



# Promiscuity: An Evolutionary History of Sperm Competition

*Tim Birkhead*

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Males are promiscuous and ferociously competitive. Females--both human and of other species--are naturally monogamous. That at least is what the study of sexual behavior after Darwin assumed, perhaps because it was written by men. Only in recent years has this version of events been challenged. Females, it has become clear, are remarkably promiscuous and have evolved an astonishing array of strategies, employed both before and after copulation, to determine exactly who will father their offspring.

Tim Birkhead reveals a wonderful world in which males and females vie with each other as they strive to maximize their reproductive success. Both sexes have evolved staggeringly sophisticated ways to get what they want--often at the expense of the other. He introduces us to fish whose first encounter locks them together for life in a perpetual sexual embrace; hermaphrodites who "joust" with their reproductive organs, each trying to inseminate the other without being inseminated; and tiny flies whose seminal fluid is so toxic that it not only destroys the sperm of rival males but eventually kills the female. He explores the long and tortuous road leading to our current state of knowledge, from Aristotle's observations on chickens, to the first successful artificial insemination in the seventeenth century, to today's ingenious molecular markers for assigning paternity. And he shows how much human behavior--from the wife-sharing habits of Inuit hunters to Charlie Chaplin's paternity case--is influenced by sperm competition.

Lucidly written and lavishly illustrated, with a wealth of fascinating detail and vivid examples, *Promiscuity* is the ultimate guide to the battle of the sexes.

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