

title that will find its way to more coffee tables than desks.

### **SEX, TIME AND POWER: HOW WOMEN'S SEXUALITY SHAPED HUMAN EVOLUTION**

by Leonard Shlain. Viking Press, New York, 2003. 420 pp., illus. Trade. ISBN: 0-67003-233-6.

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When encountering a book concerning a subject like the anthropology of sexual attraction and social evolution published by a non-academic press and written by an author with no discernible training in the field, an educated reader knows to approach the ideas advanced in that book as interesting if fanciful. When the publisher in question is a large popular press with a vast marketing department and the author appears to be a charming and fascinating storyteller, then it is likely that some readers may allow themselves to be seduced by the flight of fancy and be taken on a wild goose chase—and end up the goose.

This is precisely the problem with *Sex, Time and Power: How Women's Sexuality Shaped Human Evolution*, by Leonard Shlain. A cursory search on the Web reveals the extent of the damage such whimsy can wreak. Web sites ranging from “Why Your Wife Won't Have Sex With You” to a delineation of the brain power of Biblical characters in “Time, Menses, Left Brain,” to “promoting intimacy and other-centered sexuality” among a group called “Liberated Christians” show evidence of the popularity of Shlain's topic. This book does not merely strike a chord with its readers; it verifies all of the preconceived notions of gender difference some readers could ever hope to come across for pushing their own political, social and religious agendas.

Let us be clear: *Sex, Time and Power* is not hard science. Nor is it anthropology. It is, instead, mythology. And because the narrative is highly engaging, it can be, on the surface, amusing mythology at that.

The book generated from a question the author pondered over when he was a young medical student—“Why do women menstruate?”—and has as its premise the idea that woman's need for iron, resulting in part from the blood loss of menstruation, drove many if not

all “human cultural innovations” (p. xii), but particularly the knowledge of time, which ultimately resulted in the loss of her power. With this idea in mind, Shlain looks at such issues as incest, homosexuality, courting practices, marriage and death, to name a few. Along the way he gives us dialogues with Adam, Eve and members of their tribe; recountings of schemes made by campfires in 40,000 B.C.; and a world-view organized in a recognizable dualism (man, left-brained, sex-crazed; woman, right-brained, uses sex to get what she wants from man). He tells us in the preface that the book is meant for “both generalists and specialists” and that he avoids the “standard academic practice of citing the pedigree of a particular idea” (p. xiii). Lucky thing, too, since some of his logic would never pass the vetting process of a reputable science journal or the scientific review board of an academic press.

This reviewer counted no less than 39 instances where faulty logic and gross generalizations were used to make a point.

Some of the most pernicious include the idea that early Homo sapiens women “after a lifetime of lovemaking . . . would have spent hours discussing the sexual idiosyncrasies of their diverse male partners and comparing their experiences” (p. 93). He then comes to the conclusion that these women would have been responsible for promoting male circumcision as a way of delaying their lovers' orgasms (p. 93)—an interesting idea that flies in the face of circumcision rites performed by older men upon younger ones.

Another is his adopted view of the relations between genders, which reduces man's value to his ability to provide meat and woman's to her ability to give sex (p. 113). While some may look around at some of today's couples and agree with this assertion, this theory disregards the possibility that man's need to satisfy his own hunger and woman's interest in her own orgasm also could have shaped our social development.

But truly the most awful claims remain in his discussions about rape and pornography. In terms of the former, he asserts that “speech affords a woman the chance to determine in advance . . . whether her suitor has the predisposition or intention to harm her” (p. 205). How many women who have been date-raped would agree that they could have known their suitors had

darker intentions in mind by simply talking to these men? About the latter, he tells us that “pornography would disappear tomorrow if women were as eager to have sex and behaved sexually as indiscriminately as men” (p. 352). From that standpoint, pornography is women's fault. Rest assured, there are 35 more of these jewels in this tome, and these do not include the problem of his chronology: that all of these innovations regarding sex, time and power occurred in 40,000 B.C., an idea that stands against the discoveries of birth goddess artifacts by Marija Gimbutas and others.

Anyone who seeks to end misogyny and who questions the power inequities between the sexes rates our attention. And as stated previously, when that person has a gift for storytelling, we may not even mind wading through a mire of misinterpreted data to hear the teller out. But in the end, the most discriminating of readers should realize that the stories told are simply that, stories. The problem lies in that they are presented as “The Truth.” This is the point where the stories cease to be amusing and become insidious, and we can say that the book is seriously flawed.

### **THE PUPPET AND THE DWARF: THE PERVERSE CORE OF CHRISTIANITY**

by Slavoj Žižek. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, U.S.A., 2003. 190 pp. Paper. ISBN: 0-262-74025-7.

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Slavoj Žižek's *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* borrows part of its title from the first of Walter Benjamin's “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” the one in which an automaton, or puppet (historical materialism), “wins all the time” in chess (or historiography) with the crucial assistance of a hidden dwarf (theology). According to Žižek, we must now “reverse” Benjamin's thesis so that theology always wins by enlisting “the service of historical materialism, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight” (p. 3). Theology, particularly Christianity, has moved center stage, and the cultural theorist must read it dialectically—through the mate-