by Ashley Montagu

THE FEMALE ANIMAL

by Irene Elia; introduction by Henry Holt: 318 pp.; 0-8050-0702-4) (A Donald Glower Book

Reviewed by Richard A. Swedcr

It is still widely rumored among members of our species that women were designed for domestication and that there is salvation, fulfillment and protection for women in marriage. If God (or nature) had not intended women to be caretakers of children and keepers of the home, then why did God (or nature) make women ovulate, gestate, lactate and so well-attuned to the feelings of others?

"The Female Animal" is a protest against the chaotic quasars, hermaphroditic angels and parthenogenetic lizards against any scheme, divine or other, to tame the human female. It is written by Irene Elia, a biological anthropologist, a Darwinian, a modern liberated woman and, as she tells us, a nursing mother who feels oppressed and endangered by the status of females in the human society, by the disproportional burden of parenting endured by the weaker sex of our species, and by the institution of marriage.

Marriage, fidelity, chastity and several other: contemporary indecencies are linked in the modernized consciousness of Elia to male coercive power, which she views as a menace to the well-being and even survival of women.

The book concludes with an ominous forecast about the evolutionary consequences of future reproduction and human cloning. "Why would the Nobel Prize-winning sexologist Kinsey face the morning, ringless lives up half the food if they are no longer needed for reproduction?"

"The Female Animal," Elia is out to rectify the status of women and to show how across all life forms—from bacteria to mammals—there is more to the life of females than producing eggs, attracting mates, making babies, tending the brood and being passed over for jobs or promotions.

Elia seeks to upset our conception about sexual roles with a series of vivid, witty and provocative descriptions of alternative experiences in our world of algae, bacteria, birds, fish, reptiles and mammals, with special reference to reproduction, parenting responsibilities and gender differences in looks, attitudes and behavior.

In most species, it turns out, parenting is not the specialization of females, and it is not always true that males are larger than females or that the sexes are distinguished by their genitalia.

Every political culture has its origin stories. In the now popular Darwinian genre of storytelling, Mother Nature has the last word and the storyteller sticks to a simple fixed theme.

The goal. Win in the struggle to

get your genes into the next generation.

The theme: If you have a very long time to mindlessly pursue your selfish advantage, you'll eventually come up with some thing inventive that makes you and your next of kin well-suited for survival and reproductive effectiveness in your environment.

Elia is a Darwinian narrator spinning a graceful and scholarly tale about how parenting got associated with the female sex, about fertilization, contraception, courtship, gestation, thecaclfaciation, menstruation, breast-feeding and the evolution of sexuality and male/female differences.

The central chapters of "The Female Animal" can be read as a kind of "Gulliver's Travels" across life forms. There is delight in the journey and you will learn things.

The book is at its best reviewing comprehensively the ingenious designs for sexual reproducing, without the need for a mate, hundreds of thousands of replicas of yourself with a combination of advantages.

Indeed, after finishing "The Female Animal," I was left wondering why we are not all xenial bacteria, who are among the most ancient life forms. They are still here. They are everywhere.

If a female is in life is to survive forever, why not keep it simple?

What self-regarding egoist would want to be a complex needy human being, so few progeny?

And how cumbersome to have to cooperate with, or oppress, another sex in order to make it in life.

Darwin's origin story is an eye-opener yet its incessant refrain, advantage and a lot of time, makes for dulled reasoning after a few repetitions.

"The Female Animal" is a poetic piece of sociobiology, which not only appropriates nature to feminist ends but does it in the Western libertarian way, with a kinkly fascination for alternative life styles.

Perhaps it is not surprising that our author is far better at describing nature's diverse designs than at explaining how to ever get there. She fails to speak with a single or consistent voice about male/female issues.

Fortunately, Darwinian storytelling notwithstanding, the origins of nature's various and astonishing species is still mysterious and a decent subject for fables.

Fortunately, rational debates about the rights, duties, sacred obligations regarding parenting, men and women in human society are not likely to be settled by nocturnal musings at the mating business of hairy woodpeckers.

Thevoyeuristic pleasures and vicarious satisfactions of looking over Mother Nature are, of course, quite another matter, and, after reading this review, my wife told me to say that "this male chauvinist pig has looked the book, for the nature stuff."

Mother's Nature

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by Irene Elia; introduction by Ashley Montagu

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