



Why is the Penis Shaped Like That?: And Other Reflections on Being Human

Jesse Bering

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Why do testicles hang the way they do? Is there an adaptive function to the female orgasm? What does it feel like to want to kill yourself? Does "free will" really exist? And why is the penis shaped like that anyway?

In *Why Is the Penis Shaped Like That?*, the research psychologist and award-winning columnist Jesse Bering features more than thirty of his most popular essays from *Scientific American* and *Slate*, as well as two new pieces, that take readers on a bold and captivating journey through some of the most taboo issues related to evolution and human behavior. Exploring the history of cannibalism, the neurology of people who are sexually attracted to animals, the evolution of human body fluids, the science of homosexuality, and serious questions about life and death, Bering astutely covers a generous expanse of our kaleidoscope of quirks and origins.

With his characteristic irreverence and trademark cheekiness, Bering leaves no topic unturned or curiosity unexamined, and he does it all with an audaciously original voice. Whether you're interested in the psychological history behind the many facets of sexual desire or the evolutionary patterns that have dictated our current mystique and phallic physique, *Why Is the Penis Shaped Like That?* is bound to create lively discussion and debate for years to come.

Why is the Penis Shaped Like That?: And Other Reflections on Being Human Details

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From Reader Review Why is the Penis Shaped Like That?: And Other Reflections on Being Human for online ebook

Georgina Ortiz says

A few months ago, I noticed myself just looking at good-looking guys (some of whom used to make my heart palpitate a bit) and feeling nothing. Absolutely nothing. It was then that I realized that I must be getting old, since just a decade ago, butterflies in my chest and stomach were a constant whenever I would come face-to-face with a "potential mate" (in the Filipino language there is a word for this: *kilig*).

And so I reflected on it. Maybe, I theorized, evolution has dictated that female thirty-somethings should have long concluded their "mate-hunting" phase and should instead focus on rearing healthy offspring (who would, in turn, ensure the health of the global population). Stomach butterflies, in this case, are only for those females who have yet to choose "dependable and loyal" mates destined to help them rear those little gene-passers. Okay, plausible answer.

So this is the kind of mind I have (and I will not apologize for it), and the kind of mind I wish to encourage in my future offspring (a questioning, not salacious, mind, MIND YOU). This is also the kind of (nerdy) mind that would be intrigued with Dr. Jesse Bering's *Why Is the Penis Shaped Like That: And Other Reflections on Being Human*. Needless to say, I enjoyed his essays (and evidence-based theories) immensely.

Now I must admit that there were some topics in the book that made me uncomfortable (I will not enumerate them here lest I be accused of prudery). They still make me uncomfortable now that I have finished the book. Nevertheless, I think Bering was right in saying that *"the great thing about good science is that it's amoral and objective and doesn't cater to the court of public opinion."* He further pointed out (and rightly so): *"Data don't cringe; people do."*

Some of the concepts that Bering introduced (I don't know and can't verify at the moment if these are new, by the way), such as "green burial" and "animal laughter," were really thought-provoking (I am now seriously considering of someday having myself buried, not with a non-biodegradable coffin, but with a shroud—and a special acacia tree planted above me). I was also interested in Bering's scientific examination of the suicide phenomenon and his reflections thereafter: *"If there is one thing I've learned since those very dark days of my suicidal years, it's that scientific knowledge changes perspective. And perspective changes everything. Everything. And, as I alluded to at the start, always remember: you're going to die soon anyway; even if it's a hundred years from now, that's still a blink of a cosmic eye. In the meantime, live like a scientist—even a controversial one with only a colleague or two in all the world—and treat life as a grand experiment, blood, sweat, tears, and all. Bear in mind that there's no such thing as a failed experiment—only data."*

This book is definitely not for the moralists and the faint of heart. But for those who are open to learn about (and subsequently discuss) usually "icky" topics, Dr. Bering's book is one hell of a joyride.

Ronisia says

Meh, meh e ancora meeeh... non fidatevi di questa roba, non prendetela per oro colato perché cita gli studi più biased che io abbia mai letto. Siccome si tratta di una raccolta di saggi, l'andamento è discontinuo, ma s'aggiusta le cose un po' come pare a lui per quanto riguarda la legittimità delle, chiamiamole, "opinioni

comuni" intorno a certi temi più o meno scabrosi.

Ho molto da criticargli, innanzitutto il fatto che la psicologia evoluzionistica, per come la concepisce lui almeno, parta da un errore metodologico che ricalca il panselezionismo, quello in cui tutto sarebbe andato per il meglio nei lontani tempi dell'evoluzione della scimmia-uomo, e tutto si sarebbe armonicamente sviluppato per raggiungere le più alte vette dell'adattamento. Si chiede costantemente "in che modo sarebbe adattativo?", il che non è di per sé illecito, ma Bering stesso sembra ancora non volersi arrendere all'evidenza che non tutto è adattativo, molta roba che ci portiamo appresso è "monnezza" derivante da processi di evoluzione fuori selezione (sì, anche roba disadattativa), per una serie di motivi. Sembra che per loro l'uomo abbia smesso di evolversi diversi millenni fa, e si lascia troppo spazio a spiegazioni estremamente meccanicistiche, che, per quanto possano avere un loro valore, non sono sufficienti a svelare l'enorme complessità del comportamento umano, e mi sembra che il ragionamento che molti psicologi evoluzionisti utilizzino per giustificare il loro riduzionismo (cioè: beh ma noi analizziamo solo un aspetto, poi c'è il resto, che è complementare, e viene studiato da altra gente) sia davvero debole, e non regga.

L'errore è, a mio avviso, metodologico, nel voler insistere in un approccio ormai superato di nature vs nurture, ove quel vs non ha senso di esistere. L'errore è metodologico nel voler insistere su una media poco sensata, e porre l'accento sulle differenze sbagliate. È estremamente difficile interpretare in termini riduzionistici causa-effetto standardizzati il comportamento umano, inoltre i gruppi in cui vengono divisi gli essere umani sono troppo spesso uomo vs donna, in questo caso le differenze sono esasperate (perché tanto tutto è adattativo per la perpetuazione della specie = riproduzione, uff).

Non viene data enfasi ai fattori ambientali, relazionali e culturali che modellano il comportamento del singolo, a come li modellino, se c'è un pattern, insomma non viene dato risalto all'aspetto empatico della nostra specie, che poi è una bella peculiarità, e si scimmietta un approccio vecchio della biologia, e male.

Poi è incoerente, alcuni studi menzionati sono molto interessanti e prendono in esame tutta una serie di influenze ambientali (v. suicidio, disadattativo?); altri io non li avrei pubblicati nemmeno sulla carta igienica, es. le presunte virtù antidepressive dello sperma, basatosi su un semplice sondaggio in un campione di circa 300 studentesse americane (o inglesi boh), che correlerebbe i rapporti non protetti con un minor rischio di cadere in depressione. Un sondaggio. Dal valore arbitrario. Niente valori misurabili, niente valori plasmatici di sostanze presumibilmente antidepressive, niente studi sull'assorbimento, niente eventuali correlazioni con i contraccettivi orali, con lo stato mentale in cui viene consumato un rapporto sessuale, una cosa regà da cani maledetti, e io non gli avrei mai dato spazio in un libro. Uno studio replicato da un tizio slovacco (ho cercato lo studio e le citazioni) e che non ha ottenuto risultati comparabili, il che vuol dire che manco quella correlazione, quasi sicuramente spuria o comunque estremamente indiretta, s'è riusciti a dimostrare.

Fermiamoci poi un attimo a pensare che implicazione hanno questi studi, così profondamente male-biased, sull'opinione pubblica e sui giornali. Guarda caso ne escono sempre titoloni da colonna destra, "DONNE FATE I P*MPINI CHE VI FA BENE" condiviso da chissà quanti maschi infoiati su fb, giustificati dal fatto che beh, lo dice la scienza (come se avessimo necessità di legittimazione per farli). Pensiamo anche un minimo di responsabilità sociale che possono avere sti studiunculi, è un accanimento da cui si vuol far discendere forti differenze comportamentali senza considerare le similitudini... Gli studi nel campo sembrano fatti ad hoc per cercare delle conferme dei propri bias, e non per esplorare altro, e sono sempre le stesse ipotesi, mai altre.

ESEMPLARE è il capitoletto che vorrebbe spiegare che le adolescenti siano stronze di natura per via della competizione con le altre donne. Studi fatti su ragazze delle scuole superiori. Intrinsecamente stronze. E l'influenza esterna? E i condizionamenti ambientali? E i modelli comportamentali di successo per fattori culturali? E tutto quello che esula dal determinismo?! E la cultura che ci pervade, quella che appunto ci continua a ripetere che alle ragazze piace il rosa e che sono subdole e stronze?

PERÒ quando c'è da sparare contro il poliamore ecco che il Bering questa faccenda la tira fuori, perché non si può giustificare tutto con la nostra tendenza alla poligamia, c'è anche l'empatia (eh maddai),

presumibilmente perché avere le corna lo fa incazzare come un pitone (lo dice lui e non è una mia speculazione). Lì, però, la questione della non necessità di legittimazione scientifica dei comportamenti umani la tiriamo fuori. E come mai?

Ecco, lui parte da questo:

"Le femmine fanno questo, gli uomini quest'altro, gli uomini gay questo altro ancora comparati e subordinati agli uomini etero: perché?" oppure: "gli uomini sono feticisti dei piedi, come mai? E come può essere adattativo?" (ma perché dovrebbe esserlo per forza?!)

Mentre io partirei da questo:

"siamo sicuri che le femmine facciano tutte questo? Ed esistono uomini che non fanno quest'altro? E cosa li differenzia da chi non lo fa? Quale ambiente diverso, quali variabili? E quanti e quante sono? E in altre ETNIE con cultura profondamente differente è anche così?" oppure: "le donne sono feticiste dei piedi? Come mai? C'è qualche fenomeno occulto che sto ignorando? Le donne non hanno parafilie o semplicemente non se le strainc*la nessuno le parafilie femminili, perché tanto il mio modello di riferimento è sempre lo stesso stramaledetto uomo occidentale?"

Io intorno a questo libro potrei continuare con un pippone lungo cinquanta chilometri... partendo dal fatto che l'autore accusa gli altri di avere troppa morale e quindi troppi pregiudizi (anche qui correlazione poco sensata, una morale non implica necessariamente pregiudizi), passando per l'impronta fortemente maschilista del discorso -attenzione! La natura è profondamente sessista, il problema è come l'autore riporta alcuni fatti, il linguaggio che usa, come utilizza le critiche, che in alcuni casi sono aspre e in altri casi mancano totalmente-.

Concludo non dilungandomi ancora, ma dicendo che la scienza non è un monolite fermo e fisso, con le sue risposte scolpite nel marmo. Sono le persone a creare la scienza, assieme a tutti i suoi errori, assieme a tutti i suoi pregiudizi (ehi ciao Lombroso e altri scienziati razzisti!) che Bering pensa di non avere, invece li ha e forti, fa un mischiotto e non va bene regà, se volete leggere questo libro fatelo con un GROSSO occhio critico.

Boris Limpopo says

Bering, Jesse (2012). *Why Is the Penis Shaped Like That?: And Other Reflections on Being Human*. New York: Scientific American/Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 2012. ISBN 9781429955102. Pagine 319. 8,78 €

Due critiche principali a questo libro:

Si tratta sostanzialmente di una raccolta di articoli già apparsi sulla rubrica che Jesse Bering (sì, afferma di essere un discendente del noto esploratore artico Vitus Jonassen Bering). Niente di male, naturalmente (anche se confesso di non amare questo tipo di raccolte: ma è una questione di gusto personale), a patto che tu abbia un buon editor. Questo prezioso aiuto a Bering è mancato, sicché il connettivo tra i capitoli è pressoché inesistente e alcuni sono decisamente meno riusciti di altri. In più, ho avuto la spiacevole impressione che la casa editrice avesse imposto un traguardo minimo in termini di numero di pagine e che questo abbia indotto a Bering a inserire capitoli che hanno ben poco a che fare con la tematica principale del libro (un'esplorazione della sessualità umana da una prospettiva di psicologia evoluzionistica). Per esempio, non ho proprio capito che c'azzechi (per parafrasare Tonino Di Pietro) il capitolo *Planting Roots with my Dead Mother*, che – senza alcuna analisi scientifica – propone un nuovo tipo di cimitero alberato (proposta peraltro non particolarmente originale, come testimonia L'albero ed io, vecchia canzone di Francesco Guccini).

Quando il mio ultimo giorno verrà dopo il mio ultimo sguardo sul mondo,

non voglio pietra su questo mio corpo, perché pesante mi sembrerà. Cercate un albero giovane e forte, quello sarà il posto mio;
voglio tornare anche dopo la morte sotto quel cielo che chiaman di Dio. Ed in inverno nel lungo riposo, ancora vivo, alla pianta vicino,
come dormendo, starò fiducioso nel mio risveglio in un qualche mattino.
E a primavera, fra mille richiami, ancora vivi saremo di nuovo
e innalzerò le mie dita di rami verso quel cielo così misterioso.

Ed in estate, se il vento raccoglie l'invito fatto da ogni gemma fiorita,
sventoleremo bandiere di foglie e canteremo canzoni di vita.
E così, assieme, vivremo in eterno qua sulla terra, l'albero e io
sempre svettanti, in estate e in inverno contro quel cielo che dicono di Dio.

Il tono di Bering, che vuole essere scherzoso, a volte è un po' irritante. Per sua sfortuna, proprio in questi giorni è dilagata (insomma, sto esagerando...) una polemica su Science writing: lite and wrong sul blog di Jerry Coyne e, qualche giorno prima con Jonah Lehrer, Malcolm Gladwell and our thirst for non-threatening answers sul blog di Eric Garland. Coyne distingue, in bella sostanza, opere come *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, effettivi contributi alla comprensione pubblica della scienza, dai libri di "science-lite" che offrono analisi e soluzioni superficiali a problemi sociali o resoconti approssimativi di ricerche scientifiche. Forse Bering non è del tutto light, ma fatevi un'idea da soli:

Se volete leggere altre recensioni ho preparato una pagina su Storify.

* * *

Come al solito, le mie annotazioni, che non siete obbligati a leggere. Riferimenti numerici all'edizione Kindle.

According to a 2009 report in *Medical Hypotheses* by the anatomist Stany Lobo and his colleagues, each testicle continuously migrates in its own orbit as a way of maximizing the available scrotal surface area that is subjected to heat dissipation and cooling. Like ambient heat generated by individual solar panels, when it comes to spermatoc temperatures, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. With a keen enough eye, presumably one could master the art of "reading" testicle alignment, using the scrotum as a makeshift room thermometer. But that's just me speculating. [163]

Evolution does not occur by design. The best way to think about most adaptations is in terms of cost/benefit ratios. I suspect that the foreskin provided protection of the glans and what you see is the result of a statistical compromise of sorts. [445]

[...] 76 percent of a sample of 235 female undergraduates from Australia reported having removed their pubic hair at some point in their lives. Sixty-one percent currently did so, and half of this sample said that they routinely removed all traces of their pubic hair. The current trend for men appears to be no different. [746]

Gerard David, a prolific religious iconographer based in Bruges, Belgium, was merely painting a scene of starvation cannibalism. [765]

Gerard David

oceansbridge.com

Better this evolutionary account than pimples by intelligent design, in any event. What a heartless God indeed that would wind up the clock so that our sebaceous glands might overindulge in sebum production precisely at the time in human development when we'd become most acutely aware of our appearance. [874]

[...] hindsight is twenty-twenty [...] [2695]

In many courtrooms across the Western world, for instance, defendants and witnesses must place their hand on the Bible and volunteer to respond to the religious oath "Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?" And in the ancient Hebrew world, there was the similar "oath by the thigh"—where "thigh" was the polite term for one's dangling bits—since touching the sex organs before giving testimony was said to invoke one's family spirits (who had a vested interest in the seeds sprung from these particular loins) and ensured that the witness wouldn't perjure himself. [2779]

"I love Humanity; but I hate people." [2792: è una citazione di Edna St. Vincent Millay]

[...] there's no such thing as a failed experiment—only data. [3290]

Vohs and Schooler write: "If exposure to deterministic messages increases the likelihood of unethical actions, then identifying approaches for insulating the public against this danger becomes imperative." Perhaps you missed it on your first reading too, but the authors are making an extraordinary suggestion. They seem to be claiming that the public "can't handle the truth" and that we should somehow be protecting them (lying to them?) about the true causes of human social behaviors. [3355]

The self is only a deluded creature that thinks it is participating in a moral game when in fact it is just an emotionally invested audience member. [3372]

Claire says

If you do not feel that you are not particularly interested in the shape of penises, don't let the title of this book put you off. The subtitle is "... and other reflections on being human" which is a more helpful description of the collection of essays within.

Bering is a professor of evolutionary psychology, or something equally as fascinating and beyond the reaches of my full understanding. The book begins with a chapter where he does tackle the male genitalia in some detail (pun intended) but many people either have their own penis or live with someone who has one, so may find all this of at least some interest. Many of the essays are about sexuality or our privates, but from the perspective of someone who knows a lot about human nature and our evolution. Much of these facts could be used to populate polite conversation at the family dinner table. He also has a section on homosexuality, religious belief (which he went on to write a whole book about) and suicide.

The book is peppered with references to his own life. Bering basically gets to read about stuff he is interested in, writes a paper about it, and gets paid to publish it in a journal, then gets paid again to publish it all together in this book. What a lucky guy. There are over thirty essays in this book, all on various subjects relating to being human, so it is a great read for any humans you may know with a very short attention span.

[click here to read the rest of my reviews](#)

Scott says

This was not an easy rating to arrive at. On the one hand, the book is full of interesting and at times valuable information presented in readable prose, fully accessible to a general audience. It was for the most part fun to read and edifying which generally earns a book at least four stars.

On the other hand, the book reads like a collection of previously published pieces, cobbled together under more or less logical headings, then sent off to the binder with a perfunctory introduction and little else. It does not appear that Bering attempted to edit the pieces to prevent repetition, and certainly he does nothing to create a narrative flow.

It's a rare writer who can write about sex and be funny without being juvenile. Dan Savage usually succeeds. Mary Roach and Jesse Bering do not. Too many jokes have the effect of an off-color line delivered too loudly in a slightly slurred voice at a black tie party. Everything stops suddenly, then you try to act like that didn't just happen.

Finally, I have a real problem with some of the early chapters. The piece on pedophilia in particular hit some wrong notes for me. I suppose the big problem is he talks about the legal implications of, for instance, classifying ephebophilia as a mental disorder, without bothering to actually research those implications (if he had, he would have discovered that it would avail a defendant of an insanity defense).

In a few other places he drifts from science to discussing law, ethics or morality, none of which he does well.

I'm glad I read the book and would recommend it to anyone interested in pop evolutionary psychology. But with a little work it could have been so much more.

Christine Glasser says

Okay so plain and simple: the book is AMAZING. Didn't want it to end. The title refers to just one of the 33 essays and I don't think does the book justice because it is in fact a work of intellectual breadth covering an incredible range of material. What I mean is that it's not as superficial as it probably sounds. It's one those books that I think readers will either love or hate (or maybe just completely not get?) because of the author's very unique style, the provocative subject matter and the sometimes really, REALLY uncomfortable points he makes. While I didn't agree with everything he says I found that so much of the fun in reading this book is the fact that you find yourself debating with him throughout, then usually coming to the conclusion after listening to him unpack his argument that, yeah, if you're being honest with yourself you know he's probably actually right. Bering is consistently almost preternaturally logical in his thinking but also weirdly playful and frankly kind of hard to explain. I got the distinct impression that he was teasing the reader just to drag out your headshaking for his own delight. And you enjoy his teasing in the process! I snorted--mind you not just laughed but SNORTED at some of his lines they were so funny. What this book did was make me think about things in totally new ways (actually about things that hadn't even occurred to me to wonder about) and I *love* when a book does that. I first heard about Bering on an NPR show (I think "All Things Considered" maybe?) where he was talking about his first book "The Belief Instinct" which I also read and while totally different (it was about God being a figment of the human mind) it had a similar effect on me. I'm hooked!

Brendon Schrodinger says

Jesse Bering is an evolutionary psychologist. That means he asks things like why do we do that? And what could cause nature to select for that behaviour?

Jesse Bering is an evolutionary psychologist who studies sexual behaviour. So what we end up with is a book that would make your mother blush and your grandmother to either faint or laugh uncontrollably and give awkward sepia -coloured sex stories.

And while some part of me feels that I should give a warning that this isn't a book for everyone and that it does deal with *very* topical, abnormal and uncomfortable material, it does so in a very intelligent yet very witty way. So while there is a lot to learn here about why we do the things we do to the people we are hoping to get our rocks off with, there is also an intelligent look at the people who get their rocks off animals, vegetables and minerals. And while you may not like or condone or even think some behaviour is legal or even consensual, it's always great to hear about studies that have had the cajones to ask why. And it is always better to have an intelligent conversation rather than condemning because that is what cultural norms say.

Jesse Bering is a hilarious guy. Not only did I get to experience his words, but he did read the audiobook. Audiobooks read by the author can only approach the epitome of seeming like you are in a lecture by the author and not having your suspension of disbelief shattered by the unnatural and stunted reading of what is obviously the author in a booth. Thankfully Jesse manages a close approximation of that seemingly off-the cuff, I'm-not-reading-a-script type of natural voice.

So you'll learn about why the penis is shaped like that of course (don't want to give the game away but research on this question involved lots of moulded latex genitalia, manufactured ejaculate and a lot of elbow grease) and you'll learn about homophobes response to watching gay pornography. There's a smattering of female orgasm speculation between all the penile talk as part of a tokenistic 'female bits' chapter in an otherwise sausage-fest book.

So, if you liked Mary Roach's 'Bonk' and even her hilarious writing style you should give this a try, It's a lot more scholarly, with Jesse talking about a multitude of research papers for every question or theme. But it is a lot more interesting and a lot more thought-provoking. I definitely did enjoy listening to ten hours of what comes down to dicking about.

Melody says

Wildly uneven book of essays. Some of them were very good and some of them were amusing. A couple rubbed me the wrong way entirely because they were so personal and Bering assumed that his feelings were universal (for instance, polyamory can't ever work for anyone because Bering gets so jealous he throws up). The essays about suicide were especially interesting. Bering's corny jokes were cute at first but wore on me by the end.

Anna says

I saw this book on display in a used book shop in Oregon. I loved the title and knew I would have to read it. I loved it. I knew I loved learning about evolutionary psychology, but this book reminded me on a constant basis how FASCINATING the whole subject is and how much more we have to learn!

I loved all of the subjects for this book. Penises, bodies, the brain and sex, sexual preferences, homosexuality, suicide, and religion. This book was by no means an easy read, nor did I zoom through it, but it made me think. It forced me to remain objective in my thinking and abandon morality to consider the science and the facts. I rarely read books that force my brain to do such strenuous exercises!

I have to say, I was disappointed that the women section was so lacking. I do understand that a lot of women's studies in science, like on their orgasms etc. is lacking research, but seriously, like 4 chapters and each one 2 pages? It was kind of ridiculous. I think he could have found more to talk about.

Also, the first chapter in the religion section was absolutely maddening. His so called "data" and analysis of explaining why religious folks are more trustworthy was bogus. The experiments detailed and reasoning presented was faulty. Clearly, religious people are only more trustworthy because they are like-minded with a majority of already religious people, not because they actually are. What nonsense. The rest of the section was pretty awesome, especially the section on green funerals.

I learned so much from this book, and I would love to learn even more of the subjects presented. I hate to drop it back at the library - maybe I'll buy it one day! On with science!

Rick says

I was going to leave this un-reviewed, but since I struggled between giving it a 2-star or 3-star rating...

First...

The Good: Interesting tidbits of science conveyed with a bit of humor, along with some thoughtful ponderings on what it all -- or at least, what some of it -- means. The essays are short, meaning you can easily pick it up for a quicky as time permits, which leads to...

The Bad: This is a collection of previously-published essays. As such, there's a certain lack of narrative flow -- the whole comes across as a series of discreet thoughts bundled together under the guise of *reflections*, without much tying it together. This is especially true as the book progresses: the first sections focus on all things sex-related (as the title might suggest), but the latter portions veer off into Religion, Free Will, and Death.

This, in turn, leads to a bit of repetition on two fronts, namely: Jesse Bering is Gay, and Jesse Bering is an Atheist, and he wants you to Know This. Or at least, that is how I perceive it. If you were to read these essays in their original forms/forums, it would likely be less apparent, but sardined together without much editing, these two identifiers repeatedly hit you over the head. The net effect, for me, is to make the fact that *Jesse Bering is a Gay Atheist* as much the center of attention as the topics he holds forth on. He seems especially keen to point out his godlessness, which leads to...

The Ugly: Snarkiness. I've got nothing against Atheists -- even the non-heterosexual ones ;-). Being a PK, with gay friends and family members, who falls squarely in the midst of the dual-A camp (Atheists and Agnostics) I'm right there, for the most part. But True Unbelief requires the same amount of faith as True Belief, a fact that seems to evade many True Unbelievers, including, apparently, Jesse Bering. And while I appreciate a good mocking, here it seems contrived, as though he repeatedly brings the subject up just so he can make fun of it, even when it has only tangential bearing to the subject at hand.

And so...

This book was a disappointment for me. Given the title, and the fact that one of the back-cover reviewers christened Mr. Bering "the Hunter S. Thompson of science [writing]", I was expecting something at least as funny -- and focused on the naughty bits, if you will -- as Bonk, by Mary Roach, especially since I'm a huge HST fan. Instead, what I got was a disjointed, though still at times funny and thoughtful, glimpse at what keeps Jesse Bering awake at night. Honestly, were it not for *The Ugly*, I'd have given this 3 stars...

Deby Depreta says

This book's aim was to titillate, rather than educate. I found it immature at best and rather spare on its actual science reportage.

Annoyingly, the author seemed to think the reader needed to know how much he loathed the idea of having intercourse with a woman. He mentioned it a few times in the book.

This book was more about the author's opinions and predilections than factual information.

I was deeply disappointed given I looked forward to a good non-fiction read.

Book says

Why is the Peni\$ Shaped Like That? And Other Reflections on Being Human by Jesse Bering

"Why is the Peni\$ Shaped Like That?" is the irreverent, thought-provoking and rather sensational book of essays on human sexuality. Dr. Jesse Bering takes us on a journey of surprising and even shocking peculiarities of being human. Using the latest of scientific research in psychology, neuroscience, biology and a naughty sense of humor Bering succeeds in enlightening the public on fascinating issues pertaining to human sexuality. This entertaining 320-page book is broken out into the following eight parts: Part I. Darwinizing What Dangles, Part II. Bountiful Bodies, Part III. Minds in the Gutter, Part IV. Strange Bedfellows, Part V. Ladie's Night, Part VI. The Gayer Science: There's Something Queer Here, Part VII. For the Bible Tells Me So and Part VIII. Into the Deep: Existential Lab Work.

Positives:

1. A fun and informative book for the masses.
2. The fascinating topic of human sexuality in the irreverent hands of Jesse Bering.
3. A frank conversational tone. Bering holds nothing back to the point of being uncomfortable but when it is all said and done you are thankful that he did.
4. This book is anything but boring. The pages turn themselves. The ability of Bering to immerse science, anecdotes, sound logic, personal experiences, pop culture and humor into an engaging narrative is what

makes this work.

5. This book will at times surprise, inform, disgust and educate you. In short, it's thought provoking.
6. Understanding the male reproductive anatomy. The activation hypothesis and yes an evolutionary-based explanation for the title of the book.
7. Interesting facts and findings throughout the book. Let me share one because I can't contain myself, "In fact, frequency of erotic fantasies correlates positively with intelligence".
8. Curious oddities of the human body.
9. Cannibalism...bite me.
10. The correlation between brain damages and behavior. One of my favorite essays.
11. Dirty brain science. Some very uncomfortable topics...but I couldn't look away. Fetishes...
12. Understanding the female anatomy. It's the ladies turn.
13. Unflattering stereotypes...understanding straight women who gravitate toward gay men.
14. Interesting studies on homosexuality. The differences between men and women. The roles and preferences. Educational.
15. Wonderful use of evolution. "Right is irrelevant. There is only what works and what doesn't work, within context, in biologically adaptive terms..."
16. Burial practices that need to change. A very interesting essay.
17. A hard look at suicide and a unique take regarding suicide as adaptive and from an evolutionary perspective.
18. A look at free will and one of the most thought-provoking statements, "If exposure to deterministic messages increases the likelihood of unethical actions, then identifying approaches for insulating the public against this danger becomes imperative". In general, I disagree with the statement but talk about a conversation ice breaker.
19. Comprehensive notes section.

Negatives:

1. I didn't like the title of this book. Sure, it reflects the author's irreverent and humorous side but for one I can never remember the title. It's like an entertaining commercial where you can never remember the product being promoted. Secondly, the title alone might keep some people from reading it and these are perhaps the ones who need to read it the most to begin with. How about a title like, "Naughty Science: Reflections on Human Sexuality"?
2. This is not so much a negative on the book but on the lack of scientific research on human sexuality. Such a fascinating topic yet it's clear that for whatever the reasons the science of human sexuality is its infancy.
3. A lot of the findings in the book are tentative. In truth, all science knowledge is tentative but it seems to me that the some of these studies require much further research. Enough there to whet the appetite but not enough to reach strong conclusions.
4. No direct links to notes on the kindle version, a real shame.
5. Some of the findings will cause cognitive dissonance. I don't agree with everything in this wonderful, thought-provoking book. As an example, I disagree with the general notion that a person who believes in supernatural punishment may be more trustworthy than one who isn't. In the fantastic book, "Society without God", Phil Zuckerman makes the compelling case that those societies without religious beliefs (or less of) are more successful, better functioning and happier places to live in. As a personal example, if was looking for a babysitter and a member of the clergy were to ring my doorbell, I'd probably be more inclined to call a policeman.
6. This book whets your appetite for more, more, more.
7. No formal bibliography.

In summary, what a trip this book was. First of all the topic of human sexuality is fascinating and rarely dealt with at the scientific level. I'm glad that for once an author has the guts in lieu of another word, to get a book

like this out for the public. This book will make your cringe, laugh, disagree, concur, and ultimately think. The only thing that limits this book is the fact that the scientific research on human sexuality is still in its infancy. Be that as it may, I learned so much from this book while having fun with it. I highly recommend it!

Further suggestions: "The Belief Instinct" by the same author, "Subliminal" by Leonard Mlodinow, "Society Without God" by Phil Zuckerman, "The Believing Brain: From Ghosts and Gods to Politics and Conspiracies---How We Construct Beliefs and Reinforce Them as Truths..." by Michael Shermer, "The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature" by Steven Pinker, "Who's in Charge?" and "Human: The Science Behind What Makes Us Unique, by Michael S. Gazzaniga, "Hardwired Behavior: What Neuroscience Reveals about Morality" by Laurence Tancredi, "Braintrust: What Neuroscience Tells Us about Morality" by Patricia S. Churchland, "The Myth of Free Will" by Cris Evatt, and "The Brain and the Meaning of Life" by Paul Thagard.

Karli says

Eh. Some of the essays were fun and interesting. Others, not so much. I particularly picked up this book to read the essay on asexuality, and was pretty disappointed. Bering is really committed to an essentialist understanding of human sexuality, and that carries right over into his take on asexuality, and his essentialist stance directs the questions he finds most intriguing about the biological possibility of someone never experiencing sexual attraction. Bering works with an odd definition of "sexual orientation" which is strictly biologically based and possibly genetically heritable, so he automatically discounts life events or experiences with trauma as part of one's sexual development history; he also discounts pathologies and chromosomal differences, which may also be up for debate. The most troubling sentence that reflects this is in his essay on asexuality in particular: "But if it exists as a distinct orientation, true asexuality would be due neither to genetic anomaly nor to environmental assault." The phrase "true asexuality" is also cringe-worthy, and makes me wonder if Bering draws similar lines to demarcate "true homosexuality," "true heterosexuality," "true bisexuality," and so on. Overall, I picked up some interesting bits from evolutionary biology, but otherwise, this book is kind of a queer theorist's nightmare.

Jan Bednarczuk says

I was hoping this book would be an informative and fun read, but the author's irritating voice kept me from enjoying the material. I could never really get into the topic he was writing about, due to his constant efforts to draw attention to himself in the form of "humorous" asides and digressions, often seemingly intended to shock the reader with how outré he is. Can we just assume that someone who is willing to pick up a book titled "Why is the penis shaped like that?" is someone who is reasonably open-minded and who won't dissolve into tittering blushes every time the word "semen" is mentioned?

I just couldn't get past the style on this one.

AlcoholBooksCinema says

There's a book-cafe close to my house. It is owned by an old couple(the woman is 82 and her husband is 76. Yes, he is younger than her. I know this because she told me). It is a fifteen-minute walk, and sometimes I

take my kindle and escape to this place for it's unbelievably calm and peaceful environment, in addition to that, it incorporates a heap of non-fiction books, particularly science. When I took a break from what I was reading, I detected this book on the shelf, initially, I believed the title must be 'why is the pencil shaped like that?' however I might've read it as 'penis'. I looked around, there were a couple of good-looking women who were relishing their coffee and seemed to be unaware of the events happening around them because of the book they were reading, therefore, I slowly got up, walked up to the shelf and lingered for quite a while as I was trying to absolutely make sure it was 'penis' and not 'pencil'. Ahoy! I noticed it was indeed 'penis' and not 'pencil'. So I got my hands on it and left the place as quickly as I could.

Now, talking about the book. I went to the book-cafe to return the book, and the conversation with the 82-year-old-woman was

She: "So, what do you think about the book?"

Me: "Good."

She: "Try to express it. Be punctilious. Don't be hesitant."

Me: "All right. It was a fascinating and an informative book. There's a lot to analyze from the book. It shows the writer did a lot of research. I like science books with a smack of humor. So I enjoyed reading this."

She: "True. I think, if people can knock off their fatuous religious views, they can enjoy such books."

Me: "Couldn't agree more."

She: "So, what are you having today?"

Me: "The usual."

She: "Okay."

I went and sat at the place where I always sit and looked up for the meaning of the word punctilious.
