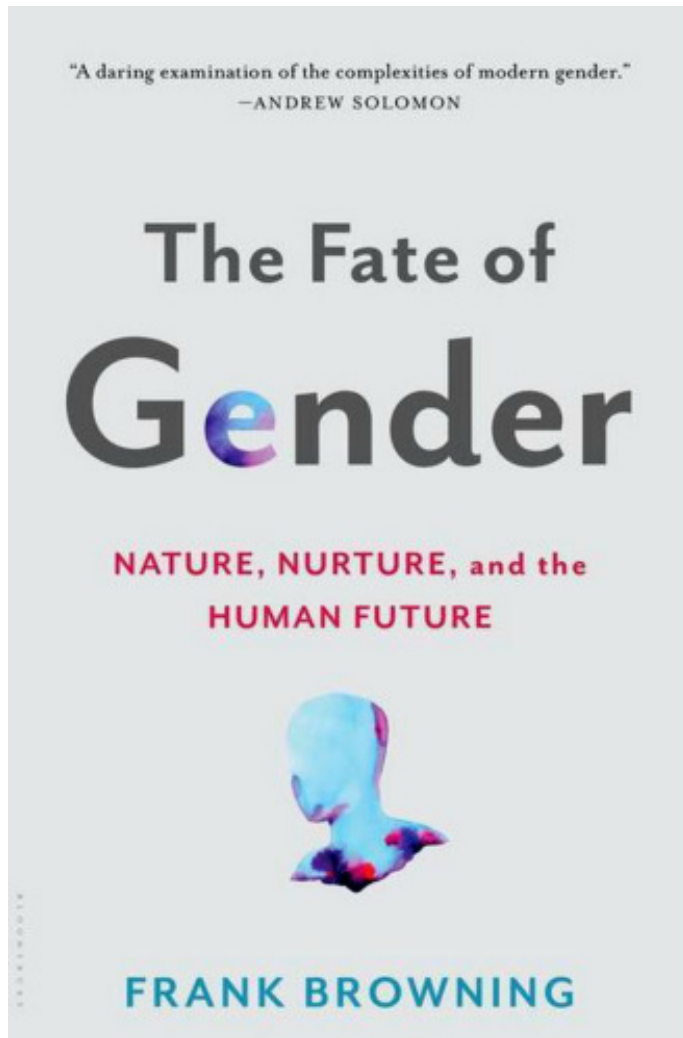


'Fate of Gender' is extraordinarily instructive

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"The Fate of Gender: Nature, Nurture and the Human Future" by Frank Browning. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016, 310 pages, \$28.00.



"Canning in my childhood was women's work, like mopping and laundering and bathing the baby," Frank Browning explains near the beginning of "The Fate of Gender: Nature, Nurture and the Human Future," his new book about evolving gender norms in the United States. "Today, canning is nearly a forgotten art. Of the few people who do still can, most I know are men. Very few women have either the time or the inclination to undergo this annual punitive exercise no matter how much better the end result may taste when compared to tins of flavorless red stuff sold on supermarket shelves."

"Today all of these roles and behaviors that once defined what and how men and women could be and do seem terribly antiquated, detritus on the cultural battlefield of what has for the last half century been labeled the gender revolution," he continues a little later, after describing a few more passé conventions that once characterized our collective understanding of masculinity and femininity. "The term itself – gender – would have baffled most everyone in the first years after World War II when legions of women known collectively as Rosie the Riveter returned to the kitchen after operating

tobacco farms and serving in wartime factories building tanks and B-52 bombers."

"The Fate of Gender" consists of an introduction, 17 chapters and an epilogue and is arranged in five major sections: "Gender Visions," "Nature, Nurture and Society," "Family Values: New Realities, New Complexities," "Fluidities," and "Gender and Being." Browning covers his chosen subject matter from a variety of angles; indeed, it is one of the most comprehensive treatments of gender I have run across in recent years. And although the author delves deeply into the scientific and philosophical implications of what it means to be human, his prose is easily accessible to a general audience. He also challenges readers to reflect on some long-standing preconceptions held by many people around the world with respect to how the full spectrum of gender identities relate to one another and to the institutions at the heart of civilization itself.

Browning provides a clear treatise on the potential consequences of how we choose to view gender and equality. The language is crisp and refreshing; for an ostensibly scholarly discourse, the literary

style is innately interesting and even mesmerizing in several places. Fair warning: he communicates in a respectful yet explicitly straightforward style that seldom leaves any doubt about what he is describing. If you tend to blush at certain anatomical descriptions or depictions of various sexual practices, take notice.

As noted in the political and legislative debates we have experienced in this country over the past two decades, the notion of what constitutes “appropriate” gender roles tends to arouse entrenched passions regarding deeply-held beliefs in many individuals and cultures, particularly when viewed through a religious lens. We need to keep in mind this phenomenon is not confined to the United States, which tends to be on the high end of the progressive scale when considered from a global perspective. In many countries, the debate is not as civilized, in a relative sense, as our dialog has been and encompasses virtually every aspect of the day-to-day existence of many human beings. For a lot of those who fall outside the mainstream when it comes to their conceptualization of gender, how this integral aspect of their lives is viewed can determine whether they are allowed to peacefully coexist with their neighbors or suffer unimaginable ridicule and horrendous physical and psychological harm.

“Official Catholic doctrine on gender remains what Pope Benedict XVI articulated in his 2012 Christmas message fiercely denouncing any notions that either sex or gender should vary from the dictums of the Old Testament,” Browning notes in “Gender War,” the sixth chapter. “Benedict’s position is clear and unequivocal and while his successor, Pope Francis, has softened his language on the roles of men and women, his fundamental gender message has not changed – either in regard to women’s access to the priesthood or to divorce, same-sex marriage or transsexuality. Indeed, the violence committed against women and sexual minorities in predominantly Catholic countries remains as intense today as in many Islamic nations.”

As the push for universal human rights gains momentum, and as the inevitable democratization of gender has moved center stage in many developed countries, the lines continue to blur with respect to what it means to be a man, a woman or some combination of both or neither. Whether or not this movement is viewed as a natural progression of the ultimate order of things or as a transgression of that order of the highest magnitude depends primarily on your cultural background, religious/philosophical orientation and ontological worldview. Although Browning sees himself on the right side of history when it comes to how we should view gender in the future, he presents a fairly balanced and detailed discussion of all the relevant factors: biological, cultural, sociological, political and economic.

Browning is a former science reporter for National Public Radio. A frequent contributor to The Washington Post Magazine, The Huffington Post, Mother Jones, Playboy, Salon and The Atlantic, his previous books include “The Vanishing Land,” “The Monk & the Skeptic: Dialogues on Sex, Faith and Religion,” “The American Way of Crime: From Salem to Watergate” and “The Culture of Desire: Paradox and Perversity in Gay Lives Today.” Raised on an apple orchard in Kentucky, he currently lives in Paris, France.

As someone who has long been fascinated with the aura that surrounds any discussion of gender roles, I found this volume to be extraordinarily instructive. Browning clarifies many of the core issues related to the ongoing societal conversation we seem to be having these days.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.

Editor’s note: The author will speak at 6 pm Friday at Morris Book Shop at 882 E. High Street in Lexington.