



ACADEMIC STUDIES PRESS

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Anatomy of Love: A Natural History of Mating, Marriage, and Why We Stray* by Fisher, Helen

Review by: Liana S. E. Hone

Source: *Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Fall 2018), pp. 131-134

Published by: Academic Studies Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.26613/esic.2.2.100>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Academic Studies Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture*

JSTOR

Fisher, Helen. 2016. *Anatomy of Love: A Natural History of Mating, Marriage, and Why We Stray*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company. xii, 450 pages, 2 halftones.

Hardcover. \$26.95.

Paperback. \$15.95.

Kindle edition. \$9.04.

Liana S. E. Hone

Helen Fisher's second edition of *Anatomy of Love: A Natural History of Mating, Marriage, and Why We Stray* is an optimistic, evolutionary account of human romantic love. If you were a child who found donning rainboots and jumping in puddles exhilarating, you will find that each section of her book produces a satisfying splash. From courting and falling in love, to marriage and divorce, to how the invention of the plow influenced power, Fisher masterfully covers the evolution of love.

Fisher draws on many concepts with which evolutionary-minded readers will be well-acquainted, including the evolution of the two sexes and sexual selection. What makes her book unique is her ability to coax the reader into viewing these topics through the lens of love: What were the implications of the development of language and tool use on the pair-bond? Did cooking with fire tip the balance of reproductive costs in favor of the pair-bond? Fisher's characteristic answer: "Probably."

Fisher outlines several intriguing theories concerning the evolution of love and, unavoidably, reproductive strategies. Fisher wastes no time getting our feet wet. On the first page, she reminds us of the evolutionary bases of our behaviors, and by page two, she has drawn parallels between human courting cues and similar tactics observed in other species, providing evidence that sexual strategies are the product of past adaptive

pressures. She covers the origins of our "body talk" (directed gaze and movements) and "grooming talk" (flirtatious conversations). Fisher divides courting into five stages (attention getting, recognition, grooming talk, touch, and body synchrony). She suggests that body synchrony, food offering, and musical performance are candidate human courting universals. Fisher then discusses the psychological and physiological mechanisms that drive us to fall in love. Romantic love, it seems to her, is distinct from lust and attachment. It can be influenced by a potential mate's odors, our previous experiences (or "love maps" of what we seek or avoid in a mate), and attractiveness (both physical and financial). Falling in love is a universal trait and, like the use of courting cues, has an evolutionary basis.

Courting and romantic love are natural—but is monogamy? According to Fisher, a resounding "Yes." Courting and romantic love are means to an end: Getting one's genes into the next generation. Fisher craftily characterizes marriage strategies (monogamy, polygyny, polyandry, and polygynandry) to support her serially monogamous model of human mating. She argues that pair-bonding is natural, common, and the *primary* strategy used by our species, unless, in rare cases of accumulated wealth, an opportunity for a *secondary* strategy presents itself. This is an interesting argument, though it does not consider how polygyny crops up in

other species without accumulated wealth (e.g., gorillas) or why humans exhibit a sex difference in physical size (which is not consistent with a monogamous model, serial or otherwise, and more supportive of mildly polygynous model). Fisher suggests that we pair-bond willingly and engage in secondary strategies grudgingly.

With monogamy comes adultery and divorce. Adultery seems to be the universal rule, not the exception. For men, evolutionarily, more sex equates to more genes in the next generation. For women, the evolutionary advantage is less clear, but abundant: Sex begets (1) supplementary subsistence or “meat for sex,” (2) “backup” support if a mate dies, (3) good genes for offspring, and (4) genetic variability among offspring. Fisher states that “given the vast number of cultural factors and individual variations involved in marriage and divorce, one would expect even fairly significant divorce patterns to disappear” (95). However, she finds three patterns: (1) Divorce occurs more frequently among those in their twenties and thirties. This is early in human reproductive careers, when it is possible to move on to have more children with new partners. (2) Divorce likelihood is inversely related to the number of children a couple share. If a couple shares no children, both easily move on—if the couple shares several children, investing in mutual offspring is beneficial to both. (3) Divorce typically takes place about three to four years after marriage, at a time when, according to Fisher, pair-bonded parenting is less essential to the survival of a child. Fisher concludes that there is a duality to our mating strategy whereby humans pursue monogamy during the time it takes to ensure offspring survival, then start the process with a new partner unless a second offspring is conceived. Bountiful cross-cultural data confirm these patterns of adultery and divorce, but Fisher puts forth a disclaimer against determinism: “Can we rise above this natural heritage? Of course we can” (145).

After supporting her theories on monogamy, adultery, and divorce, Fisher paints a picture of

the changing earth that precedes the evolution of pre-hominids. She offers a detailed description of our ancient and modern relatives. A reader could get lost in the jungle of Fisher’s imagery, forgetting they are reading a book on love. Her metaphors are humorous and effective. When describing chimps devouring the spoils of a hunt she writes, “Everyone sits to eat, leisurely adding leaves to supplement the protein—the original steak-and-salad dinner. Sometimes it takes a dozen chimps all day to consume a carcass weighing less than twenty pounds, an event not unlike an American holiday dinner” (117).

After this pit stop in our primeval past, Fisher gets to the crux of monogamy and desertion from an evolutionary perspective. She draws on what she knows about ancient African flora/fauna, modern apes/monkeys, monogamous species, and modern hunter-gatherers. She suggests the evolution of our primary mating strategy occurred 4 million years ago, after *Ardipithecus ramidus* roamed circa 4.4 million years ago and before *Australopithecus afarensis* rose, which was about 3.6 million years ago. She describes our ancestors during this period as “Meat Pirates” (129), which is by far the best description of “man the scavenger” I have ever come across. Fisher contends that our “meat pirate” ancestors adjusted to being pushed out of disappearing forests onto open land (eye level with predators) by scavenging (opportunistic hunting). Craving the protective cover of what was left of the woodland, our ancestors started to move their food to sheltered areas, which required bipedalism. But what does this have to do with love?

Fisher argues that bipedalism caused humans to cross the monogamy threshold. As our ancestors became bipedal and infants no longer clung to a mother’s back, women began to carry their young. Bipedal women carrying infants needed extra protection. Without the support of a mate, infant survival was jeopardized. And so, Fisher suggests, the benefits of monogamy started to outweigh the costs of foregoing promiscuity. It is

at this point one might have expected Fisher to consider the difference in physical size between the human sexes, which is inconsistent with monogamous mating strategies. But she further supports her argument for the emergence of monogamy with the familiar “obstetrical dilemma.” When humans started to use fire, nutritious cooked food contributed to bigger brains, and an increased difficulty for the brain case to fit through the birth canal. Natural selection sorted this out through secondary altriciality: our ancestors began to deliver increasingly immature fetuses. Fisher argues that a pair-bonded mate could lessen the burden of rearing increasingly immature infants. In her view, a man could provide enough for one woman in these harsh scavenging times, and so monogamy became a viable male option.

Fisher offers more than an ultimate explanation for love; she also covers proximate explanations. She describes the brain processes of lust (testosterone), love (dopamine, norepinephrine, serotonin), and attachment (vasopressin, oxytocin). She suggests that love is like an addiction. Addiction is characterized by chronic relapsing triggered by craving, and so, as Fisher suggests, is love. There is a key difference between love and addiction on which she does not touch: Our brains produce *adaptive* behaviors when it comes to love (or hunger, or thirst), whereas during addiction, drugs override reward circuits and produce *maladaptive* behaviors. The analogy is useful in that readers intuitively understand what addiction is, but it is worth remembering that there would be no circuitry for drugs to wreak havoc on if the reward system had not evolved first. Regardless, Fisher’s mechanistic description of lust, love, attachment, and abandonment fits well with her theory of serial monogamy: Pair-bonding, followed by a three- to four-year itch, then by desertion.

Though Fisher does not discuss physical sex differences, she offers a review of psychological ones, including female verbal superiority and male visuospatial acuity. She gently disentangles

biological bases from the cultural enhancements of sex differences that are exaggerated by sexual selection. However, she focuses entirely on relations *between* the sexes, or on sustenance and nurturing. She mentions hunting in relation to men’s “step” thinking and multitasking in the home in relation to women’s “web” thinking but does not discuss the implications of intra-sexual competition on the evolution of these thinking styles. She gives a solid evolutionary rationale for the preponderance of visuospatial abilities in men, but she does not discuss the implications of male–male competition on the evolution of these traits. Likewise, she attributes the evolution of female verbal acuity to their role in educating the young, without considering female–female competition.

After recounting the evolution of love throughout our hunter-gatherer past, Fisher describes the switch to farming and the invention of the plow. I have never thought of the word *plow* as ominous before now. Fisher claims that “there is probably no single tool in human history that wreaked such havoc between women and men or stimulated so many changes in human patterns of sex and love as the plow” (284). Fisher contends that whereas men and women traditionally played equal roles in marriage and divorce during our hunter/gatherer past, the plow pushed us into permanent marriage “till death us do part,” by tying men and women to mutual real estate with no option for divorce. Further, the plow requires the strength of a man, and so wives became subordinate to their husbands as their roles as contributors in a marriage became unequal to that of men. Thus, Fisher concludes that with the invention of the plow came Western notions that men have a higher sex drive and are more adulterous, that women should be chaste and are the dependent sex. It was not until the Industrial Revolution that “patterns of sex and love and marriage would begin to swing forward to our ancient past” (294). It is at this point that Fisher reveals her theory on slow love. Now that the restraints of the plow have relaxed, she muses, people in

Western societies seek long courtship prior to commitment. They have one-night stands, seek friends with benefits, co-habit, and create pre-nups prior to marriage. Fisher suggests that this allows many unhappy “marriages” to end before they start, which increases overall relationship satisfaction. She leaves the reader with this optimistic conclusion.

Throughout the book, Fisher draws the reader’s attention to the intuitive nature of what she studies and keeps the human evolution enthusiast engaged. In her quest to tell

the story of love, Fisher paints a picture of our primeval past by drawing on what we can observe in the modern animal kingdom, what we can glean from the remains of our ancient relatives, and what we can infer from modern hunter-gatherer ethnographies. Her conclusions are backed up by data when we have it and educated musings based on years of experience when we do not. She gets at the guts of why we love, so the title’s *anatomy* is fitting. I recommend this book to the academic, student, and casual reader alike.