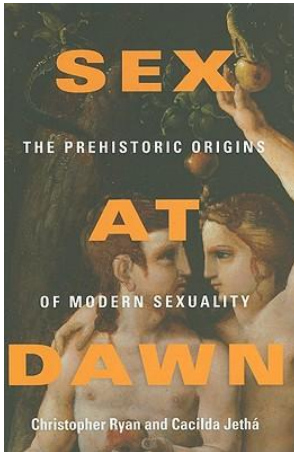


book review – Ryan & Jetha: ‘Sex at Dawn’



Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jetha, *Sex at Dawn: How We Mate, Why We Stray, and What It Means for Modern Relationships* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010).

This book incorporates the findings of anthropologists about the nature of human societies before the agricultural revolution, which was the main turning point in human history. From the origins of Homo sapiens over 200,000 years ago, until 10,000 years ago, all humans lived in hunter-gatherer foraging societies of about a hundred people or less. In such small bands, people shared for their mutual survival. In this context, sex was also a shared matter, with casual erotic expression with a number of people being the norm. Whenever they would come in contact with other wandering bands, sex often occurred. This included sexual contact even with Neanderthals, a closely related subspecies that contributed Neanderthal DNA to the genes of modern humans. Throughout history, when humans come in contact with others, they have sex. Sexual sharing was the norm.

Because our genetic heritage was adapted to this pattern of sexual promiscuity, patterns of marriage that originated in agricultural societies bring conflict.

p. 4: “Although we’re led to believe we live in times of sexual liberation, contemporary human sexuality throbs with obvious, painful truths that must not be spoken aloud. The conflict between what we’re told we feel and what we really feel may be the richest source of confusion, dissatisfaction, and unnecessary suffering of our time. The answers normally proffered don’t answer the questions at the heart of our erotic lives: why are men and women so different in our desires, fantasies, responses, and sexual behavior? Why are we betraying and divorcing each other at ever increasing rates when not opting out of marriage entirely? Why the pandemic spread of single-parent families? Why does the passion evaporate from so many marriages so quickly?”....

THE UNNATURALNESS OF MONOGAMY

p. 4: “Every month, truckloads of glossy supermarket magazines offer the same old tricks to get the spark back into our moribund sex lives. Yes, a few candles here, some crotchless panties there, toss a handful of rose petals on the bed and it’ll be just like the very first time!”

p. 5: American men respond to the need for something beyond marriage in their overwhelming desire to look at pornography. Conservative corporations such as AT&T, General Motors, and even Rupert Murdoch make billions of dollars per year from selling sex films. “The frantic sexual hypocrisy in America is inexplicable if we adhere to traditional models of human sexuality insisting that monogamy is natural, marriage is a human universal, and any family structure other than the nuclear is aberrant. We need a new understanding of ourselves, (p. 6) based not on pulpit proclamations or feel-good Hollywood fantasies, but on a bold and unashamed assessment of the plentiful scientific data that illuminate the true origins and nature of human sexuality. We are at war with our eroticism. We battle our hungers, expectations, and disappointments. Religion, politics, and even science square off against biology and millions of years of evolved appetites.”

p. 12: “A great deal of research from primatology, anthropology, anatomy, and psychology points to the same fundamental conclusion: human beings and our hominid ancestors have spent almost all of the past few million years or so in small, intimate bands in which most adults had several sexual relationships at any given time.... In addition to voluminous scientific evidence, many explorers, missionaries, and anthropologists support this view, having penned accounts rich with tales of orgiastic rituals, unflinching mate sharing, and an open sexuality unencumbered by guilt or shame.”

p. 15: “The anthropological record is so rich with examples of societies where biological paternity is of little or no importance. Where paternity is unimportant, men tend to be relatively unconcerned about women’s sexual fidelity.”

SEXUAL ORIENTATION DIFFERENCES MALE AND FEMALE

p. 272: Regarding sexual orientation, “research suggests strong differences in degrees of ‘erotic plasticity’ (changeability) in the males and females of many species—including ours. The human female’s behavior is typically far more malleable than the male’s. Greater erotic plasticity leads most women to experience more variation in their sexuality than men typically do, and women’s sexual behavior is far more responsive to social pressure.... Young males pass through a brief period in which their sexuality is like hot wax waiting to be imprinted, but the wax soon cools and solidifies, leaving the imprint for life.”

p. 276: In research studies of sexual orientation, “a straight guy with a higher sex drive tends to be more focused on women, while higher sex drive in a gay guy makes him more intent on men. But with women—at least nominally straight women—the opposite occurs: the higher her sex drive, the more likely she’ll be attracted to men and women. Lesbians showed the same pattern as men: a higher sex drive means more women-only focus. Perhaps this explains why nearly twice as many women as men consider themselves bisexual, while only half as many consider themselves to be exclusively gay.”

p. 277: In psychological studies where men and women were asked how many sexual partners they had had, men reported the same number on all questions. Women, however, reported more partners when they thought they were hooked up to a polygraph machine, and fewer partners when they filled out a questionnaire. “So, while women admitted to 70 percent more sexual partners when they thought they couldn’t fib, the men’s answers showed almost no variation.”

p. 278: “Parents need to remember that women’s answers to such questions may depend on when, where, and how the question is asked, as well as who’s asking.”

ADOLESCENT BOYS

p. 284: “Adolescent boys have a frenzied focus on sex. If you’ve ever tried to teach a class containing more than a few, or tried to raise one, or recall the turbulent desires yourself, you know the phrase testosterone poisoning is not always used ironically. For most adolescent boys, life often seems (and is) violent, hectic, and wild. Countless studies confirm that testosterone and associated male sex hormones are at high tide from puberty to a man’s mid twenties. Here we have another massive conflict between what society dictates and biology demands. With every voice in a young man’s body screaming for SEX NOW, many societies insist he ignore these incessant urgings and channel that energy into other pursuits, ranging from sports to homework to military adventure.”

“As with other attempts to block the unignorable importance of biology, this one has been a centuries-long disaster. Testosterone levels correlate to the likelihood of a young man (or woman) getting into trouble. Prisoners high in testosterone committed more violent crimes, were judged more harshly by the parole board, and violated prison rules more often than those low in testosterone. In the United States, adolescent males are five times more likely to kill themselves than females are.... Sexual repression underlies this widespread despair, a government study found that homosexual youth are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers.”

“Well intentioned websites and presentations rarely, if ever, mention gut-wrenching, identity-clouding sexual frustration as a possible cause of some of this destructive adolescent behavior.”

US CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM IS UNJUST

p. 283: “In 2003, 17-year-old honor student and homecoming king Genarlow Wilson was caught having consensual oral sex with his girlfriend, who had not yet turned 16. He was convicted of aggravated child molestation, sentenced to a minimum of ten years in a Georgia prison, and forced to register as a sex offender for life. If Wilson and his girlfriend had just enjoyed good old-fashioned intercourse, as opposed to oral sex, their ‘crime’ would have been a misdemeanor, punishable by a maximum of a year in prison and no sex-offender status.”

Another teenage couple videotaped their consensual sexual act, which was prosecuted that they were “manufacturing child pornography.”

p. 283: “Adolescents all over the country are getting into serious trouble for sexting one another: snapping a risque photo of themselves with their cell phone and sending to a friend. Turns out, in many states, these kids can be sent to prison for photographing their own bodies (manufacturing child pornography) and sharing their photos (distributing child pornography). They’re being forced to register as sex offenders despite the fact that they themselves are the ‘victims’ of their ‘crime.’”

SEXUAL REPRESSION LEADS TO VIOLENCE

p. 284: “Our distorted relationship with human sexuality is the source of much frustration, confusion, and ignorance.” Developmental psychological studies show that bodily pleasure during childhood leads to less violence as an adult, and denial of bodily pleasure during childhood leads to more violence in adulthood. Cross-cultural studies show that cultures which have a tolerance for childhood sexual behavior are much less violent, while cultures which repress childhood sexual expression have much higher levels of warfare and interpersonal violence.”

p. 285 “If we accept that our species is and always has been optimized for a highly sexual life and that adolescent boys are especially primed for action, why should we be surprised by the explosions of destructive frustration that result from the thwarting of this primal drive?”

p. 187: “The American Medical Association declared, in 1972, ‘Masturbation is a normal part of adolescent sexual development and requires no medical management.’ But still, the war on sex continues... The suffering caused by centuries of war on masturbation is beyond calculation. But this we know: all the suffering, every bit of it, was for nothing. Absolutely nothing!”

MALES NEED VARIETY

p. 292: “Why do men have such overwhelming hunger for variety in their sexual partners? ... Variety and change are the necessary spice of the sex life of the human male....”

p. 293: “Among social mammals the male drive for sexual variety is evolution’s way of avoiding incest. Our species evolved on a sparsely populated scene.... To avoid the genetic stagnation that would have dragged our ancestors into extinction long ago, males evolved a strong appetite for sexual novelty and a robust aversion to the overly familiar. While this carrot-and-stick mechanism worked well to promote genetic diversity in the prehistoric environment, it’s causing lots of problems now. When a couple have been living together for years, when they’ve become *family*, this ancient anti-incest mechanism can effectively block eroticism for many men, leading to confusion and hurt feelings all around.”

p. 293: “Monogamy itself seems to drain away a man’s testosterone. Married men consistently show lower levels of the hormone than single men of the same age.... Married men having affairs, however, were found to have higher testosterone levels than those who weren’t. Additionally, most of the men having affairs have told researchers they were actually quite happy.”

p. 294: Many other cultures recognize that after a few years of marriage the husband’s interest in the wife will begin to pale, and allow married men to take others as lovers. Rather than being jealous of these affairs, wives regard the younger lover as status symbols to raise their own esteem in society. Older men fear that without young lovers to excite them, they will become sexually inactive. Similarly, Alfred Kinsey concluded, ‘There seems to be no question but that the human male would be promiscuous in his choice of sexual partners throughout the whole of his life if there were not social restrictions.’” ...

p. 295: “Sociologist Jessie Bernard argued in the early 1970s that increasing men’s opportunities for sexually novel partners was one of the most important social changes required in Western societies to promote marital happiness. But this hasn’t happened yet and seems even less likely now, almost four decades later. Maybe this is why some 20 million American marriages can be categorized as no-sex or low-sex due to the man’s loss of sexual interest.... The absence of sexual desire is the most common sexual problem in the country. Combine these dismal numbers with the 50 percent of all marriages that end in divorce, and it’s clear that modern marriage is suffering a soft-core meltdown.... Human males seem to be so constituted that they resist learning not to desire variety.”

p. 296: “As their testosterone levels decline with age, many men experience a diminishment of energy and libido, an intangible distance from the basic pleasures of life. Most attribute this blurred distance to stress, lack of sleep, or too much responsibility, or they just chalk it up to the passage of time. True enough, but some of this numbing could be due to ebbing testosterone levels.... And one of the things that reliably revives a male’s sagging testosterone levels is a novel lover.”

p. 297: “How many families have been ripped apart because middle-aged men misinterpreted the surge of vitality and energy resulting from a novel sexual partner as love for a soul mate....”

“The realities of what makes a relationship work over the long run are respect, admiration, convergent interests, good conversation, sense of humor, and so on. Only by arriving at a more nuanced understanding of the nature of human sexuality will we learn to make smarter decisions about our long-term commitments. But this understanding requires us to face some uncomfortable facts.... Researchers have found that men with lower levels of testosterone are more than four times as likely to suffer from clinical depression, fatal heart attacks, and cancer when compared to other men their age with higher testosterone levels. They are also more likely to develop Alzheimer’s disease and other forms of (p. 298) dementia, and have a far greater risk of dying prematurely from any cause.”...

“If it’s true that most men are constituted, by millions of years of evolution, to need occasional novel partners to maintain active and vital lives, then what are we saying to men when we demand lifetime sexual monogamy? Must they choose between familial love and long-term sexual fulfillment? Most men don’t fully appreciate the conflict between the demands of society and those of their own biology.”

What to do? One option is repress a desire for variety, and continue to be monogamous, but with the above disadvantages. Another is to lie, but if caught this can ruin the marriage. A third option is to divorce and start another relationship. This is the preferred option in American culture, but it leads to many broken homes and single parent households.

p. 302: “A reasonable relaxation of moralistic social codes making sexual satisfaction more easily available would also make it less problematic. This appears to be the overall trajectory of history.... In terms of sexuality, history appears to be flowing back toward a hunter-gatherer casualness. If so, future generations may suffer fewer pathological manifestations of sexual frustration and unnecessarily fractured families.... Apart from death itself, what causes as much human misery as the ongoing demise of marriage? In 2008, almost 40 percent of the mothers who gave birth in the United States were unmarried. This matters. On every single significant outcome related to short-term well-being and long-term success, children from intact, two-parent families outperform those from single-parent households. Longevity, drug abuse, school performance and dropout rates (p.

303) teen pregnancy, criminal behavior and incarceration, in all cases, the kids living with both parents drastically outperform the others.”

p. 303: “By insisting upon an ideal vision of marriage founded upon a lifetime of sexual fidelity to one person—a vision most of us eventually learn is highly unrealistic, we invite punishment upon ourselves, upon each other, and upon our children.”

p. 305: “From a child’s perspective, having more than two stable loving adults around can be enriching”

p. 304: “Many women will find it difficult to accept that men can so easily dissociate sexual pleasure from emotional intimacy, just as many men will struggle to understand why these two obviously separate (to them) issues are often so intertwined for many women. But with trust, we can strive to accept even what we cannot understand.”

p. 309: “Conventional marriage is a failure. Emotionally, economically, psychologically, and sexually, it just doesn’t work over the long term for too many couples.”

p. 310: “Despite centuries of religious and scientific propaganda, the basic illusions underpinning the supposed ‘naturalness’ of the conventional nuclear family are clearly exhausted. This collapse has left many of us isolated and unfulfilled.... Rather than rigid adherence to a notion of the human family that was never true to begin with, we need to seek peace with the truths of human sexuality. Maybe this means improving new familial configurations. Perhaps it will require more community assistance for single mothers and their children.”

According to a survey of thousands of gay men, reported in *Alphatribe* magazine April 2019 (pp. 19-21), the most highly desired category of male to be attracted to is “young.” In addition, 44% said they were attracted to “Twinks” (18-25) while another 28% said they were attracted to “Daddies” (older). In terms of preferred positions, 20% said they are total tops, 26% are total bottoms, and 54% are versatile. One in three gay men said they watch porn every single day. Treasure Island Media is the most watched studio.