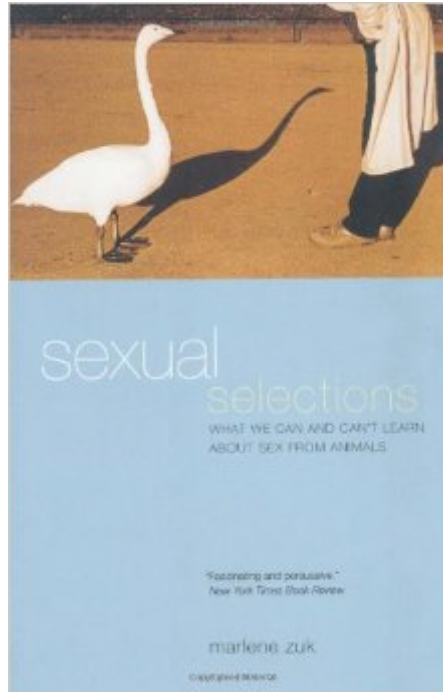


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Sexual Selections: What We Can And Can't Learn About Sex From Animals



Synopsis

Scientific discoveries about the animal kingdom fuel ideological battles on many fronts, especially battles about sex and gender. We now know that male marmosets help take care of their offspring. Is this heartening news for today's stay-at-home dads? Recent studies show that many female birds once thought to be monogamous actually have chicks that are fathered outside the primary breeding pair. Does this information spell doom for traditional marriages? And bonobo apes take part in female-female sexual encounters. Does this mean that human homosexuality is natural? This highly provocative book clearly shows that these are the wrong kinds of questions to ask about animal behavior. Marlene Zuk, a respected biologist and a feminist, gives an eye-opening tour of some of the latest developments in our knowledge of animal sexuality and evolutionary biology. *Sexual Selections* exposes the anthropomorphism and gender politics that have colored our understanding of the natural world and shows how feminism can help move us away from our ideological biases. As she tells many amazing stories about animal behavior--whether of birds and apes or of rats and cockroaches--Zuk takes us to the places where our ideas about nature, gender, and culture collide. Writing in an engaging, conversational style, she discusses such politically charged topics as motherhood, the genetic basis for adultery, the female orgasm, menstruation, and homosexuality. She shows how feminism can give us the tools to examine sensitive issues such as these and to enhance our understanding of the natural world if we avoid using research to champion a feminist agenda and avoid using animals as ideological weapons. Zuk passionately asks us to learn to see the animal world on its own terms, with its splendid array of diversity and variation. This knowledge will give us a better understanding of animals and can ultimately change our assumptions about what is natural, normal, and even possible.

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Customer Reviews

Marlene Zuk is a biologist, and has specialized in studying insects, especially crickets. Part of the reason she had picked insects for her field is that they are very much unlike humans; she knows that studying primates, dolphins, or other mammals would be harder for her because of a human tendency to anthropomorphize. She says that with insects "it is harder to see myself reflected in their behavior." That sort of recognition of how all of us react to animals informs her remarkable book, *Sexual Selections: What We Can and Can't Learn about Sex from Animals* (University of California Press), which is full of information about the sex lives of our fellow creatures on the planet, what we have to learn from them, and why we can't apply what we learn to ourselves. She shows that animals have incredibly varied versions of sex, and "... if we try to use animal behavior in a simplistic manner to reflect on human behavior, we will, in myriad ways, misperceive both." Zuk is a feminist as well as scientist, and is dismayed by the use of examples in biology to represent either feminism or "traditional family values." As a feminist, Zuk was initially heartened by the merging of environmental concern and women's rights into "ecofeminism." "Mother Nature" or some other Earth goddess is frequently invoked, but Zuk demonstrates her doubts that biological lessons show that females tend to be more caring, less aggressive, or more empathetic. She gives examples of, say, reed warbler females who practice infanticide on rivals' eggs, or female wasps that battle fiercely to take control of a colony.

University of California, Riverside biology professor Marlene Zuk, whose specialty is insects, especially crickets, makes two main points in this modest volume. One, what is "natural" as observed in nature is not necessarily right and should not be used as a guide for human society; and two, how we interpret the behavior of animals is colored by our biases, both anthropomorphic and male-gendered. Professor Zuk writes from the avowed position of a feminist, although she makes it clear that she is not an "ecofeminist" nor does she agree with those feminists who believe that the exercise of science and "attempts to study the world are just culturally derived exercises relevant only in a certain social context." (p. 16) In other words, Zuk wants to reconcile the ways of science, especially evolutionary biology, to feminists while pointing out to biologists that many of their preconceptions contain a male bias. She recalls a poem from A.E. Housman that includes the

phrase "witless nature" which she takes as a cornerstone for her position. Nature "is not kind, not cruel, not red in tooth and claw, nor benign in its ministrations. It is utterly, absolutely impartial." (p. 15) From this it follows (for most of us anyway) that we should not draw moral conclusions about how people should behave, nor should we form notions of what is "right" or "wrong" from observations of nature. This is a position that most professionals in evolutionary biology today appreciate, although this was not always the case, as Zuk is quick to remind us. She sees the antiquated notion of *scala naturae* (from Aristotle) which puts humans at the pinnacle of evolution as part of the reason for the errors of the past.

I read the original hard cover edition of 2002. The 256 page book contains 212 regular text pages. Author Marlene Zuk defines herself by some other people's term of "liberal feminism". As that she distances herself from "ecofeminists" who shape their interpretation of the animal world to fit contemporary feminist doctrine. Well... it is very necessary to get a biologist's perspective that is not patriarchal. In rare instances, I find some remarks not really that blatantly feminist either. Though after surfing the net for one Dr. Susan Block's dresscode made me think about the idea of maybe forgiving Zuk for making a squibbing insinuation about the good doctor's choice of attire - or lack of it. In principle that is every individual woman's choice, of course. At least I have never heard anything similar about some male media expert's choice of clothing. As a "liberal feminist" Zuk isn't actively set to discriminate homosexuals. However, she isn't exactly unbiased either, when it comes to interpretations. On the one hand, she's self-critically musing about her former ignorance on witnessing male crickets (her animal of expertise) love singing to other male crickets without her thinking of anything obvious before reading *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity* (Stonewall Inn Editions) on some 450 species of scientifically witnessed homosexual behavior. On the other hand, she is nullifying that statement in the same breath by claiming this wouldn't necessarily mean anything as she also witnessed some crickets singing to twigs and leaves. Well, there was an Asian prince once (for real!

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