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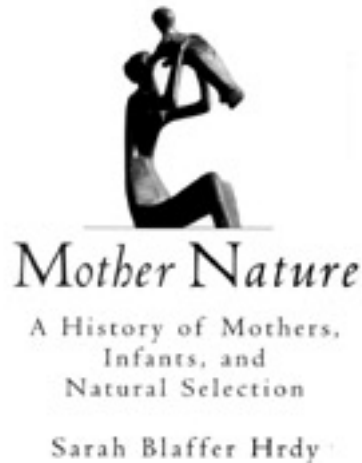
Summer Reading

The Evolutionary Type

by Susan Contratto

I have spent my entire adult life engaged in a quest to understand not just who I am but how creatures like me came to be," says Sarah Blaffer Hrdy '68, PhD '65 in the opening lines of *Mother Nature: A History of Mothers, Infants, and Natural Selection*. "What does it mean to ... be a semicon-
tinuously sexually receptive, hairless biped, filled with conflicting aspirations and struggling to maintain her balance in a rapidly changing world?" Drawing on her extensive research with langur monkeys, as well as many other fascinating examples from the natural world, Hrdy has written a seven-hundred-page tome on motherhood that has elicited responses from publications as diverse as Salon.com and *Scientific American*. Her controversial thesis is that maternal love--and human love in particular--is highly conditional.

In a recent e-mail interview, Susan Contratto '65, EdM '68, EdD '72, a feminist psychodynamic therapist in Ann Arbor and a lecturer in psychology at the University of Michigan, talked to Hrdy about what motivated her to write this book and what implications it holds for our future.



Susan Contratto: Your voice, personal maternal experiences, and emotional history run throughout the book. It's clearly more than an ambitious scholarly exercise (though it is that, too). What motivated you to write *Mother Nature*?

Sarah Blaffer Hrdy: In 1984, I was invited as the token "evolutionary type" to a conference at UCLA entitled "The Many Phases of Eve: Beyond Psychoanalytic and Feminist Stereotypes." I had never interacted with psychoanalysts before and was intrigued. By then, I had spent ten years of my life studying langur monkeys, a species in which males attempt to control female breeding options by eliminating offspring sired by rivals. What was it driving me to study such a bizarre and oppressive breeding system? Perhaps one of the distinguished psychoanalysts scheduled to attend (Dorothy Dinnerstein, Anni Bergman, Joyce McDougall, and so on) would be able to explain to me my own fascination with a male behavior that evolved so as to constrain female reproductive options.

For the conference, I prepared a lecture on "Nature and Nurturing: An Evolutionary Critique of the Concept of Motherhood." I chose this topic because in reading around a bit in preparation, I was struck

that social philosophers and psychologists seemed to have very fixed ideas about what maternal instincts were, yet few seemed aware of what sociobiologists had been learning by actually observing mothers in natural social contexts. Some of my listeners were frankly puzzled. But others were deeply and genuinely interested. My decision to write a book about the natural history of motherhood dated from this conference.

By the way, I never did find anyone that seemed suited to psychoanalyze my research choices, and in the end had to settle with trying to answer the question for myself. The main outlines of my Darwinian self-analysis are all there, between the lines, in *Mother Nature*.

Contratto: Why did you decide to focus on maternal infanticide and abandonment?

Blaffer Hrdy: Maternal responses fall along a continuum that ranges from total commitment to absence of caring. The way any given mother responds will vary with her circumstances--how old she is, her physical condition, how much social support she can anticipate, etc. Young maternal age, for example, is one of the most reliable predictors of whether a human mother is likely to abandon her baby. The same teenager who abandons her first infant may later, when older, become the most devoted mother you will ever meet.

I had two reasons for paying so much attention to the noninvesting far end of this continuum. So many of our preconceptions about maternal instincts come from focusing only on the cases that conform to them, yet we can learn a lot about the processes underlying maternal commitment by examining cases where maternal commitment is dicey, or fails to develop altogether. What doesn't happen in those cases?



Photo: Jerry Bauer

Sarah Blaffer Hrdy

So for someone like me, interested in the various kinds of priming (hormonal and otherwise) and cues that elicit mother love, it's critical to examine when everything goes according to our expectations and, also, especially, when it does not.

Secondly, if I was going to argue that mother love is both biologically based and contingent upon a woman's circumstances, I couldn't just write those words, I had to thoroughly document my case. Stereotypes about what it means to be a mother were already too well entrenched--the notion that mammalian mothers automatically nurture their babies, and if human mothers don't, this must mean maternal instincts have been lost in the human species. And this is an awkward job--convincing readers that mother love is not automatic, but where it does emerge, it is, nevertheless, biologically based.

Contratto: You describe a scenario of maternal "strategizing" over whether or not to nurture a particular infant; the infant "working at" being engaging; and the larger environmental setting in which this drama takes place. What are the social policy implications of your argument for the United States?

Blaffer Hrdy: Though I am not qualified to design social policy, in *Mother Nature* I provide evidence and arguments that policymakers could draw on to design policy that is more biologically literate. For example, I explain how foolish and ill-informed it is to try to legislate maternal love; I provide rational alternatives to focusing on "when life begins;" and I make a strong argument for providing sex

education and birth control to teenagers who have been rendered fertile at an unnaturally early age by our sedentary lifestyles and rich diets.

In addition, though I cannot prove this scientifically, I am convinced that humans develop their uniquely broad capacity for compassion--being able to care for others--in the course of development in early childhood. Being born unwanted by one's mother or anyone else interferes with this capacity.

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