

BOOK REVIEWS

The Sex Contract: The Evolution of Human Behavior. Helen E. Fisher. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1982, 253 pages, \$13.50.

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Helen Fisher cuts across disciplines with such ease that a major accomplishment of her book will probably go unnoticed. She presents an overview—the big picture—rarely obtained but certainly needed to counterbalance the constantly accelerating specialization in scientific writing. Fisher is quite adept at synthesis; she moves easily and comfortably from authority to authority, abstracting Louis Leakey's ideas as expeditiously as she does Emile Durkheim's. Sociobiology, biosocial anthropology, psycholinguistics, archaeology, economics—none gain dominance. The multiple perspectives of special fields and special views are gracefully integrated into a majestic panorama. Triumphant over fragmentation is not a mean feat, but Fisher does it so easily, she generates such lucid prose, that what is pure and clear may be mistaken for artlessness and simplicity.

Any book attempting to explain sex stratification is likely to arouse a good deal of ire. The materialists will discover too much functionalism; the Bullogh ideologists will declare there is too much Ortner. And *vice versa* will be heard as well. *The Sex Contract* can not win—except, perhaps, among those readers who already agree with it (including a number of Fisher's colleagues who are cited in the book and who wrote blurbs for the dust jacket). Fisher's major thesis, that human sexuality has been the dominant factor in determining the nature of human social behavior, is certainly interesting and it is quite well supported. To be sure it is arguable, and sex and evolution are today argued with a vehemence that used to surround theological disagreements.

Fisher's hypothesis can be briefly summarized without too much damage. When humans began to walk upright, she suggests, the resulting narrower pelvis caused females who gave birth to smaller babies to be favored by evolution. However, these survivors were women who gave birth to smaller, probably premature, babies—helpless babies. Thus burdened in the hunt for food and the battle against predators, women were forced to "bond" to survive. Today's human females are nature's sexual super athletes—they lost estrus cycle and can copulate any time—because sex was, of course, the best way to keep a man around. It assured bonding, so it assured survival of the species. In a fundamental way, Fisher's hypothetical protohominid female, who used sex to assure bonding, is an archetype who walks the pages of literature, as in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*. Indeed, this protohominid temptress calls to mind the females of the recent movie hit, *An Officer and A Gentleman*. And this suggests the weakness of *The Sex Contract*. Too often it reads like popular fiction, or a script designed to attract a large movie audience.

Perhaps Fisher should not be criticized for this. She does, after all, declare in her

short preface "To The Reader" that because she is "interested in bringing anthropology to the public," she "elected to write a book for a general audience." The book is entertaining and accessible; from this both its strengths and its weaknesses obtain. Odd things happen when a book is aimed at the lowest common denominator. For example, all the "sexy stuff" is up front; presumably this is so the general reader who is browsing will be intrigued as soon as he or she opens the book. Fisher has written imaginary tableaux ("verbal dioramas" Professor Jack Kelso calls them in the "Foreword") meant to dramatize key moments in evolution and, therefore, sprinkled throughout the book. However, they are so simple and flat as to be virtually lifeless. Yet her prose sparkles when she deals with more complex matters. One suspects that her enthusiasm for her subject enabled her to simplify the stages of human evolution, the work of anthropologists in unravelling the mysteries of evolutionary development from a few bones, and a good deal of biological and linguistic theory while still exhibiting a lively style. At any rate, her fictional dramatizations are not lively.

These "verbal dioramas" fail in another way. Fisher emphasizes occasional sentences in them (e.g., *Then she shared her vegetables with him.*) to indicate to any simple-minded readers who might be out there that this is a *key moment* in human evolution—or at least in Fisher's hypothesis. Unfortunately, she often makes the transition from speculation to a quasi-factual approach, in which her imaginary scenario with no warning and no substantiation, becomes the foundation for conclusions. The serious reader is distracted as well by the plethora of probabilities, maybes, perhapses, and might; yet the distraction accelerates when these magically lead to musts and weres. Certainly Fisher was attempting a difficult passage between the Scylla of reason and the Charybdis of imagination, but too often the book is in danger of foundering in the whirlpool of fancy.

The Sex Contract is literally a slight book. It has been padded with an eight page bibliography—surprising and probably extraneous in a book aimed at "the general reader". The book is lengthened by its inclusion of illustrations, as well as the "verbal dioramas." At least two, and sometimes three, nearly empty pages separate each chapter title, and the *verso* displays a frequently brief quotation. The book is blessed with two title pages; its pagination begins on the first one. The actual text does not begin until page 21. Consequently, this book contains fewer than 200 pages of actual text. Fisher's thesis could easily have been explained to the "general reader" in thirty pages or so. Thus, the second half of the book contains a rather detailed history of the discovery and interpretation of fossil records.

If the second half of the book is padding, it nevertheless contains some of her best writing. However, because of its less spectacular subject matter, it is more likely to be passed over quickly, or ignored, by the "general audience" she sought to reach. In fact, as a comparative oral presentation to a general class of college freshmen demonstrated, the second half of the book is deemed dull by a general audience.

Fisher's book generates problems concerning the origins of human behavior (and she does tend to reject all other social theories somewhat arbitrarily; do not other species bond even though their females have retained estrus?), just as it generates questions concerning audience. This is a worthwhile book; it is even, at times, an exciting book. But it is a book with two personalities, because it is a book which, ostensibly, tried to reach a general audience while its heart was with a more informed one.