

# SEX AT DAWN

the prehistoric origins of modern sexuality

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& Cacilda Jethá**



SEX  
THE PREHISTORIC ORIGINS  
AT  
OF MODERN SEXUALITY  
DAWN

Christopher Ryan, PhD,  
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*To all our relations*

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## NOTES

# PREFACE

## A Primate Meets His Match (A note from one of the authors)

*Nature, Mr. Allnut, is what we are put in this world to rise above.*

KATHARINE HEPBURN,  
as Miss Rose Sayer, in *The African Queen*

One muggy afternoon in 1988, some local men were selling peanuts at the entrance to the botanical gardens in Penang, Malaysia. I'd come with my girlfriend, Ana, to walk off a big lunch. Sensing our confusion, the men explained that the peanuts weren't for us, but to feed irresistibly cute baby monkeys like those we hadn't yet noticed rolling around on the grass nearby. We bought a few bags.

We soon came to a little guy hanging by his tail right over the path. His oh-so-human eyes focused imploringly on the bag of nuts in Ana's hand. We were standing there cooing like teenage girls in a kitten shop when the underbrush exploded in a sudden simian strike. A full-grown monkey flashed past me, bounced off Ana, and was gone—along with the nuts. Ana's hand was bleeding where he'd scratched her. We were stunned, trembling, silent. There'd been no time to scream.

After a few minutes, when the adrenaline had finally begun to ebb, my fear curdled into loathing. I felt betrayed in a way I never had before. Along with our nuts went precious assumptions about the purity of nature, of evil as a uniquely human affliction. A line had been crossed. I wasn't just angry; I was philosophically offended.

I felt something changing inside me. My chest seemed to swell, my shoulders to broaden. My arms felt stronger; my eyesight sharpened. I felt like Popeye after a can of spinach. I glared into the underbrush like the heavyweight primate I now knew myself to be. I'd take no more abuse from these lightweight.

I'd been traveling in Asia long enough to know that monkeys there are nothing like their trombone-playing, tambourine-banging cousins I'd seen on TV as a kid. Free-living Asian primates possess a characteristic I found shocking and confusing the first time I saw it: self-respect. If you make the mistake of holding the gaze of a street monkey in India, Nepal, or Malaysia, you'll find you're facing a belligerently intelligent creature whose expression says, with a Robert DeNiro-like scowl, "What the hell are *you* looking at? You wanna piece of me?" Forget about putting one of these guys in a little red vest.

It wasn't long before we came to another imploring, furry face hanging upside down from a tree in the middle of a clearing. Ana was ready to forgive and forget. Though I was fully hardened against cuteness of any kind, I agreed to give her the remaining bag of nuts. We seemed safely distant from underbrush from which an ambush could be launched. But as I pulled the bag out of my sweat-soaked pocket, its

cellophane rustle must have rung through the jungle like a clanging dinner bell.

In a heartbeat, a large, arrogant-looking brute appeared at the edge of the clearing, about twenty yards away. He gazed at us, considering the situation, sizing me up. His exaggerated yawn seemed calculated to dismiss and threaten me simultaneously: a long, slow display of his fangs. Determined to fill any power vacuum without delay, I picked up a small branch and tossed it casually in his direction, making the point that these nuts were definitely not for him and that I was not to be trifled with. He watched the branch land a few feet in front of him, not moving a muscle. Then his forehead briefly crinkled in eerily emotional thought, as if I'd hurt his feelings. He looked up at me, straight into my eyes. His expression held no hint of fear, respect, or humor.

As if shot from a cannon, he leapt over the branch I'd tossed, long yellow dagger fangs bared, shrieking, charging straight at me.

Caught between the attacking beast and my terrified girlfriend, I understood for the first time what it would really mean to have a "monkey on your back." I felt something snap in my mind. I lost it. In movement quicker than thought, my arms flew open, my legs flexed into a wrestler's crouch, and my own coffee-stained, orthodontia-corrected teeth were bared with a wild shriek. I was helplessly launched into a hopping-mad, saliva-spraying dominance display of my own.

I was as surprised as he was. He pulled up and stared at me for a second or two before slowly backing away. This time, though, I'm pretty sure I saw a hint of laughter in his eyes.

Above nature? Not a chance. Take it from Mr. Allnut.

# INTRODUCTION

## Another Well-Intentioned Inquisition

Forget what you've heard about human beings having descended from the apes. We didn't descend from apes. We *are* apes. Metaphorically and factually, *Homo sapiens* is one of the five surviving species of great apes, along with chimpanzees, bonobos, gorillas, and orangutans (gibbons are considered a "lesser ape"). We shared a common ancestor with two of these apes—bonobos and chimps—just five million years ago.<sup>1</sup> That's "the day before yesterday" in evolutionary terms. The fine print distinguishing humans from the other great apes is regarded as "wholly artificial" by most primatologists these days.<sup>2</sup>

If we're "above" nature, it's only in the sense that a shaky-legged surfer is "above" the ocean. Even if we never slip (and we all do), our inner nature can pull us under at any moment. Those of us raised in the West have been assured that we humans are special, unique among living things, above and beyond the world around us, exempt from the humiliations and humiliations that pervade and define animal life. The natural world lies below and beneath us, a cause for shame, disgust, or alarm; something smelly and messy to be hidden behind closed doors, drawn curtains, and minty freshness. Or we overcompensate and imagine nature floating

angelically in soft focus up above, innocent, noble, balanced, and wise.

Like bonobos and chimps, we are the randy descendents of hypersexual ancestors. At first blush, this may seem an overstatement, but it's a truth that should have become common knowledge long ago. Conventional notions of monogamous, till-death-do-us-part marriage strain under the dead weight of a false narrative that insists we're something else. What is the essence of human sexuality and how did it get to be that way? In the following pages, we'll explain how seismic cultural shifts that began about ten thousand years ago rendered the true story of human sexuality so subversive and threatening that for centuries it has been silenced by religious authorities, pathologized by physicians, studiously ignored by scientists, and covered up by moralizing therapists.

Deep conflicts rage at the heart of modern sexuality. Our cultivated ignorance is devastating. The campaign to obscure the true nature of our species' sexuality leaves half our marriages collapsing under an unstoppable tide of swirling sexual frustration, libido-killing boredom, impulsive betrayal, dysfunction, confusion, and shame. Serial monogamy stretches before (and behind) many of us like an archipelago of failure: isolated islands of transitory happiness in a cold, dark sea of disappointment. And how many of the couples who manage to stay together for the long haul have done so by resigning themselves to sacrificing their eroticism on the altar of three of life's irreplaceable joys: family stability, companionship, and emotional, if not sexual, intimacy? Are those who innocently aspire to these joys cursed by nature to preside over the slow strangulation of their partner's libido?



The Spanish word *esposas* means both “wives” and “handcuffs.” In English, some men ruefully joke about the *ball and chain*. There’s good reason marriage is often depicted and mourned as the beginning of the end of a man’s sexual life. And women fare no better. Who wants to share her life with a man who feels trapped and diminished by his love for her, whose honor marks the limits of his freedom? Who wants to spend her life apologizing for being just one woman?

Yes, something is seriously wrong. The American Medical Association reports that some 42 percent of American women suffer from sexual dysfunction, while Viagra breaks sales records year after year. Worldwide, pornography is reported to rake in anywhere from fifty-seven *billion* to a hundred *billion* dollars annually. In the United States, it generates more revenue than CBS, NBC, and ABC combined and more than all professional football, baseball, and basketball franchises. According to *U.S. News and World Report*, “Americans spend more money at strip clubs than at Broadway, off-Broadway, regional and nonprofit theaters, the opera, the ballet and jazz and classical music performances—combined.”<sup>3</sup>

There’s no denying that we’re a species with a sweet tooth for sex. Meanwhile, so-called traditional marriage appears to be under assault from all sides—as it collapses from within. Even the most ardent defenders of *normal* sexuality buckle under its weight, as never-ending bipartisan perp-walks of politicians (Clinton, Vitter, Gingrich, Craig, Foley, Spitzer, Sanford) and religious figures (Haggard, Swaggert, Bakker) trumpet their support of *family values* before slinking off to private assignations with lovers, prostitutes, and interns.

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