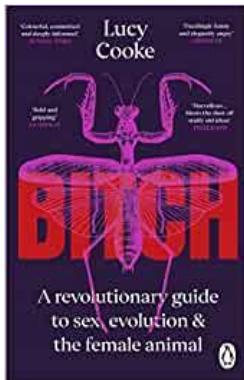




Bitch - what it means to be female. Lucy Cooke pulverises two centuries of sexual myths in biology.

Reading time 10 minutes

My last BrainCandy on egalitarian behaviour among hunter-gatherers was thematically polarising, as egalitarian behaviour developed mainly among men, while at the same time children and women were hierarchically less privileged. And I had deliberately left out the unpleasant examples of what this could mean in concrete terms. What was important to me was the realisation that homo sapiens prefer to dominate their environment, but in case of doubt prefer to accept equality if they themselves cannot assert a dominant position - which was and is the rule among hunter-gatherers.



Source: Amazon

Instead, today's counterbalance is the very entertaining book by the British Lucy Cooke, a renowned zoologist who dedicates herself to male-dominated zoological science and dismantles the many myths about female behaviour in the animal kingdom with sound knowledge and extremely entertaining linguistic wit. This is already evident from the title: Bitch! A revolutionary guide to sex, evolution & the female animal. The book is also aimed at us interested laymen and is an intelligent and at the same time the funniest non-fiction book I have read in a long time.

Using many examples, ranging from cannibalistic spiders to sex-changing reef fish, Cooke dispels a plethora of misconceptions about binary gender roles, many of which can be traced back to the great Charles Darwin. Where there are males fighting with each other for possession of females, mating promiscuously, driven by the biological imperative to spread their abundant seed. The females are lovingly monogamous and passive; they happily wait for their large, energetic eggs to be fertilized by cheap and tiny sperm, and then selflessly give their all to their babies.

Cooke gleefully refutes many assumptions about male dominance and female docility. Only 7% of birds are sexually monogamous, meaning that flocks of female birds seek sex with a variety of partners. Likewise, female lions, for example, copulate with multiple males up to 100 times a day during the mating season. In meerkat matriarchs in the Kalahari, the females are the authoritative sex. And kill all the babies of their female rivals. Female topi antelopes in Kenya gather by the hundreds to compete with their antlers for the chance to have sex with the best bull. Some mothers take tender care of their offspring, but in two-thirds of fish species, single fathers look after their young, while the females disappear after laying their eggs.



Darwin's idea about lions.

Source: istockphoto.com: SerrNovik

Competition for mates, according to Darwin, is largely the domain of males, almost all of whom have "stronger passions" than females. With the rarest exceptions, the female is "less eager than the male. She generally demands to be courted"; she is shy," he wrote in 1871. One can literally feel how the Victorian role model had been grafted onto the animal kingdom. "The main problem with this neat binary classification is: it is wrong," Cooke writes. "Female animals are just as promiscuous, competitive, aggressive, dominant and dynamic as males." Cooke writes that the Victorian male binary worldview exaggerates the differences between genders and studiously overlooks the greater similarities. (A problem that also exists in market research because segmentations often emphasize differences - and underexpose the greater commonalities).

The African spotted hyena, for example, has an eight-centimetre clitoris shaped like a penis; it also gets erections. "Try explaining to a female spotted hyena that she needs to be passive," Cooke writes, "and she'll laugh in your face after she bites it off." Female bonobo monkeys strive for sexual bliss - with each other. In dolphins, the clitoris is shaped like an "oversized meaty burger bun".

Scientists are convinced that female dolphins feel pleasure during sex.

After studying zoology at Oxford University, which was shaped by the binary worldview, she writes, she felt like a sad outsider, an "egg-maker doomed to play second fiddle to the sperm shooters".

Darwin had certainly recognised that the sole purpose of the peacock's tail might be to impress potential mates, and acknowledged that in some species "comparatively passive" females with a "taste for the beautiful" are capable of "some selection" between rival males. Darwin's astute observation of female agency in nature drew ridicule from his contemporaries. After Darwin's death, his most influential critic, Alfred Russel Wallace, wrote that such elaborate courtship ornaments were simply the result of man's "surplus of strength, vitality and power of growth".



Source: istockphoto.com: Wheatfield

Cooke, who takes obvious pleasure in reporting on the "porn star qualities" of many species, tells us that bats are among the few animals that perform oral sex. In chapters bursting with x-rated facts, Cooke gleefully dispels one myth after another about our wild sisters.



We learn that King Julian, the leader of the ring-tailed lemurs in the Madagascar films, should actually be queen. We learn about the female angler fish who absorb their tiny male mates and the female killer whales who continue to have an active sex life after menopause while maintaining hierarchy in their groups. We learn about the female seals and primates who are not as caring and maternal as they are made out to be. She pokes fun at the many misconceptions in science and quotes from studies where researchers spent years looking for alpha males in populations that were clearly female-dominated (pinyon jays).

Cooke comes down hard on the "old white male" scientists whose cultural bias has distorted our thinking about sex in nature. But she is never mean or boring. She is angry in a refreshingly elegant way. She combats the "scientific phallocracy with data and logic". It's fun to whiz through the world with her as she points out what has been overlooked or misinterpreted.

Her message? Let's learn from the amazing diversity of nature and allow our thinking to evolve. "Bitch" is a wake-up call to us to understand the great diversity of female roles in nature and ultimately to change our understanding of what it means to be "female". She is certain that the binary view in humans is also shaped less by biology than by culture, and that exciting insights arise from this.

We market researchers know that very few conditions are black and white, that almost all dimensions exist side by side in a continuum.

There are many women without the stereotypical characteristics such as the desire to have children and/or the maternal instinct. And without the desire for steady partners, but with a lot of fun enjoying variety.

For friends of podcasts, I recommend listening to one of her many interviews. For example, on psychologist Cara Santa Maria's 'Talk nerdy' [podcast](#). The two reveal to each other and to us very personal insights about their own deviations from biological norms. Those who read and listen to Cooke experience a scientist who not only opens new horizons in her knowledge of zoology, but has probably also found a more intense closeness to herself.

.



Book recommendation

By Ralph Ohnemus, Uwe H. Lebok, Florian Klaus:

Context marketing

The key to consumer behaviour to [order](#).



Feedback, suggestions or criticism about this article:
braincandy@ka-brandresearch.com

The author

Ralph Ohnemus, CEO. Board member and main shareholder of K&A BrandResearch since 2001.

Previously a client of K&A BrandResearch for 15 years.

National and international marketing and sales experience in senior management positions, including FMCG, fashion, media and telecommunications - most recently as SVP Consumer Sales responsible for marketing, sales and chain stores at Viag Interkom O2.

Contact: r.ohnemus@ka-brandresearch.com

