

"Delightful, deliberately provocative and quick-footed...they persuasively argue that to understand literature, one should understand evolutionary biology."
—*Seattle Times*

MADAME BOVARY'S OVARIES

A DARWINIAN LOOK AT LITERATURE



DAVID P. BARASH and NANELLE R. BARASH

Madame Bovary's Ovaries: A Darwinian Look at Literature

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What can elephant seals tell us about Homer's *Iliad*?

How do gorillas illuminate the works of Shakespeare?

What do bloodsucking bats have to do with John Steinbeck?

Madame Bovary's Ovaries

A Darwinian Look at Literature

According to evolutionary psychologist David Barash and his daughter Nanelle, the answers lie in the most important word in biology: evolution. Just like every animal from mites to monkeys, our day-to-day behavior has been shaped by millions of years of natural selection. So it should be no surprise to learn that the natural forces that drive animals in general and *Homo sapiens* in particular are clearly visible in the creatures of literature, from Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* all the way to Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones*. Seen through the lens of evolutionary biology, the witty repartee of Jane Austen's courting couples, Othello's tragic rage, the griping of Holden Caulfield, and the scandalous indiscretions of Madame Bovary herself all make a fresh and exciting kind of sense.

The ways we fall in—and out—of love, stand by our friends, compete against our enemies, and squabble with our families have their roots in biological imperatives we share not only with other primates but with an amazing array of other creatures. The result is a new way to read, a novel approach to novels (and plays) that reveals how human nature underlies literature, from the great to the not-so-great.

Using the cutting-edge ideas of contemporary Darwinism, the authors show how the heroes and heroines of our favorite stories have been molded as much by evolution as by the genius of their creators, revealing a gallery of characters from Agamemnon to Alexander Portnoy, who have more in common with birds, fish, and other mammals than we could ever have imagined.

As engaging and informative as a good story, **Madame Bovary's Ovaries** is both an accessible introduction to a fascinating area of science and a provocatively sideways look at our cherished literary heritage. Most of all, it shows in a delightfully enteraining way how science and literature shed light on each other.

Madame Bovary's Ovaries: A Darwinian Look at Literature Details

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Author : David Philip Barash , Nanelle R. Barash

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From Reader Review Madame Bovary's Ovaries: A Darwinian Look at Literature for online ebook

Ana says

Thoroughly silly (in a good way) academic look at the way that biology and particularly evolution can be seen in literature. Some of the points became a bit repetitive, i.e. and this is how this theory is shown in Anna Karenina and this is how it's shown in Kafka's work. Ended up sounding a bit like 'ooh, these are the books that i read'. Still, very entertaining, even more so when at the end I realized that it was written by a father and young daughter :o) Anyone who's taken an anthropology or biology class (and actually enjoyed it) who also loves lit. would enjoy quite a few of the chapters in this book. Warning though, sometimes it can fall into science-speak, i.e. a bit dry, so be forewarned if that's not your thing.

Jen Graham says

My professors had us use this book in class to interpret another novel through the concepts given in the book. It was easy to read and I loved all of the biological reasons behind what has been written and what continues to be written. It is easy to find all of ideas offered in this book in other literature after having been exposed. Overall, this book was a great reference. I would recommend it to everyone.

Lana. says

With such an awesome title and chapter headings (e.g. How to Make Rhett Give a Damn, Wisdom from the Godfather) I expected a lot from this book, some real biology and an interesting look at literary works.

It didn't quite live up to expectation.

Chapter 1 - The Human Nature of Stories: A Quick Hit of Bio-Lit-Crit, gave the most information in why a biological perspective in reviewing literature is valuable and important, why certain stories endure (the Classics) and certain characters seem most believable and human (when they follow human nature). I didn't take much to convince me of this, because I also saw humans beings as a type of animal. And yes, this perspective was new.

The other chapters, while amusing, didn't exactly illuminate. Very simple science was brought into play to explain male sexual jealousy (Chapter 2 - Othello and Other Angry Fellows), and other phenomenom.

Maybe it simply is too simple, we see human nature and understand it immediately, and thus, when the authors point out that the recurring theme of the evil stepmother in fairytales as it relates to the self gene (step-children do not carry the genes of the stepmother), it is not groundbreaking.

Though, this is still a fun read, and may be good for those interested in examining literature in a new way, but has not also studied a lot of biology. The writers are witty and playful (if prone to pun and over familiarity).

If anything, it's made me more interested to seek out "the Classics", to learn more about human nature.

Christine says

The concept of this book was very entertaining, but after several chapters, it seemed repetitive and rather simplistic. Most people who have taken English and biology in high school, or introductory courses on those subjects in university can probably put the two together.

While using literature to exemplify evolutionary human behaviour is novel, it is not exactly an 'eureka' moment of discovery. Literary works, whether they feature humans or animals (most anthropomorphized ones), often serve as social commentaries on human nature and society, which is to a degree governed by the aforementioned biological forces. So it is no wonder that characters from literature would act as agents of the driving forces of evolutionary behaviour. After all, they are, like us, only human.

Jo Schaffer says

Entertaining, but with major holes in the logic. The "scientific" conclusions are sometimes merely conjecture...and I felt as if they started their research in the "middle of the book", so to speak. Pop science by consensus...although some of it seemed dead on- which is probably why they felt at liberty to fill in the holes with supposition. Truth mixed with fiction is the oldest hook in the book.

Christine says

This started off well, I enjoyed the first couple of chapters which were quite insightful but after a while it became a bit slow, I would recommend it to English students as it is an interesting perspective on the evolution of literature.

Ahuva Belfer says

As a psychoanalyst, I am very interested in evolutionism. In my mind it goes together since society is made up of rules that restrain our animal impulses.

So whenever you want to understand a human motive, look for animal behaviour.

This book is both very enlightening and humorous.

Through classics of literature, it reveals the strive for survival that the characters adopt.

Great book, nice and light prose.

Greg Linster says

Noam Chomsky once said: "It is quite possible — overwhelmingly probable, one might guess — that we will always learn more about human life and human personality from novels than from scientific

psychology." I think this insight speaks to something very important about the humanities and what they can reveal to us about the human experience. Literary theory (and some forms of literary criticism), however, can come across as obscure, esoteric, and confusing as hell. Fear not, the ideas from Charles Darwin can help us understand and interpret literature too using what is called Darwinian lit-crit.

Read the rest of my review of *Madame Bovary's Ovaries* here.

Kristenyque says

Finally I got my hands on a copy and I got a chance to read it before school. This is a fantastic non-fiction book. It's a strange combination, science and literature, but the author makes it all come together. There were many things in this book that I had never heard before, I thought the information about how fat in hips and breasts are an "evolutionary fake-out" made perfect common sense, I had just never heard/read it before. Very interesting book overall.

MJ says

If you are one of those people who have wondered what evolution and literature have in common then this is a must read. If you are like me and just like reading about literature and enjoy other peoples observations and theories then I recommend this book to you also.

David Barash and Nanelle Barash take some of the most popular literature and explain why these books are still favorites due to their basics themes, which are all evolutionary concepts.

A fascinating look at Othello, Holden Caulfield, Elizabeth Bennet and many others. With chapters titled Othello and Other Angry Fellows: Male Sexual Jealousy and Madame Bovary's Ovaries: The Biology of Adultery this book is fun and info

Yngvild says

I have never read so much bad science, bad literary theory and banalities in one volume before. **Madame Bovary's Ovaries** is populist writing at its worst: misleading, vulgar and insulting to the intelligence of a hedgehog.

The book is a collection of random quotations glued together with such illuminating gems as these:

And that writes about it.

. . . the evidence is now undeniable that much of human life is not socially constructed.

The play is great because it is wonderfully written . . .

True it is that by sacrificing Iphy, (sic) Aggy (sic) lost a daughter . . .

In short, in the realm of sexual attraction, nothing succeeds like sexual attraction itself.

These writers need to throw away their thesaurus, stop referring to children as "tykes" and "brats", and sit down with a *real* scientist who can explain to them how natural selection works, as distinct from how they *think* it works.

David says

You gotta have a gimmick

("Gypsy")

Reader, beware! With all the sweaty desperation of a couple of cheap strippers, here comes the distinctly unsavory father-and-daughter vaudeville team of David P. and Nanelle R. Barash, bumping and grinding towards you, tipping you a leering wink as they try to lure you with their patented gimmick - the special high-tech e-vo-lution-ary reading lens.

Gentle reader, run for your life! It's not just that this pair of brachiate mouth-breathers have nothing of interest to impart. Much worse, they are possessed of a sensibility so crass, a vocabulary so crude, cognitive deficits so far-ranging, that time spent in their company cannot end well. The severely limited cognitive ability of this pair can accommodate neither complexity nor subtlety, nor nuance of any kind. Which renders those fancy "evolutionary" lenses they are peddling as reductive as a pair of cheap 3D glasses from a 1950s creature feature.

Men just want to screw as much pussy as they can get away with, women are just looking for a sugar daddy who will provide for their babies, and blood is thicker than water. Because, as the Barassholes so charmingly explain: **"Females are egg makers; males are sperm squirters."**

And there you have it folks. In that crassly reductive nutshell you have the entire Barash key to literary interpretation. Sprinkle in assorted references to rutting stags battling it out for dominance, peacock's tails and other elaborate courtship rituals, repeat the terms "gene", "DNA" and "evolution" often enough to keep the humanities folks guessing - and they got themselves a gimmick!

The Barasshole's opinion of their readership is apparently not very high. They take care to point out that the "American writer Kate Chopin"'s name is pronounced like "that of the renowned composer". And the blindingly obvious is pointed out with numbing frequency:

"Aha!" says the reader: a mother helping out her own offspring.

"Aha!" says the evolutionary biologist: genes helping themselves.

In other breaking news, parents find the death of a child incredibly upsetting. Oh, and the bond between a step-parent and a child is often more problematic than that with the child's natural parent.

So Othello is reduced to an enraged silverback, lashing out to maintain his alpha male status. Lady Dedlock seeks out her illegitimate daughter to effect a joyous reconciliation. The Dursleys are mean and spiteful to

the stepchild Harry Potter. See how simple it is? Genes explain everything. All of literature is made clear viewed through the awesome prism of evolutionary psychology. The genetic advantage that accrues to the house of Atreus by having Agamemnon kill his daughter Iphigenia would be what, now? The stupidity and arrogance of these authors is simply breathtaking.

Equally disturbing is their vulgarity. The analogy of strippers in a titty bar is not inappropriate - the kind of leeringly reductive "analysis" that this knuckle-dragging duo specializes in leaves the reader feeling coarsened, if not actually violated, and in need of a cleansing shower. Other crimes to be found in this book include assorted atrocities against the language (please don't make me go into details), as well as a disturbingly cavalier tendency to blurt out complete plot details of books the reader might still have been planning to read.

This book is deeply offensive and insulting to the intelligence. These people need to be stopped.

Brenda Clough says

A cogent and accessible summary of genetic and Darwinian theory to date, illustrated from the lives of literary characters. I fell off the sled towards the end, but if I were less familiar with the material I possibly would have been more gripped.

DeAnne says

Depending on how you look at it, Madame Bovary's Ovaries is either a bit of a pop-science lark or one of the stupidest books written in a long time.

If you read it as a breezy application of current ideas in sociobiology and evolutionary science to the field of literature, it makes for an occasionally interesting primer. It analyses our selfish genes in action, using the classics as data. Exploring themes ranging from adultery to kin selection to parent-offspring conflict, it draws on the examples of Anna Karenina, Richard III, and Holden Caulfield.

But as a new species of literary theory, what the authors call Bio-Lit-Crit, it signals a reduction to the absurd. Their starting point comes from Northrop Frye, of all people, who famously declared literary criticism "badly in need of an organizing principle, a central hypothesis which, like the theory of evolution in biology, will see the phenomena it deals with as parts of a whole." But such a principle already exists, "needing only to be recognized and developed." And, ironically, "it is the same one that Frye gestured toward so longingly: evolution."

This is way off base. Frye found his organizing principle by supposing literature a unified order of words. He was deeply suspicious of intellectual structures and theories imposed on literature from outside that order. But Bio-Lit-Crit is all about grounding literature in something prior to the very idea of order. Prior even to language or the ability to walk upright. A Darwinian critic digs down to the "bedrock that all human beings share with elephant seals, elk, gorillas, and much of the animal world."

Such a grounding may be valid on one level, but it doesn't take us very far. Applied to literature it boils down to providing some pretty bare analyses of character motivation. Aeneas forsaking Dido? While in his conscious mind it is the gods driving his actions, "it is his biological impulses that compel him to leave." His genes made him do it. It is a Darwinian genetic imperative that compels him to cut off his "sterile dalliance with a middle-aged woman." Othello? "The truly important thing about Othello wasn't the color of his skin, his age, or his war record. Rather, Othello was all about sperm; Desdemona eggs." And so it goes.

It's hard to know just how seriously the authors want us to take all this. As you might expect, they have to keep insisting that humans aren't just animals, and that what makes a book great is more than its biological accuracy. But if you want more insight into Othello than the fact that "the play is great because it is wonderfully written", you will be disappointed. Literature here is just a bunch of case studies, as well as an endless source of lame jokes. Altruism is really a form of selfishness? Well that means the Three Musketeers, "for all their friendly collegiality" are, "at heart, the three must-get-theirs"! Groan. And sometimes the authors don't even have their facts straight. The Human Comedy of Balzac is attributed to Zola at one point, leading one to wonder just how many of the books mentioned here were actually read.

Grounding literature in biology also has a terrible leveling effect. If Othello is all about sperm and Desdemona eggs, so what? If Aeneas is simply being driven by the need to breed, who cares? What does that tell us about ourselves that we didn't already know, and haven't moved beyond? Is this really expanding our appreciation of literature? Enriching the reading experience?

Of course basic biological truths about human nature get represented in literature. How could they not? But literature isn't the stuff of scientific laws. It isn't life, or nature, or reality - though it certainly shapes the way we think about these things.

In other words we can take a Darwinian look at literature, but what we might really be seeing is literature looking back.

Dana Clinton says

Certainly not a book for everybody! The authors are evolutionary biologists in their approach to literary criticism, and they do an uneven job of presenting their thesis (in my opinion), although it is interesting and intriguing and undoubtedly correct. One reason we love great tales is that the characters come across to us as real, and this means that the authors had a gift for seizing what is uniquely human in us and an ability to create tales where the actions of the characters is authentic and strikes the reader as intuitive; it IS intuitive, and the gift is real, even if the authors lived before Darwin and the concept of evolution and before Richard Dawkins and the Selfish Gene concept which rather fuels this entire excursion into literature. Human behaviors as depicted in literature from Homer to James Joyce show consistent patterns that make sense in a biological context even if the choices of the characters seem counterproductive. It is fun to see how the "need" to ensure the continuation of one's own genes accounts for behaviors such as the adulterous woman or the male aggressive confrontation. The authors sum up Emma Bovary thus: "...deep inside, in the DNA of her brain, she heard a subliminal Darwinian whisper that tickled her ovaries, even though she may not have acknowledged it and would likely have even acted consciously against such an outcome. Smart women sometimes do make foolish choices, and a whiff of Darwin enables us to glimpse some of the reasons why." My only reservation about the book is that they seem to be trying too hard to be funny and witty when it

would have been a richer text altogether had they followed their thoughts further along and provoked more thoughtful comprehension of their premises. But if you like Jane Austen, Shakespeare, Leo Tolstoy, James Joyce, Flaubert, etc., you will enjoy this fresh presentation.
