

Look, the writers of this intensely popular book don't need my help, and certainly won't be bothered by my disapproval, so I offer my opinion here mostly in the interest of hearing myself talk.

This is a really well written book that does a great job of confronting titillating issues head on, with honesty and humor and giving us an unflinching look at our sexual history - by which I really mean our primatological history - a look at how we boinked in our pre-agricultural past.

From a primatology standpoint, the arguments feel ironclad. The authors' examination of female copulatory vocalization, the physical mechanics of our sexual dimorphism, thrusting action in intercourse, relative genital sizes and many other factors all point toward a pre-agricultural ancestry where humans were unconcerned about paternity, where everybody pretty much fucked everybody and kids were raised communally.

No argument with any of that, and reading about the scientific evidence to support this is fascinating and really enjoyable, especially given the authors' brisk and really engaging style.

HOWEVER.

The book is clearly making a **STRONG** argument for polyamory, that monogamy is unnatural and a cause of endless misery, and that the future of human endeavor and satisfaction depends on a frank reckoning with how nature designed us to fuck.

Noted. And . . . I guess it's not wrong? But the argument collapses under the weight of the fact that **NOTHING** humans do in modern society is remotely in keeping with our natural origins. We deliberately make choices in a society that trade some kind of misery/suffering in for what we perceive to be a greater reward. I served in a military (wouldn't ever change that), I live in a climate controlled apartment (wouldn't change that), I drink milk post-weaning and tropical fruits out of season (wouldn't change that).

You know what's the most counter-natural thing I could ever imagine? The disciplined research and labor necessary to **WRITE A BOOK**. Our Bonobo relatives don't do that, and our pre-agricultural progenitors didn't do that either.

The authors proselytize for polyamory, but then fail to make any arguments or offer any suggestions for how, as a society, we get there. they also attack monogamy wholesale without examining why smart people who acknowledge and agree with their arguments (I'm a dedicated Dan Savage disciple) would be **willing** to be monogamous in spite of those challenges.

In short, the book feels like Bill Mahr's film *Religulous*, which makes some great arguments, but attempts to strengthen them by omitting all consideration of opposing viewpoints.

The result is a book that's 75% fascinating science, and 25% irritating social proselytizing, an argument full of so many holes that I can't be the only reader to have rolled by eyes so hard I nearly detached a retina.

Still, worth your time. I'm a lot smarter on our primate past now than I was before I read it.

Sarah says

Overrated, mostly unfunny but overly glib, using the same bad logic he accuses the monogamy pushers of, this book which is basically shilling for open relationships vis-a-vis evolutionary psychology is intellectually dishonest **AND** irritating, which is quite a feat. I can't believe Dan Savage pushed this crap. There are better arguments for new takes on monogamy, open relationships, and polyamory out there - we don't need to cloak them in bad, gender-essentialist "science".

Warwick says

A popular science book for people who hate science, *Sex at Dawn* manages to combine weak arguments with a prose style of such overbearing condescension that I had to grit my teeth to get through it. Everything is couched in terms of facile jokiness or, even worse, of coy euphemism, so that we have the ghastly prospect of a supposedly serious book about sexuality that can talk about a 'human female's naughty bits'.

The basic argument is that evolutionary psychologists, anthropologists and palaeontologists are conspiring to propagate the 'lie' that human beings have evolved to be broadly monogamous. The few studies that 'dare' to question this narrative are hailed as revolutionary, while the rest of the scientific community is written off as 'the clipboard-carrying crowd', who 'rigidly insist' on the status quo. Unfortunately this blanket dismissal of an entire discipline succeeds only in fatally damaging the authors' own credibility.

The debate over prehistoric sexuality is one that I have followed amateurishly, but with some interest, so I was quite looking forward to seeing what kind of evidence was going to be brought forward. By about page 40 I had realised with a sinking feeling that there wasn't going to be any. Instead, their approach is simply to restate their opponents' arguments in the most ludicrously simplistic terms they can, and hope that will stand for a rebuttal.

For instance, there is a mountain of evidence suggesting that prehistoric females were in the habit of 'bartering' sex, consciously or otherwise, for access to protection and resources supplied by males. This is a complicated and sophisticated argument, which Ryan and Jethá summarise like so:

Darwin says your mother's a whore. Simple as that.

After reading that I gave up any hope of finding a serious argument in here.

Of the book's other stylistic tics, I will just highlight a few of the more irritating. There is a tendency to ask rhetorical questions as a substitute for actually making an argument: *Could it be possible that...? Dare we ask whether...?* 'How many families are fractured by this common, tragic, undetected sequence of events?' I don't know – do you?? If not, stop asking stupid questions and show me some evidence. (It reminds me of a tabloid headline like ARE IMMIGRANTS CAUSING CANCER?, where the rest of the article amounts to a long admission that the answer is 'no'.)

A few other representative quotations: 'Sexual monogamy itself may be shrinking men's balls'; '*Homo sapiens*: the great ape with the great penis!'; 'ancestral females were shameless trollops'; 'Who's your daddies?'; 'We've no space for a comprehensive response to this'; 'Yabba-dabba-doo'. Malthus is introduced, laughably, as 'Wikipedia's eightieth Most Influential Person in History'.

If you're worried about missing the subtle message hidden in all this facile nudge-nudge-wink-winking, have no fear, because *they will simply put entire sentences that they consider important in italics*. Reading these passages feels like being talked down to by someone who doesn't even properly understand their own arguments. They also repeatedly make the infuriating implication that anyone who disagrees with them is doing so because they're morally offended or out of political expediency.

What makes it all so sad is that a book offering some new ideas on hot topics like male parental investment

or female sexual receptivity would actually be very welcome. This is not that book. What it really is is a plea for a return to an imagined 'ancient [sexual] egalitarianism' where humans – especially men – had repercussion-free sex with multiple partners. I would be more than happy to read a book promoting the benefits of polyamory, but please, don't dress it up as science.

Sex at Dawn was condemned by most of the academic community, but it was widely promoted by people like Dan Savage and Peter Sagal, and ended up on the New York Times bestseller list. It doesn't deserve the attention, and I wish I'd done a bit more research on it before I bought a copy. Instead, my advice is to consider the response that a pseudonymous primatologist was moved to write, *Sex at Dusk: Lifting the Shiny Wrapping from Sex at Dawn*. Because my impression of this one is that it's a disastrous blend of wilful misrepresentations with very poor writing.

(Feb 2014)

A much better book about the role of polygamy in human evolution (and one that sees it in much more ambiguous terms) is David P Barash's *Out of Eden: The Surprising Consequences of Polygamy*. Barash's comments on *Sex at Dawn*, by the way, are as follows: 'a truly egregious misrepresentation of biological and anthropological fact...grotesquely flawed...shouldn't be tossed aside lightly, [but] thrown away with great force.' Heh.

(Feb 2016)

Chris says

Hey! Hey, baby, baby, waitwaitwaitwait. Wait. Wait! Baby, don't... don't freak out

Okay, okay, I know what this looks like, but I can explain! Quiet, Chad, let me handle this. I can explain! I'm just - please, stop crying and listen - I'm just fulfilling my evolutionary heritage and helping to cement social bonds with... um... the pizza boy, but that'snotthepoint!! That's not the point! Look, before you do anything, y'know, drastic, you just need to read this book....

Humans are really good at figuring things out. As far as we go, we have a real knack for taking things apart and figuring out how they work. Though determined curiosity and perseverance, we know what's happening at the center of the sun, we know how the continents slide across the surface of the earth, how plants turn sunlight into potatoes. We can smash atoms and cure disease and peer back to the moment of creation itself. There is almost nothing that humans cannot comprehend if we put our minds to it.

Except ourselves.

Don't get me wrong - we have made great strides in philosophy and psychology, and come very far in understanding human origins and our spread across the planet. But there is a fundamental problem that we have when we study ourselves, and that is that we cannot do so objectively. Try as we might, it is impossible to completely put aside our own biases, judgments and backgrounds when we study how humans behave and try to understand why they do what they do. They are still there, if you look for them, and nowhere are they more evident than in the search for the origins of foundations of human sexuality.

The standard model, as it's often called, goes something like this: ancient men and women established a pattern of monogamy based on mutual self-interest. The man would keep to one mate in order to be absolutely sure that he was dedicating his efforts towards raising his own kids and not someone else's. If a

man had multiple partners, he wouldn't be able to provide for them all, and his genetic investment would die out. So, in terms of efficiency, it is much better for the man to keep himself to one woman, focusing all his attention on the children he knows he has fathered and making sure they live to have children of their own.

As far as women are concerned, they require the resources that the men bring. When pregnant, a woman's physical capacities are reduced and she is in a vulnerable state, so by staying monogamous, she is essentially purchasing security and resources that would otherwise be unavailable to her in a world that brought quick and merciless death to the weak. If she slept around, the man wouldn't be sure that the child she bore was his, and would therefore have less interest in taking care of the both of them. Thus, monogamy is the best bet to assure the survival of herself and her child.

This is the story that's been told for a long time, and it's considered by most to be the truth. Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jetha, however, disagree. Not only do they think the standard model is wrong, but they think it is nothing more than a relic of our own modern biases and hang-ups. The process, they say, can be referred to as "Flintstonization."

As you know, the characters in "The Flintstones" were more or less just like us. They went to work, they had houses and appliances and domestic disputes. They had the same issues and amusements as we did, because we overlaid our own society onto a prehistoric setting. Now in cartoons, that's good entertainment, and in the right hands it can be used as powerful satire and commentary. In science, though, it's just no good.

Starting with Darwin, people have imagined prehistoric humans to have the same sexual values that we have: a demure, reluctant female who is very choosy in deciding which male she will mate with. A bond forms, and they are faithful to each other until the end of their days. Later researchers, looking at our ape cousins, have plenty of observational research to support the idea that very early humans were monogamous. They look at chimps and gorillas and baboons and confirm what they had always suspected - that our natural sexual state is one of monogamy.

The logical conclusion, then, is that our modern attitude towards sexuality, with the rising rates of divorce and teen sexuality, represents a deviation from the way things "should" be, and must therefore be fixed. A loveless marriage, a man's roving eye, a woman who cuckolds her husband, serial monogamists, all of these, according to the standard model, result from our attempts to go against our nature.

Or is it the other way around?

Ryan and Jetha have put together a very compelling argument that the standard model of pre-agricultural human sexuality is not only wrong, but dangerously so. By looking at modern foraging tribes and the way they live, as well as doing a comparative analysis of humans against our nearest ape cousins, they have come to this conclusion: our "natural" sexual state is one of promiscuity. Back in the day, communities were small and tightly bonded, and sex was one of the things that held those bonds tight. Rather than one man and one woman struggling to protect their own genetic line, their entire community made sure that children were cared for and raised well. Everyone was everyone else's responsibility, and in a world of plenty there was no reason to try and enforce any kind of sexual exclusivity.

It was only with the rise of agriculture that it became important to know what was yours, as opposed to someone else's, and that quickly extended from fields and livestock to wives and children. Now that people were keeping their own food and making sure to divide their lands from their neighbor's lands, sharing went out of style. With so much work put into growing crops, that's where the standard model of economic monogamy settled in, and it's been with us ever since. The advent of agriculture changed everything, and not everything for the better.

In addition, the very biology of humans, from the way sperm behaves to the shape of the penis, to the

anatomy of the clitoris to the noises women make in the throes of orgasm - all of these point to an evolutionary history of sexual promiscuity. The evidence of our bodies tell us that being locked into a lifetime monogamous pair-bond is not what we evolved to do.

Ryan and Jetha know that their view of the fundamental nature of human sexuality will not be popular, mainly because it completely undermines our vision of who we are. So much law, tradition, education, entertainment and just plain common sense relies on humans being naturally monogamous. It's something that seems so obvious to us that we cannot imagine a society built any other way. Unfortunately, if Ryan and Jetha are right, *society* is the problem. We have established a cultural norm that goes completely against our biological and evolutionary nature, and which makes people miserable on a daily basis.

I bought this book mainly to stop Dan Savage from nagging me about it. If you listen to Savage's podcast - and you should - you will soon realize that monogamy is something that a lot of people aren't good at. We look at other people with lust in our hearts, we cheat, we stay in relationships where we're sexually miserable just because that's what we "should" do. For most people, our sexual urges are to be fought against, with everything from self-restraint to social shame to law itself. It seems like staying monogamous is one of the hardest things for many people to do.

This, of course, raises the question: if it were natural, would it really be so hard?

It is a fascinating read, which covers a lot of ground and makes some very compelling arguments. It's also quite funny in places, which was quite welcome. In discussing the standard model the authors note that this is, fundamentally, prostitution, wherein the woman uses sex for material resources. This sexual barter system has been assumed to be true for years, leading the authors to write, "Darwin says your mother's a whore. Simple as that." They also put in some special notes for adventurous grad students in the field of sexual research (especially genital to genital rubbing, something popular in bonobo apes, but which is rarely studied in humans) and re-titling the extremely popular song "When A Man Loves a Woman" as "When a Man Becomes Pathologically Obsessed and Sacrifices All Self-Respect and Dignity by Making a Complete Ass of Himself (and Losing the Woman Anyway Because Really, Who Wants a Boyfriend Who Sleeps Out in the Rain Because Someone Told Him To?)"

I don't really know what can be made of the serious information proposed in this book. No matter how it may seem, the authors are not proposing a dissolution of marriage or compulsory orgies or anything like that, nor is this book a "Get Out of Cheating Free" card. We've spent thousands of years putting these restraints on human sexuality, and they're not going to come off anytime soon. The best we can do right now is to be aware of where our ideas about relationships come from, and stop to think about the difference between what is true and what we wish were true. This understanding might help to save relationships that would otherwise work. People cheat not because they're scum or whores, but because they're human. Being monogamous is really hard not because we're weak or flawed, but because it's not what our bodies want for us.

The search for a better understanding of human nature should lead us to being better humans, and nothing should be left out. Not even our most sacred beliefs. Not even sex.

"Asking whether our species is *naturally* peaceful or warlike, generous or possessive, free-loving or jealous, is like asking whether H2O is *naturally* a solid, liquid or gas. The only meaningful answer to such a question is: It depends."

- Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jetha, *Sex at Dawn*

Okay? Okay, baby? So you see, I wasn't really cheating - okay, I was, but you can see why, right? I was just acting in accordance with my fundamental humanity, following the biological impulses as determined by

millions of years of evolution when we... Hey, where are you going? Where are you? Oh, hell, he's going for the shotgun. Run, Chad, leave your pants, you don't have time, run!

Althea Ann says

SEX AT DAWN: Preface

OK, I get the point of this. The preface is trying to make the point that humans are primates, and subject to primate urges. However, this is a DUMB story. Seriously, author? A monkey stealing peanuts you'd meant to give to a different monkey makes you feel 'betrayed in a way you'd never been before'? And inspires 'loathing' for monkeys? Plus, over-the-top anthropomorphization, and your telling me about putting on a 'primate display' for the monkey makes me think you may be a little unbalanced. Maybe not the best way to open the book.

SEX AT DAWN: INTRODUCTION

This covers a lot of stuff very quickly, as it's a quick overview of the topic of the book. There is little evidence for the claims here, but I'll trust that will come later.

*We're apes - fine, ok.

*Our society has sex issues - fine, ok.

*The Spanish word 'esposas' means 'wife' and 'handcuffs'... hmm... this word looks more like 'spouse' than 'wife,' looked it up, yep, I'm right, it can also mean husband. Point taken, though.

*People like porn - yep, true, but does that really mean sexual dysfunction?

*Priests molest kids - yep, true, but is this because of 'denying normal human sexuality' or because predators seek out positions where they have trusted access to kids?

*The self help industry is pathetic and non-helpful - agreed.

*On to the summary of what we'll find in this book - a theory that from existing evidence, we can conclude that pre-agricultural societies were gender-equal and generally promiscuous. I have serious doubts that it is possible to draw such conclusions. It is POSSIBLE, but I do not think it can be proven. We shall see.

*Outline of the typical 'narrative of human sexual evolution.' Yep, heard it before, agree that it's problematic.

*Graph of how agricultural societies lead to war. This graph spells the word "hierarchical" miserably wrong. PROOFREADERS are important!

*More about how agriculture leads to the idea of property, which leads to women losing status, etc. Stuff admittedly cribbed from Jared Diamond. Again, nice theory, not proven, though.

*Good point about: really WHY should men care about paternity?

SEX AT DAWN: Chapter 1, a.

Starts out with the old chestnut about an explorer asking the native "what's that?" and ending up thinking that "I don't understand" is a noun. I've most often heard this about "kangaroo" but the word in question here is "Yucatan." If you go to the 'notes' the author admits that this story is anecdotal - but he uses it anyway. It would have been more effective (not to mention more respectable) to talk ABOUT this story and why it flourishes in different versions... Cecil Adams explains in detail. (I LOVE Cecil Adams): (start w/ 4th paragraph) <http://www.straightdope.com/columns/r...>

SEX AT DAWN: Chapter 1, b.

A page or two to convince us that food preferences are cultural, and people in one country may eat things that people in another think are gross. This seems very obvious, and a waste of breath - except that a friend & I were recently discussing a post where someone was using others' food habits to demonstrate racism; and then of course there's the whole "Did Obama eat a dog" thing, so maybe this actually IS a valuable point to make to a large segment of the population.

I'm still stuck in my own culture - I'll pass on the grasshoppers! The references in this bit led me to this out-of-date but interesting blog: <http://bugsfordinner.blogspot.com/>

SEX AT DAWN: Chapter 1, c.

"An essential first step in discerning the 'cultural' from the 'human' is what mythologist Joseph Campbell called 'detribalization.' We have to recognize the various tribes we belong to and begin extricating ourselves from the unexamined assumptions each of them mistakes for 'the truth.'"

Nice quote. I agree. I know Campbell is frequently considered outdated, and in his search for universals, he was often far TOO reductionist about human mythology. He also grabbed things that were convenient to his narratives and ignored what didn't fit... but I still like him, overall. Interesting stuff.

Goes on to say that the commonly-accepted tropes about sexual jealousy, etc, are not necessarily natural, but cultural - that evolutionary psychologists are wrong. I feel like that's probably the main focus of this book - the theories of Evo. Psych. are NOT NECESSARILY true. I think that is correct - the evo. psych crowd CANNOT determine that human beings have always been monogamous/jealous/etc. But I still don't think this book can determine the opposite, either. Still, I suppose it's necessary and valuable to point out that one can look at the same set of data, can draw different conclusions or create a different narrative.

SEX AT DAWN - Chapter 2a

Darwin was influenced in his thought by the prudery of Victorian times, and the religious bias of those who came before him, not to mention his own sexual inexperience. The writing of Darwin were, additionally, censored by his prudish sister.

Therefore our first concepts of human evolution were subject to an anti-sex bias.

SEX AT DAWN: Chapter 2, b.

"the deepest function of myth... to lend narrative order to apparently disconnected bits of information, the way constellations group impossibly distant stars into ... patterns that are simultaneously imaginary and real."

Ok, that is lovely.

I've probably never mentioned it here, but I am a huge fan of mythology and mythopoeic fiction; and how they connect to culture and history.

The book goes on to say, "mythology is the loom on which we weave... daily experience into a coherent story. This... becomes tricky when we mythologize about ... ancestors separated from us by 20 or 30,000 years... (there's a) widespread tendency to project contemporary cultural proclivities into the distant past."

YES. Historical fiction writers talk about this A LOT, although usually not on such a grand time frame. But I'm really glad this book is admitting this problem. We'll see where they go from here...

SEX AT DAWN, Chap. 2, c.

Stuff about Lewis Morgan, a contemporary of Darwin and an anthropologist. Never read much about this guy, but what a fascinating character!

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lewis_H...

SEX AT DAWN: Chapter 3

Here the author's go into more detail on the assumption of current evolutionary theory that they believe are erroneous, including:

#1 - women aren't actually very horny

#2 - men are motivated to only care for their own children.

Their arguments for this second one are pretty convincing - as they point out, the arguments inherent in this are very questionable:

especially: early humans understood that sex led to children, and were certain which children were biologically his. (It's known that even recently, some 'primitive' cultures did not understand this).

There's a lot more here but it also points out that evolutionary theory concentrates ONLY on sexual relations

as a method of producing children, as if this were the only function of human sexuality - which, as any psychologist can tell you, it certainly isn't.

The chapter also points out that no, not all human cultures have centered around 'marriage and the nuclear family,' and that in early societies, which centered around shared resources, the whole sex-as-barter concept does not apply. (The idea that women allow a man sexual access in exchange for his material resources.) The author clearly finds this reduction of all human sexuality down to - essentially - acts of prostitution - offensive.

SEX AT DAWN - Chapter 4.

Finally, the bonobos make an appearance!

Starts off with a quote from Stephen Jay Gould about how it's peculiar that we insist on comparing 'nasty' animal and human traits, but not making the same comparison for 'noble' traits.

It then talks about how there's a history of comparing human behavior to chimp behavior. Interestingly, it mentions how some of the characterization of chimps as violent and aggressive is also inaccurate (much was based on captive chimps; and their behavior, it is pointed out, differs from behavior in the wild as much as the behavior of jailed humans and free humans.)

However, the authors are somehow not as critical of the research done on bonobos, and ignore the fact that (much like chimps) bonobos have also been observed acting in aggressive and violent ways.

I don't think this invalidates the author's theory that we can compare ourselves to bonobos, as humans also, obviously, DO act aggressively and violently, but I do feel like the authors are oversimplifying to make a point here, and the point suffers for it.

However, there are some very valid points here about the insistence on seeing animal cultures as a reflection of human. For example, the concept of "rank" and "hierarchy" in animal societies - it's noted that status can come from affection or seniority, rather than a 'rank' system.

Also, that primatologists have insisted on describing different groups of apes as 'enemy' groups, when in fact when the groups meet, socializing and sex occur - not what one would expect if they are 'enemies.'

Interesting note about how both humans and bonobos, UNLIKE other apes, have a genetic mutation related to oxytocin, and by inference, emotional bonding.

And, a reiteration of the book's main point: "Modern man's seemingly instinctual impulse to control women's sexuality is not an intrinsic feature of human nature. It is a response to specific historical socioeconomic conditions - conditions very different from those in which our species evolved."

Sex At Dawn: Chap. 5

Starts off with an interpretation of the Adam and Eve story as an allegory about humans moving from a foraging to an agricultural lifestyle. The authors express befuddlement as to why anyone would move from such an Edenic lifestyle to one of toil. It seems rather willfully naive. Foraging may be Edenic, temporarily, in times and places of plenty, but not all places are full of food. The foraging lifestyle requires frequent, nomadic travel. Not so good for those who aren't hale and fit. For me, it's very easy to see why people wanted to be able to settle and make a home, to try to wrest some predictability from an unpredictable world. However, the authors clearly state they regard the move to agriculture as a 'fall from grace.' I see it as a trade-off, yes... but one that most people have seen as worth it.

Next: very interesting (and true) idea about how humans have domesticated themselves, as much as any crop or farm animal: 'our cultures domesticate us for obscure purposes, nurturing and encouraging certain aspects

of our behavior... seeking to eliminate those that might be disruptive."

Next: the authors claim that, in the animal kingdom, humans are both uniquely social and uniquely sexual. While I see their point, I do think they exaggerate both. And no, 'exile' has not usually been considered the 'worst' punishment one can decree - hello, torture and death? Check out a list of historical punishments sometime.

Last: the authors promise to make the case that prehistorical human life was 'far from solitary.' OK, I never thought it was. However, I do think that the degree of privacy/community/social interaction that an individual expects is not an innate thing, but one of those 'culturally pruned' aspects of society mentioned at the beginning of this very chapter.

SEX AT DAWN: Chap. 6

This chapter explores in more depth the fallacy of the assumption that sexual exclusivity is required because women need the protection and provision of a man, who will only cleave to a woman if he is sure that her children are his.

The authors bring up the examples of many, many tribes who have traditionally believed that ALL men a woman has sex with contribute to the paternity of a child (and even that, the more men a woman has sex with, the stronger and healthier a child will be).

They point out that in cases where a child is considered to have more than one father, the child benefits, because that child has multiple people looking out for his or her well-being. (After all, in small tribal groups, the likelihood is that to some degree, the children ARE actually related to all of the adults in the group.)

In a small tribal group, where monogamy is not the rule, and having multiple lovers is not considered to be a cause for jealousy, but rather, something to be expected, having multiple bonds of affection helps draw the group closer together.

If women are free to have sex when and with whom they choose, this eliminates conflict & competition between males for female companionship.

The authors point out that the egalitarianism of small groups, where resources (and, often, sexuality) are shared, is not somehow more 'noble,' but, rather, is the most efficient way for a small group to survive. Again, showing that monogamy is not always the cultural norm, the authors mention that the Matis tribe of South America (they're pretty much nearly wiped out now, which the book doesn't mention) actually have a word that translates to "being stingy with one's genitals" - a cultural transgression. (Kinda the opposite of calling someone a "slut!")

The authors also mention that if we look at sexuality not solely as a means of reproduction, but as a mechanism for consolidating enduring bonds of affection and caring between multiple individuals in a group, homosexuality no longer appears like a functionless aberration, but rather as just another way to demonstrate mutual bonds.

However, the authors then try to make a jump to compare the sexual egalitarianism of tribes to examples such as rock bands or soccer teams that happily share the sexual favors of groupies. I'm not at all sure that this analogy works.

This is probably coming up later in the book, but it seems clear to me at this point that this egalitarian model of sharing (both sex and resources) with multiple members of a group, through multiple, enduring bonds of affection works very well IF you are in a tribe - a fairly small group who all share close bonds.

It wouldn't work so well in a larger group (say a town or city) where not all your neighbors are people you know intimately, whose well-being and survival is chained inextricably to yours.

A change from it being acceptable and expected to have sex with multiple people in your tribe probably

occurred when people started having a larger social group, and the "social unit" switched from "tribe" to "family."

Huh, This would also explain the weirdness of traditions such as that in Afghanistan where a woman is expected to marry only within her family (usually an uncle or first cousin), and marrying a non-related man is considered to be wrong and threatening (a non-family member is not trusted). It's like the tradition has only half-switched over...

SEX AT DAWN - Chapter 7.

While the last chapter was all about how other cultures have often had a more non-specific view of paternity, this chapter moves on to how mothering has often been less specific as well, with examples about how, in small tribes, maternal duties are shared amongst all the women.

It also points out how, in cultures that have insisted on seeing the nuclear family as the only acceptable family unit, horrible dysfunctions often occur. They bring up a horrible statistic that I had to check: it's true. In 1915, out of ten 'foundling hospitals' visited, in NINE of them, EVERY child died before the age of two. Makes it sound like Little Orphan Annie had it good! Meanwhile, the unwed mothers of these infants would hire out as wet-nurses to other women's children. Hardly the ideal vision of the nuclear family, I agree.

This chapter segues right along into CHAPTER 8

The main point here is that it's been claimed that "marriage" exists in every society around the world because, well, we've taken a look at whatever arrangements exist in whatever culture, and we call that "marriage," ignoring how their arrangements may actually differ quite a lot from what we think of as "marriage" - there's no definition of the word. The authors agree that yes, people around the world do 'pair-bond.' But whether a bond is supposed to be permanent, temporary, or brief, whether that bond overlaps with other long-term sexual relationships, whether sexual activity is allowed or expected outside the bond: not at all, all the time, only during festivals, only with strangers, only with tribe members...? this varies, and varies quite a lot. Most of the chapter is composed of details about the "marriages" found in other cultures, and it's quite interesting.

CHAPTER 9

The first half of the chapter is all about Matriarchies. It talks about different cultures that have encouraged female sexual permissiveness, and talks a lot about the Masuo; whom I've read about before. In traditional Masuo culture, the family is the essential unit of society – but the family who lives in a shared house are brothers and sisters, and the children of the women. Men go to women's homes for sex and romance, but never live with their lovers. Men's fatherly duties are to their sisters' children.

The authors that assert that in a matriarchal society, men have it better than in a patriarchal one, because women don't have a tendency to form the mirror image of a patriarchy and oppress men – matriarchies tend to be more relaxed and easygoing. Sounds nice, but the evidence presented is a bit scant for that assertion.

The second half of the chapter is about animal species which are erroneously considered to behave monogamously. Penguins are brought up (they engage in serial monogamy, sticking with one partner annually to raise chicks), as well as swans (they mention that at least 20% of chicks born to supposedly monogamous birds are not the offspring of that pair).

I'm not at all sure why these two segments are jammed together into one chapter, but there you are.

CHAPTER 10

The topic is jealousy.

"In a traditional Canela marriage ceremony... the brother of each partner's mother comes forward. He admonishes the bride and her new husband to stay together until the last child is grown, specifically reminding them not to be jealous of each other's lovers."

I like it!

Here, the authors argue that jealousy is largely a socially-constructed emotion, pointing out that degrees of sexual jealousy differ from society to society, not to mention exactly what behavior elicits jealousy. They make a very valid point that the results of many studies that we hear bandied about a lot, (saying that men are concerned with sexual infidelity and women are concerned with emotional infidelity) are fundamentally flawed, because their respondents were all Western college students – hardly a wide representation of the many ages and cultures of humanity. Good point.

It then moves on (again, and awkward transition) to talking about how Western pop culture views of ideal love are flawed, bringing up as examples the notorious stalker-song “Every Breath you Take “ (The Police), and “When a Man Loves A Woman,” which they amusingly propose should be retitled “When A Man becomes Pathologically Obsessed and Sacrifices All Self Respect and Dignity by Making a Complete Ass of Himself (and Losing the Woman Anyway, Because, Really, Who Wants A Boyfriend Who Sleeps Out In The Rain Because Someone Told Him To?)”

They then go on to point out Richard Dawkins’ idea that there’s no reason that sexual love should necessarily be exclusive, since we don’t expect any other sort of love or affection to be exclusive. All good.

Liz says

This book makes one depressed about the human race from agriculture on. However, it kind of awesomely doesn't make me feel like a slut, proving (through science!) how our anatomy developed and how we, as humans, were made to have sex with many different people. Sometimes all at once. With chocolate sauce. Kidding about the chocolate sauce.

Really, the book goes over our closest relatives, and then discusses common beliefs about the human race, and proves or disproves some of those beliefs. It's pretty fun. A good read, and since it's science, you don't even have to feel bad about getting turned on. Teresa, I recognize you are probably the only person that reads these, and I trust if you pick this book you will be able to keep your passion leased.

Valerie says

A long time ago, in a galaxy far away, I was an anthropology major at UCSC. Although I wanted to specialize in physical anthropology, I did quite a bit of classwork in cultural. One of the things that always fascinated me was fictitious kin. The idea of creating a network of ties to promote sharing among small groups. Church congregations and the scooby gang of Joss Whedon's Buffy are examples of this. I found the author's description of several of these types of kinship networks based on common sexual partners very interesting, as well as some of the research comparing primate anatomy and sexual response.

However, I had a very hard time getting past the smug, condescending tone of the book. I felt the author's "we know better than everyone who came before us." missed the point of iterative science. It also turned off any reader who might actually be reading from an academic perspective. I also felt that they presented some styles of fictitious kin that work well for small groups (less than 150) as the best for everyone. I think their work would have been stronger if they had gone for more of a tone, "of there are many different styles, and we should be more open minded".

Brendan says

I rarely stop reading books before I'm done (and I've read a lot of pretty bad books as a result!), but I think I will with this one. The book has two serious problems: first, it misrepresents (or maybe misunderstands?) the standard model of human sexuality from ev. biology. Perhaps because they are so focused on the most extreme form of ev. psych, they repeatedly oversimplify things, and then accuse various authors (e.g., Darwin) of defending such oversimplified theories because of sexism. Second, their positive theory (e.g., that humans were polygamous until about 10,000 years ago; and basically lived long, happy, war-free, sex-filled lives until the agriculture revolution) is radically undersupported by the evidence. You wouldn't know this from reading the book, though, because they repeatedly cherry-pick evidence, and consistently ignore what most practicing scientists would say are the *reasons* they believe this model (hint: it's not because Steven Pinker did a study of dating strategies in college-age students, or whatever).

In short: this is pop-science at its worse--it deliberately distorts science for ideological ends; it ignores evidence for rival theories; it presents biased and uncharitable pictures of other *scientists*; and the conclusion it defends seems to be mostly wish-fulfillment. (I think this is by far the meanest book review I've ever written, if that means anything...)

Steve says

I loved this book, but to be honest I have nowhere near the education to be able to evaluate the validity of the arguments presented in the book. I have seen grumblings here and there about the book, mostly from religious people who this book will understandably offend.

One of the main messages of the book is that monogamy is not natural to either men or women.

The authors are two researchers and psychologists, both married.

Despite being academics and approaching a variety of very weighty subjects the tone of the book is conversational, even jocular. No doubt this provided fuel to critics who wanted to pan the book because of the message. I found the tone endearing. It reminded me of that brilliant, but cool professor from college whose lectures were both fun and educational at the same time.

The authors do not advocate any change in lifestyle for anyone, only to be open minded about what they believe to be the biological drives people have.

There are too many fascinating arguments about too many related subjects in the book to do the book justice in this space.

More than the exploration into humanity's natural lack of monogamy and the biological roots of a number of common sexual fantasies, I enjoyed the deconstruction of the view of prehistoric life being harsh. According to the author there is much evidence for the argument that prehistoric life was not brutish, short and malnourished. Quite the opposite.

If you have strong religious values this book will certainly offend you. I am atheist and even some of the ideas in the book about the way men and women relate to each other deeply disturbed me. If you can put your values aside, this book is powerful and entertaining food for thought.

