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Recommended Readings



How Women Got Their Curves and Other Just-So Stories: Evolutionary Enigmas

David P. Barash and Judith Eve Lipton, Columbia University Press, 2009

Reviewed by Michael Zimmerman

This husband and wife team, he an evolutionary biologist at the University of Washington and she a clinical psychiatrist, have written a delightful and thought-provoking volume centered on perennial questions associated with the biology of females.

Each of the five chapters that comprise the core of the book centers on a single question: why do women menstruate; why is ovulation hidden; what's the evolutionary function of the female breast; is there an evolutionary explanation for the female orgasm; and why does menopause occur.

Barash and Lipton acknowledge right at the outset that they're not going to provide definitive answers to any of these questions for the simple reason that no such answers exist. What they do so very well, though, is provide numerous hypotheses along with ideas on how to test them. For example, from the scientific literature and from their own thoughts, they propose that the female orgasm might facilitate fertilization, might help with predator avoidance, might be a copulatory reward, might encourage monogamy, might be used to evaluate mates, or might reduce infanticide.

Along the way, they present a large amount of accessible information about biology, psychology, physiology and anatomy. Even more important, however, they demonstrate how scientists work to create and assess hypotheses all while having a great deal of fun. They also show how science slowly but inexorably pushes back the darkness surrounding complex issues and how evolutionary theory can help us understand all aspects of human biology.

- Michael Zimmerman is Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and professor of biology at Butler University.