

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Philippe Brenot, Laetitia Coryn.** *The Story of Sex: From Apes to Robots*. Translated by Will McMorran. London: Particular Books, 2016. 208 pp. RRP \$49.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84614-932-0.

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Commissioned by Katherine Harvey

In the first episode of Rashida Jones’s new Netflix documentary series on sex, pornography, and technology, *Hot Girls Wanted: Turned On*, Holly Randall sits with her mother, Suze, at their kitchen table. Holly, who describes herself as “an erotic photographer, producer, and director,” recounts how she got into the pornography business through her parents. In the 1970s, Suze became famous as the first woman to shoot a full-frontal spread for *Playboy*. As Holly and Suze sit and discuss their careers, the two women acknowledge the one aspect that was difficult for both of them to talk about: sex education. “I think it’s really awkward, to talk about sex” to children, Suze says. Her daughter responds immediately, “yeah, but someone’s gotta tell them.”

In the preface to *The Story of Sex: From Apes to Robots*, titled “Closely Guarded Secrets,” Philippe Brenot lays out his plan for this history book of sexuality: “At the start of the third millennium, sexuality seems to be all around us—within easy reach, shown on screen, talked about in the media—but, paradoxically, it’s rarely explained and almost never taught.” This lack of explanation, Brenot claims, presents an educational void in which sex education is not taught in schools, and the Internet and pornography take the place of true sexuality instruction. *The Story of Sex* seeks to counter that by revealing “this essential aspect of human intimacy” (p. vii). Originally published in France, the book’s call for improved sex education is brought before new audiences in Will McMorran’s English translation. Illustrated by Laetitia Coryn, *The Story of Sex* is a graphic novel treading the line between serious historical scholarship and playful sexual jokes and puns. The history in *The Story of Sex* is never

far from the present and the author and illustrator make observations that echo modern-day conversations about sex, rape, relationships, and prostitution.

It is no secret that many youths learn about sex from pornography, and its unlimited and free availability on the Internet over the last twenty-five years means that a whole generation has grown up with a “learning manual” of sex online. Combined with abstinence-only programs that are still popular in many parts of the world, including the United States, teenagers crave sexual knowledge with no credible place to actually get it. Furthermore, across the globe a majority of sex education is taught in a “don’t” model: don’t have sex before marriage; don’t have sex without a condom; don’t get an STI. Two large components of sex are lacking from such a model: an explicit understanding of bodies and how they work, and a positive reinforcement of a happy and healthy sexual life. The graphic novel’s focus is mostly on the latter.

The first section of the book, aptly titled “Origins,” recounts the social division of gender groups, due to competition around food, and mating in hominoids. In one astute section, the story of the first rape is followed by the discovery of love. These two actions are contrasted based on species: forced sex is something that occurs in numerous species while love is, as far as we know, a distinctly human characteristic. The beginnings of families, the authors put forth, also constituted the beginnings of the subjugation of women. Primates understood the rule of dominance in which the alpha male mated with whomever he chose, while in the next chapter, we learn that married men, in Babylon, were free to frolic

with prostitutes and maintain concubines. The fear of women's sexuality is a theme running throughout the book. We are shown how different factions of society—from the church to witchcraft in the Middle Ages to the rise of psychoanalytical theory of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—have influenced and changed our understanding of female sexuality.

The authors then take us on a romp through the sex habits of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome. We learn that Cleopatra invented the vibrator—a gourd filled with bees—and the accompanying illustration humorously shows Cleopatra eyeing the gourd with the thought that “it had better not pop open” (p. 44). This is an example of the book's greatest paradox. It presents itself as a sex education guide focusing on the history of sexuality, something that is direly needed, and yet the irreverent humor leaves one to wonder how much of an impact, instructionally, it can actually have. You finish the book with an overabundance of quirky sex facts—for example, Zeus fell in love with Clitoris, the daughter of an ant-man, and he had to turn himself into an ant to make love with her—but it is unclear how much of an impression, outside of pure entertainment, the book can have. If the authors' goal, however, is to ease tensions surrounding sex, then the book succeeds in opening space for more authoritative sex education.

The book's core is about relationships, something that is not always presented in erotic or pornographic film, and it narratively connects the social construction of relationships in the primate world to contemporary digital sex outlets available to all. Numerous anecdotes are included to support this theme, notably contraception. One of the earliest stories focuses on prostitutes' meetings with the wife of the Egyptian pharaoh's architect.

She gives the prostitutes cones filled with pomegranate grains to insert into their vaginas before sex. Brenot informs readers that these contraceptive cones contained estrogen and worked as a natural contraceptive. Next, the doctor provides an animal gut “membrane” to the prostitutes, instructing them to have the man put it on his penis before intercourse: the first condom. The sly look the doctor gives her female patients infers a sense of camaraderie among Egyptian women of all classes. The scenario shows how sexuality brings together both amorous relationships and companionship.

The authors are strongest when they trace the nuances of change alongside the static nature of patriarchy. The authors show how even during the sexual revolution of the 1950s-70s, which they identify as “a great revolution,” there was constant pushback for women. In France, for example, through the 1950s a woman needed her husband's approval for participating in professional activity or opening a bank account.

In the second half of the book the authors explore the life of Marquis de Sade, the evolution of sexual freedom (masturbation gets its own chapter in this domain), the sexual research of Alfred Kinsey and Masters and Johnson, and the “futuresex” of the twenty-first century. This last chapter includes a fictional account of the next century in which human cloning makes sexual reproduction useless and prostitution declines due to the popularity of sexual robots—accompanied by an amusing illustration of R2-D2 donning an animal print bikini.

In the end, this book may not be as revolutionary as its authors hope it to be, but it serves as a better sex education model than the porn magazines and videos that teenagers see on a daily basis. If nothing else, maybe it will make it easier for erotic filmmakers to talk about sex.

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