

Literature red in tooth and claw

Madame Bovary's Ovaries: A Darwinian Look at Literature

by David P. Barash & Nanelle R. Barash
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Book titles that feature the possessions of celebrities have recently been in vogue. We've seen *Marengo: The Myth of Napoleon's Horse* (history), *Mendel's Dwarf* (fiction) and even *Napoleon's Buttons* (chemistry). Now we've got *Madame Bovary's Ovaries*, an unusual — and unusually readable — effort at literary criticism. This book attempts to interpret fiction in terms of evolutionary biology.

This may not sound promising, but the idea is more robust than it might at first appear. In 1973 the great geneticist Theodosius Dobzhansky remarked: "Nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution." These words are now a touchstone for biologists seeking to understand the surrounding world. But in the past thirty

years, his comment has acquired an unexpected breadth: biology is currently expanding, or, more precisely, the classical boundaries between biology and the social sciences are fading away.

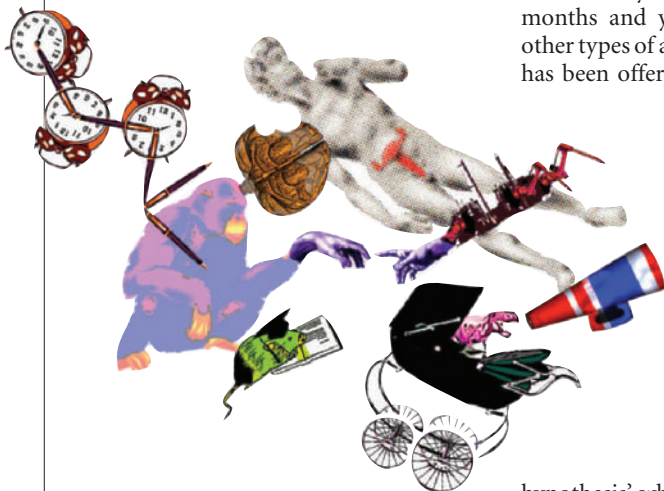
Animal behaviours and cultures have been brilliantly studied by biologists. Human culture is complex, but humans are animals too, so Dobzhansky's adage also applies to us. These days, at conferences on human behaviour, you run into evolutionary psychologists, stumble across darwinian historians and evolutionary anthropologists, listen to talks on darwinian medicine, and so on. Human sciences and the humanities have now been extirpated from the old non-historical theories, incompatible with the idea of evolution, that prevailed during the twentieth century. Goodbye Freud, Piaget, Levi-Strauss, Eliade, Chomsky and company.

Literature is a cultural product from a living species, so Dobzhansky's words apply, and this book is best understood within the context of a revival of the humanities. But in the evolutionary study of literature, there are two sides to consider: the writer and the reader. Unfortunately, nothing in *Madame Bovary's Ovaries* addresses the writer's motivations: why do people spend hours, days, months and years creating literature and other types of art? One intriguing possibility has been offered: Geoffrey Miller's 'display

Misérables and Harry Potter), and male-male competition for access to higher social status (*Huckleberry Finn*).

As a result, *Madame Bovary's Ovaries* explores various aspects of human mating strategies, rooting human behaviours within the animal repertoire. But where most such books rely on scholarly papers and monographs to ground the various points within a shared and robust scientific knowledge, these authors use literature sources as references. And why not? After all, a successful novel should contain important social information. And if this novel is still widely read a century later or in various cultural groups, its social information probably concerns a universal human topic, or at least one found in most cultures (such as male-male competition for higher social status).

Unfortunately, the various genres of literature have not been commented on in this book. An evolutionary book could have provided some welcome insights on, for example, the historical origin of the novel in various human cultures, and its unclear relationships with other kinds of literature,



such as myths or fairy tales. Perhaps this could be the subject of another book?

Madame Bovary's Ovaries lies at the crossroads between literary studies and biology, and has much to offer students of either subject. A biologist reader will be surprised at his expanded field of action, and unless he has already done so, he must now catch up with some basic literature; the good news is that he has in his hands a good guide to choosing a novel according to his own marital, familial or social concerns. A literary reader will be given a tour of some pivotal concepts of evolutionary biology, and learn how to use them to explore more new fields.

There is a profusion of books devoted to literature. This one does not talk about why books are written, but about the (darwinian) motives to read novels and other kinds of literature. We don't really know why the authors wrote this book. However, when reading it, it is easy to feel that it provides an interesting addition to our knowledge of human culture. ■

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hypothesis', which states that people tend to produce art as a strategy for broadcasting courtship displays to a wide variety of potential partners.

It is easier to explain why people spend so much time reading literature. If someone sits for a long time with a book in his hands, he is probably extracting something interesting from it. In evolutionary currency, 'something interesting' relates to reproduction, either directly or indirectly (social competition, for example). Accordingly, the authors of *Madame Bovary's Ovaries* place literature into several darwinian drawers, such as male sexual jealousy (*Othello*), how to find the best mate for a female (the novels of Jane Austen), adultery (*Madame Bovary*), the reduced parental investment when parent-child relatedness is low (*Cinderella*, *Les*