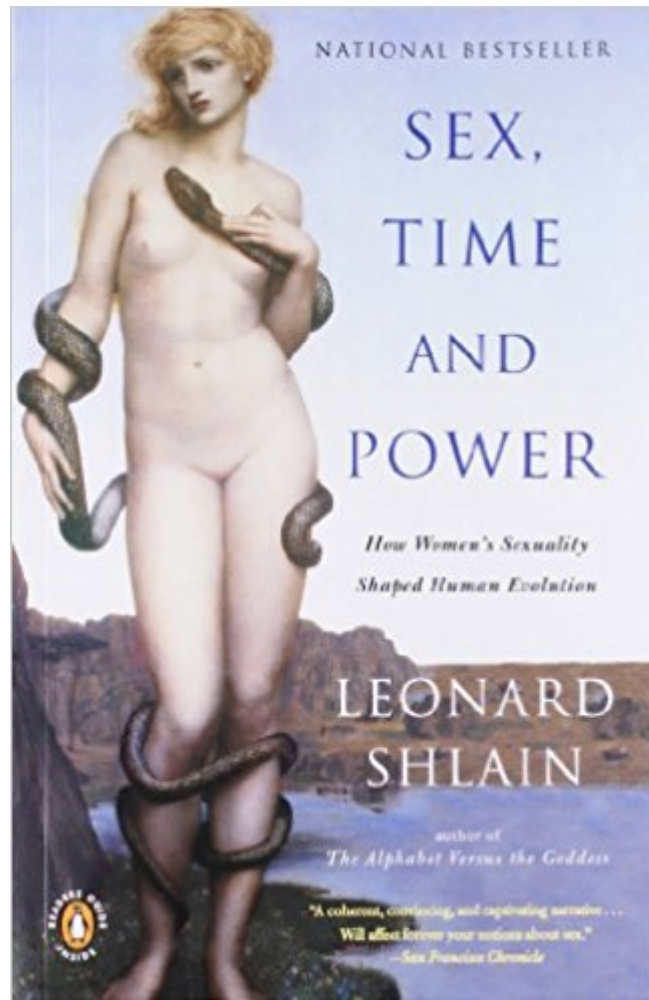


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Sex, Time, And Power: How Women's Sexuality Shaped Human Evolution



Synopsis

As in the bestselling *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess*, Leonard Shlain's provocative new book promises to change the way readers view themselves and where they came from. *Sex, Time, and Power* offers a tantalizing answer to an age-old question: Why did big-brained *Homo sapiens* suddenly emerge some 150,000 years ago? The key, according to Shlain, is female sexuality. Drawing on an awesome breadth of research, he shows how, long ago, the narrowness of the newly bipedal human female's pelvis and the increasing size of infants' heads precipitated a crisis for the species. Natural selection allowed for the adaptation of the human female to this environmental stress by reconfiguring her hormonal cycles, entraining them with the periodicity of the moon. The results, however, did much more than ensure our existence; they imbued women with the concept of time, and gave them control over sex—a power that males sought to reclaim. And the possibility of achieving immortality through heirs drove men to construct patriarchal cultures that went on to dominate so much of human history. From the nature of courtship to the evolution of language, Shlain's brilliant and wide-ranging exploration stimulates new thinking about very old matters.

Book Information

Paperback: 464 pages

Publisher: Penguin Books; Reprint edition (August 3, 2004)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0142004677

ISBN-13: 978-0142004678

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 1 x 8.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 15.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars — See all reviews (79 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #398,025 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #189 in Books > Self-Help > Relationships > Mate Seeking #213 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Anthropology > Physical #690 in Books > Medical Books > Psychology > Sexuality

Customer Reviews

I bought this book because I had immensely enjoyed Matt Ridley's book on sexuality and evolution, *The Red Queen*. Whereas Ridley goes into excruciating detail about how certain evolutionary principles have affected a wide range of species, Shlain concentrates entirely on human evolution. In the initial chapters, Shlain provides extensive explanations of the medical aspects of sex and

childbirth. Shlain knows how to make these details interesting by highlighting their relevance. For example, he explains how the disproportionately large head of the human fetus endangered the lives of prehistoric women, and why the female tendency to lose iron was such a significant issue in ancient times. And these points are only the beginning. The first few chapters contain a dozen or so similar insights. After Shlain provides the requisite background information, the book takes a more speculative turn. For the sake of argument, women are treated as a separate species, which Shlain calls gynosapiens. Because of certain evolutionary factors, gynosapiens were the first to become aware of time and mortality. In particular, sex was an act which carried potentially fatal implications for prehistoric women. Because the stakes were so high, gynosapiens took control of their own sexuality; they could not afford to be as carefree as men. The subsequent evolution of male behavior (and society as a whole) is therefore explained in terms of male efforts to negotiate sexual relationships with women. According to Shlain, language itself evolved because the glibber male stood a better chance of succeeding with females. Most men (and women, I suspect) would agree that a significant portion of contemporary male behavior is motivated by sexual ambition.

There are so many things wrong with this book it's hard to know where to begin. I suppose I should admit that the first part of the book was interesting and offered some promising questions. This makes up perhaps the first 10 or so chapters of the book. After this, however, the book is taken in an unimaginative, uninteresting, tedious, inaccurate, distorted, and pretentious direction that was very infuriating to wade through and which showed the author's bias in monogamy, gender stereotypes, and biologic essentialism. The book begins by producing a few premises which will be misused later in the book. These are that women developed a sense of time before men due to their menstruation and its connection with the lunar cycle and that this sense of time was produced to allow women to control their sexuality as a response to the high mortality of pregnancy.

Menstruation, however, produces a dependence upon men for meat due to the iron loss associated with it. This experience of time then leads men to become better hunters with foresight, produces language as a way for men and women to negotiate mating terms, and produces a sense of mortality and paternity which is what eventually leads men to produce religion, art, and systems that control the sexuality of women. I am willing to give Shlain all of these except for paternity which he does not convincingly show could have been an obvious intellectual realization nor a necessary one in hunter-gatherer societies. Now on to the problems with the way he uses all this.¹ He does not seem to clarify what epoch of time he is describing nor seems to care.

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